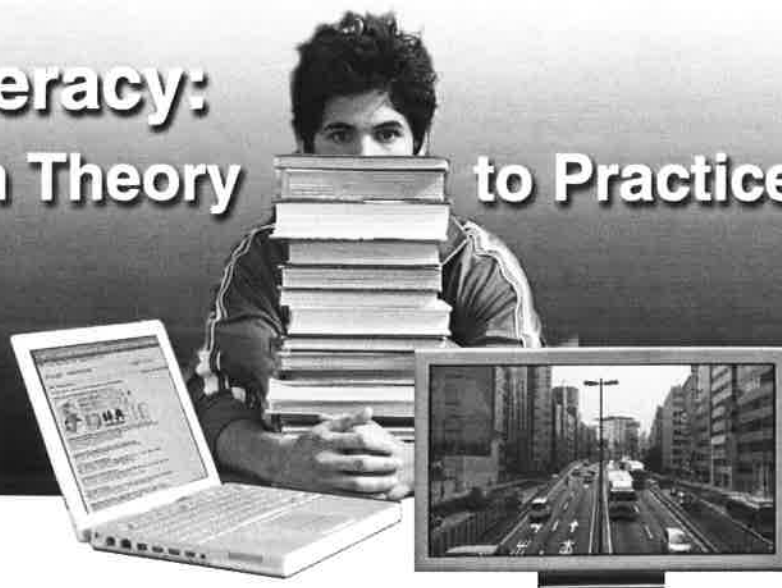


Critical Literacy: From Theory to Practice

BY KATIE SIMON KURUMADA



Literacy instruction for today's world

As an educator, I have always had a passion for teaching students diverse in their language, culture, and socio-economic status. Beginning with my pre-service teacher education, and continuing now with my graduate studies, my goal was to learn all that I could about teaching literacy so that I could reach each of my students. My belief was that by teaching them to read and write, they could become and do anything they wished, regardless of their economic or cultural background. Through a variety of experiences with students in urban schools and a deeper understanding of the systemic and historical inequities that exist for students who are linguistically or culturally diverse, I began to question if teaching my students to read and write was going to be enough to allow them to achieve in a system that continues to hold them back (Shannon, 1995). Research continues to show that because schools receive different levels of funding and resources, this creates different opportunities for students who attend schools in low socio-economic neighborhoods. Even when educational opportunities are adequate, the realities of the current global economy and systemic racism affect life opportunities of poor and minority students (Gee, 2008; Nieto, 2001).

It is now my belief that teaching reading and writing needs to be more than helping students to decode words on a page and even more than comprehending these words, but that literacy should be a means for students to problematize issues in their world. A critical literacy curriculum seeks to develop students who can use literacy to navigate the complex and unjust world they face. As Patrick Shannon, a scholar in critical literacy states, "If we acknowledge the savage

inequalities in schools and our lives, our point is to engage the world actively in order to change it" (Shannon, 1995, p. 35). Critical literacy asks teachers and students to examine, explore, and then take action on the issues that impact their world. This article will explore the tenants of critical literacy and then present how these can and are currently put into practice in K-12 classrooms.

What is critical literacy?

Critical literacy has its traditions in Critical Theory, which suggests that all citizens should be involved in taking action and ownership of the political and social issues within their community and world (Freire, 1987; McLaren, 1995). This theory helped to crystallize the movement in literacy towards critical literacy practices, using a critical lens to prepare students for a dynamic world where language and literacy are not static. Critical literacy theorists advocate for a wider definition of literacy, where the academic and political worlds honor the many different forms of literacy that exist around the world, such as local languages and writing systems (Gee, 2008; Street, 1993). This perspective also says that literacy does not exist in one mode, such as the written word, but is multimodal and evident in symbols, signs, and messages that surround us (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). It is essential that students today be taught how to negotiate these signs, symbols, and images (Kress, 2001). Critical literacy practices also value the many literate practices that students are involved in and outside of the classroom, such as popular music, movies, comic books, video games, and online resources (Bell, 2001).

By expanding what is valued and taught, critical literacy practices purposefully shake up the standard curriculum and epistemology of schooling. Exploring and analyzing language is an important aspect of critical literacy that illuminates many of the inequities in society by investigating what language variety is promoted as correct (Gee, 2008; Rogers, 2002). Incorporating different viewpoints into curriculum and encouraging students to take action to solve problems are also crucial in critical literacy practices. Shannon (1995) sees critical literacy as expanding what a normal literacy lesson may be, where students will read and use multiple types of texts to uncover how they are being positioned through the processes of question-asking and problem-posing. The following section will further explain how these theories of critical literacy are put into practice in K-12 classrooms.

Critical literacy in K-12 classrooms

While theory should be the basis for any teaching practice, it is helpful for educators to have classroom-based examples of pedagogical practices based on theory that they can incorporate into their daily teaching. Research on critical literacy has found successful ways to develop a critical literacy curriculum.

