

CHAPTER 4

Critical Literacy at the Nexus of Praxis

In this chapter we set the stage for exploring what critical literacy can look like in practice. However, we need to approach these descriptions and applications carefully, as we are reluctant to pinpoint too finitely what “counts” as critical literacy, as it defies any single rendering. However, this reluctance is also mediated by the need to tell concrete stories of how critical literacy has been taken up by some skilled learners and teachers. We are careful to resist specific classroom depictions and hold them up as models of critical literacy, as it is only through practice that the social justice basis to critical theory can, in part, be realized. So we begin by first exploring the need to maintain some ambiguity and variation in the praxis of critical literacy and then discussing what are essential features of this praxis. In the three chapters that follow this one, we provide detailed examples of critical literacy in practice. This chapter sets the theoretical stage for reading these classroom applications.

With every educational theory and perspective, the most frequent question posed is, What are practical strategies with this approach? The question is necessary, purposeful, but also potentially dangerous. If taken without the necessary understanding of theory and constant use of reflection, practices are incomplete. In fact, neither theory nor practice can exist on its own and be effective. Theory without practice is decontextualized conjecture, while

practice without theory is at best superficial and at worst unwittingly harmful. In short, what is necessary is **praxis**, that blend of theory and practice that mutually interrogate each other. Building from Paulo Freire's work that underscores much of the liberatory nature of critical literacy, the place of praxis is crucial in critical literacy as a means of social justice. In writing about Freire's philosophy of praxis, Ronald Glass (2001) put it this way: "The practice of freedom, as a critical reflexive praxis, must grasp the outward direction, meaning, and consequences of action, and also its inward meaning as realization and articulation of a self" (p. 18). We can look upon critical literacy as just this type of critical reflexive praxis. We grasp the outward direction by actually engaging with texts and representations in critical ways with our students, and we recast the inward meaning by reflecting upon the role, tenor, and consequences of critical literacy in contemporary classrooms.

The term *praxis* is also readily bandied about in educational circles, including preservice and inservice teacher education. However, to actually achieve the kind of praxis that Freire was advocating, a reflexive viewpoint is essential. **Reflexivity**, in this case, can be understood as a constant, cyclical questioning of the theoretical basis, practical implementation, and overall impact of literacy practices. With the prospect of critical literacy, this relationship of praxis is particularly crucial. As we've discussed (see Chapters 1 and 2), critical literacy is as much about an orientation toward texts as particular sets of questions. In this way, critical literacy should be a refractive practice, one in which teachers engage in a questioning fashion about their classroom practices and the critical nature of those activities. By reflecting during stages of planning and implementation, teachers interested in critical literacy would assess if their classroom practices set the stage for critical engagements with text. Looking for opportunities taken to question texts causes a form of praxis occurs. We engage in practices that are informed by theories that undergird critical literacy, but we also reflect upon our practices and use them to better understand and alter those theoretical concepts. There are not, nor should there be, static lists of approaches, sequences, and strategies that qualify as critical literacy across contexts. Rather, critical literacy is "done," in part, by engaging it as praxis, as a combination of both theory and practice, and by keeping it elusive of a static set of practices.

MAINTAINING CRITICAL LITERACY AS A MOVING TARGET

Consider the college textbooks that you read in your teacher education program. Many of them encompass phrases such as "best practices." In fact, as authors and researchers, we have both written about best practices in the field of literacy. However, we suggest that with many areas, and certainly with

critical literacy, this type of language and perspective is more self-defeating than helpful. The phrase “best practices” connotes that some specific strategies, approaches, and qualities are necessary and even replicable across contexts. In education and in other fields that work with application of theories to specific settings, a common occurrence is the following sequence: a pedagogical approach is theorized, history and research are provided to support the use of the approach, and then sample lessons and strategies are offered as models for implementing the approach. This same sequence is offered time and time again and leads to a unidirectional flow from theory to practice. Publishing companies, policymakers, and colleagues offer sample or model lessons. Often, publishing companies provide frameworks for teachers, including lesson plans, accompanying materials, assessment of student work, and correlations to state objectives. These offerings are made and taken up readily because of many factors, including the tight time constraints that teachers face as part of their daily work. With the bulk of their days spent in isolation from professional dialogue and with limited time for planning, educators are prime targets for prepackaged materials that overemphasize particular methods over the reflective practice that characterizes the most productive pedagogies for students. Ultimately, many approaches falter, in part due to this unidirectional sequence from ideation to implementation. Without a reflexive stance that questions if the starting purposes and theories are being achieved, if they are still appropriate, and how they might be altered in the future, a flow from theory to practice falls short of becoming praxis.