Lewison, Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) found that using children's literature, particularly books that address social issues, are a valuable entry point for teachers when beginning to use critical literacy practices. One device that a teacher may use to guide students in questioning and taking action on important issues is reading aloud texts that explore difficult or sensitive themes and topics. Teachers can have students write a new ending or take on the viewpoints of alternate characters in the text to examine the many perspectives and views involved in any situation (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). For example, the book *Baseball saved us* by Ken Mochizuki is written from the perspective of a young Japanese-American boy living in the internment camps that U.S. residents of Japanese descent were forced to live in during World War II. The text may be read aloud by the teacher or independently in small groups. After reading and discussing the background and the events of the book, students could work in small groups or individually to rewrite, orally retell, or participate in a Reader's Theatre of the story from the perspectives of other characters in the book such as the nameless guard who watches over the residents as they played baseball, the narrator's older brother Teddy, or an elder Japanese-American living in the camp. There are many cross-curricular opportunities when using social issues texts such as *Baseball saved us*, which could be integrated with a study of World War II and

connected to decisions and laws made by the U.S. government throughout history. America's past and current military involvements could be a source of comparison with students, where the teacher invites students to think about the different perspectives involved in any situation such as war. Students' life experiences, such as immigration, discrimination, or government action during war can be used to make this topic personal and immediate, inviting critical discussion and action on these topics.

Vasquez, Ruise, Adamson, Heffernan, Chiola-Nakai, and Shear (2003) have had success using critical literacy practices to address issues in popular culture and then engage in problem solving on these topics. For example, one sixth-grade teacher explored the issue of sports by capitalizing on his students' interests to explore issues of advertising, global economics, and labor policies related to Nike, uncovering inequities that were unknown to students. His students took action by conducting surveys at their school to see the impact of Nike on their schoolmates and to learn if they knew about some of the problematic labor practices they learned about. Students then created posters to hang up in school, wrote letters to Nike, and conducted presentations to other classes to share issues of child laborers and sweat shops (Vasquez et al., 2003). These activities allowed students to see the political and social effects of the many symbols and messages they encounter and then challenge these.

In Australia, Comber, Thompson, and Wells (2001) worked with elementary students and utilized the low socioeconomic area in which they live to question the types of services and privileges that they are not offered in comparison to their middle and upper class peers attending other schools. Because many students brought up the lack of recreational space and landscaping in their neighborhoods, the researchers used the absence of trees in this impoverished area to investigate the political and social norms affecting the quality of the students' lives, as outdoor activity was more difficult in the intense Australian heat as compared to more affluent areas with more trees. The students subsequently took action by taking photographs, drawing pictures, and writing letters to local leaders to make their concerns heard. Students were scaffolded to consider the injustices in their world and then they were given assistance to take action on these issues. This type of teacher guidance to help bring up issues and perspectives that directly affect or impact young children is essential.

Use of critical literacy practices is not limited to reading and writing teachers or elementary classrooms. A high

school history teacher, Christensen (1999), used the theme of immigration to explore with students the way that textbooks and other media have portrayed and left out important parts of history. Students were asked to do what Christensen called 'real' research, to have them uncover multiple perspectives on immigration in the United States through the lens of different immigrant groups. Christensen found that students were able to use personal and cultural resources to understand how history has positioned certain immigrant groups and to connect their own experiences as recent immigrants. Importantly, from a critical literacy view which values multimodal forms of demonstrating learning, students were asked to demonstrate what they learned through media, technology, written, and oral literacy (Christensen, 1999). Enacting critical literacy practices can be challenging for teachers who encounter many pressures and mandates in today's schools and may feel that their schedule does not allow for room for anything else. A model such as the Four Resource Model (Luke & Freebody, 1999) can be used as a framework for teachers to organize their literacy instruction.

A Model for critical literacy

The Four Resource Model, developed by Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1999) asks teachers to utilize the backgrounds, unique knowledge, and life experiences of their students to develop rich literacy teaching and learning opportunities. The four components of this model are "Code Breaking, Text User, Text Participant, and Critical Practices" (Flint, 2008, pp. 105-106). Code breaking as part of reading and writing is learning how we decipher the symbols of letters to decode words. Teaching students to be a text participant means valuing the student as one who brings their own schema and knowledge to a literacy event and can respond personally to what they have read. A text user is a reader and writer who can navigate different types of texts for multiple purposes and understand what the author is trying to say (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Lastly, this model includes critical practices as an essential part of literacy (Flint, 2008).

According to The Four Resource Model, critical practices invite students to ask questions and engage with texts that offer differing viewpoints on issues, including challenging the author, the text, and the curriculum itself (Flint, 2008; Luke & Freebody, 1999). This model gives due attention to skills long recognized as important in literacy development such as decoding, comprehension, and understanding how to read a variety of types of text structures and genres. However, critical practices are one fourth of this model,

reminding teachers and educators that students of all ages must be given the opportunity to develop critical literacy through opportunities such as reading social issue texts, examining the sociopolitical forces in curriculum, texts, and global events that affect one's world. Including critical practices such as these are essential in developing truly literate students of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and resources that can take part in changing unequal and unjust practices that impact their communities and their world.

Critical literacy: Instruction for all students

Those involved with critical literacy believe that schools and classrooms must include critically literate practices not as occasional or additional activities, but as the core of the literacy curriculum. Within the context of critical literacy, teachers teach skills readers need to know, such as code breaking and comprehension, but these practices include a critical twist on everything that is experienced (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). Students are actively invited to question, explore, and take action on issues that impact them.

According to Shor (1999), movements in education currently represent two perspectives, those who are not concerned about the inequities in our society and those who are committed to making the necessary changes in curriculum, teaching practices, and the structure of schools. At the beginning of my teaching career, I was part of this first group of educators, yet, I did not know how to teach literacy to my students in a way that offered opportunities for disenfranchised students to take part in changing the inequalities for themselves and their communities. Using the frameworks of critical literacy, educators can better prepare all students to participate and negotiate the global and quickly changing world in which they live.

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