For critical literacy, the prospect of prepackaged lessons *is* particularly problematic. Critical literacy is, more than anything, about representation and context, asking what work a text is doing in a particular context, with particular readers, and in what ways. How these questions are posed, who takes them up, and what their potential outcome might be is productively elusive of prediction. Taken too literally, explorations of critical literacy in the classroom can quickly escalate into merely getting through a time block with students rather than engaging in serious critique and reflection. In essence, a sociocultural and critical stance on literacy is more about a framework or view of literacy than methods, approaches, or sequences to lessons. We resist providing a set definition of critical literacy and advise others to be wary of approaches that do offer easy definitions and hold up models of best practices. Critical literacy will realize its potential if it remains elusive of a definition, if it, in essence, stays a moving target.

By shifting its shape across contexts and readers, critical literacy then would beg the reflexive questions that interrogate various uptakes and interpretations. Imagine that you and the teacher next door both attend an inservice on critical literacy. As with many professional development approaches, this inservice is an after-school presentation in which critical literacy is defined and then sample

64 Critical Literacy

lessons and approaches are provided. As you return to your respective classrooms, you both decided to try adapting and implementing a few of the lessons discussed in the inservice, and you compare notes after these sessions. You might discuss how the students reacted to being asked to engage with texts from a critical perspective, how discussions developed, and if your classroom contexts seemed to be appropriate settings for these types of discussions. This type of exchange and professional dialogue is at the heart of keeping critical literacy elusive of a definition and engaging in praxis. By discussing varying interpretations to critical literacy, you can keep the focus on essential features and not overly technical implementation of too-specific sequences of strategies.

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF CRITICAL LITERACY

Maintaining critical literacy as a moving target and discussing its varying incarnations across settings also sheds light on those grand features that are found in differing contexts. In the next section, we go further into detail about the necessary components of stance, contexts, tools, and process that have marked successful critical literacy practices. In making critical literacy a hallmark of our practices as readers, educators, and researchers, we have gathered together a number of salient, essential features that mark this kind of work. Our word choice of *features* is purposeful here, as these characteristics are much larger in nature than strategies, tactics, or activities. Rather, they are large, or grand, qualities of these textual interactions, but they will take shape differently in varying contexts and with diverse participants. With a strategy, such as a think-pair-share activity, we might expect to see the same basic flow of procedure across different classrooms. However, with critical literacy, we have to alert ourselves to creating and reflecting upon features that act as foundations to the set of practices that might count as critical literacy. In fact, they are features of any textual interaction, but we describe the particular ways that they can be engaged to promote the critical questioning of power and texts.

Stance: Texts as Representations

The first component to critical literacy is the necessary feature of a particular epistemic **stance**, or orientation toward texts. For critical literacy to occur, readers must be able to grasp and hold up all texts as representational. While this sounds rather obvious, the implications and ramifications of this attitude toward texts are significant. First, seeing all texts as representation raises two

immediate questions: What is included and who has made that decision? These two first questions help to show the biased nature of all texts. By definition, a representation is both an abstraction of its ideas and is partial. Representations leave in some aspects of ideas and leave out others. No representation can fully include and discuss all possible ideas, so choices are made. In first seeing all texts as representational, readers understand that all texts can and should be subject to questions about these choices.

This view is crucial for critical literacy to occur, and it must be a constant feature of textual engagement. To promote this stance with some texts and not others communicates an implicit but powerful message that only some texts are representations. This belies the very nature of critical literacy. Furthermore, invoking this stance in some situations and not others may also prompt students to follow the lead of the teacher in responding to texts. In other words, the readers in the classroom learn to “student,” to detect when to respond in critical ways and when not to. This kind of all too familiar pattern in education removes students from a more fully developed and integrated interaction with texts as independent, critical readers, because their attention is partially devoted to detecting when to use critical perspectives. This stance of seeing all texts as representations, then, must be a constant orientation.

Contexts: The Classroom as a Democratic Environment

Another feature of critical literacy, particularly for educational settings, is the context of a **democratic classroom**. By democratic classroom we do not mean the often-invoked example of taking a numerical vote on whether to read this book or that book. Rather, we point to the features of a democratic environment in which participants engage in deep discussions about difficult questions related to power, agency, rights, and harm (Harper & Bean, 2006; Parker, 2003).

For critical literacy to occur, particular questions of representation, power, and ideas are taken up. For example, a key question posed in critical literacy is, What is this text trying to do to me? This question prompts readers to question not only the purpose of the author but also the intended consequences on particular kinds of readers. However, the answers to this type of question defy right/wrong categories, instead invoking plausibility and justification as means to assessing and juxtaposing differing versions. Various interpretations can and should be engendered with these types of questions, and these interpretations can only be shared in a context that values and embodies democratic discourse. This type of discourse involves the engaged tussling over ideas that provides texture and deepens participants' understandings of the text and themselves in relation to it.

Tools: Metalanguage

Perhaps the most technical feature of the practice of critical literacy is the necessary component of metalanguage. Put simply, metalanguage is language about language. In critical literacy, we are particularly concerned with how texts do the work that they try to do. By asking questions about the particular representations and discussing our interpretations, we discuss textual features, including language choices, tone, images, layout, and so on. To engage in these discussions, we need not only an environment that encourages democratic discourse, but we also need the linguistic tools, or vocabulary, to be able to discuss the texts. An easily accessible example *is* found in discussing the kinds of visual images chosen to promote meanings in a high school textbook (see Chapter 1). A more detailed example is a discussion in which students are discussing the possible purposes used by an author who writes in the passive voice. This metalanguage can be, as seen through these examples, micro or macro in nature. That is, the metalanguage can cover broad textual features such as tone, layout, packaging, or it can be far more detailed to the level of syntactical and semantic choices made by the author. Without these linguistic tools, or metalanguage, our abilities to talk about texts themselves are very limited.

Process: Cycles of Deconstruction and Reconstruction

The last feature that we discuss is the cycle of **deconstruction** and **reconstruction** of texts. In engaging critical questions such as who stands to benefit, who is represented here, and who is not represented, we are, in essence, deconstructing texts. We use metalanguage to pick apart the specificities of power, representation, and purpose laden in all texts. Deconstruction of texts is a hallmark not just of critical literacy but of critical theory in general, which pushes readers to scratch beneath the surface. However, a frequent critique of this critical approach is that it leaves skilled readers with figurative pieces of texts strewn about. If all texts are representations, then all texts are subject to deconstruction, and this ability to interrogate texts for their implications of power may, ironically, leave readers feeling nihilistic and at a loss of agency. They may, in other words, feel capable of deconstructing any text and at a loss for finding spaces of empowerment, agency, or efficacy.

To alleviate this potential cul-de-sac of textual practice, moments of reconstruction are necessary to reengage critical readers and to take up further notions of social justice. In reconstruction (see Chapter 7 for a detailed example),

readers might recast the text from a different perspective, find alternative texts that privilege different voices, or create their own text. Any of these options are taken up with explicit and democratic discussions of what kinds of representations are more preferred, suitable, and appropriate with the particular sets of values, practices, and purposes. All of these aspects are up for grabs, so to speak, but the reconstruction of texts reengages readers with the choices that they make as readers and also creators of texts. Coming from a critical literacy perspective, they return to texts with the conscious decision about the type of representations that resonate with their worldviews and experiences.

In summary, we have outlined four key features of critical literacy teachers need to consider: (1) stance: texts as representations, (2) contexts: the classroom as a democratic environment, (3) tools: metalanguage, and (4) process: cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction. These four features of critical literacy in practice are by no means an exhaustive and scientifically validated and adjudicated treatise. We would argue that such an endeavor is contrary to the larger epistemic stance that critical literacy promotes. In fact, we hope that you have discussions about these features and their relationship to what you have experienced as readers, students, and teachers. We offer these features and our understandings of them in the hope that you will, as practitioners of critical literacy, engage in your own discussions about these features and in what ways you've seen them enacted and taken up.

Cautions to Engaging in Critical Literacy in the Classroom

- Include recursive cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction. Build agency and empowerment by providing spaces to find and contrast alternative texts.
- Respect students' out-of-school literacy practices and texts. Resist commodifying and "schoolifying" texts and practices that serve other purposes.
- Keep in mind that for many students, critical literacy perspectives and questions have not been part of their experiences in schooling. As with any departure from expected routine, multiple explanations may be necessary.
- Engage critical literacy as a perspective and tone of the classroom. These are not stand-alone activities that can be engaged some days and then not honored on others. Critical literacy is a way of engaging with texts as representational and should be engaged as part of what fluent, competent readers do consistently.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Education is known for its successive fads in theories and practices. Discuss what educational fads you have seen come and go and why you think their shelf lives were limited.
2. Often, implementation of theory into practice results in a revision of the original theory or idea. Provide an example of a theory or concept that you implemented in your teaching and how it differed from the originally stated idea.
3. Being a reflexive teacher is discussed in this chapter, as well as in much of teacher education, as a key to successful pedagogy. However, there are many constraints (time, curricular) on engaging in reflective practice. Discuss what constraints you feel as a teacher and how these constraints can be negotiated and mediated.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

- Comber, B., & Simpson, A. (Eds.). (2001). *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Davies, D. (1994). *Shards of glass: Children reading and writing beyond gendered identities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- Gale, T., & Densmore, K. (2000). *Just schooling: Explorations in the cultural politics of teaching*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Gutmann, A. (1987). *Democratic education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (2001). *Why deliberative democracy?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Morgan, W. (1997). *Critical literacy in the classroom: The art of the possible*. London: Routledge.
- Muspratt, S., Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Constructing critical literacies: Teaching and learning textual practices*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Parker, W. C. (2003). *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life*. New York: Teachers College Press.

REFERENCES

- Glass, R. D. (2001). On Paulo Freire's philosophy of praxis and the foundations of liberation education. *Educational Researcher*, 30(2), 15–25.
- Harper, H. J., & Bean, T. W. (2006). Fallen adolescents and adolescent literacy(ies) in a renewed project of democratic citizenship. In D. E. Alvermann, K. A. Hinchman, D. W. Moore, S. F. Phelps, & D. R. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Parker, W. C. (2003). *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life*. New York: Teachers College Press.