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A Critical Course For Literacy Education

Andrea Bartlett

During a recent update of our Literacy Education program, the introductory graduate-level course was renamed Critical Literacy. While the term *critical* is used extensively in the professional literature, I found as instructor of the course that I needed to research the term in order to present my students with a clear picture of what it means to be critical. This paper presents the results of that research, including implications for literacy education courses. My research began with a reexamination of critical theorists. Represented by the writings of Marcuse (1960; 1964) and Habermas (1970; 1975) among others, the goal of critical theory is to "reestablish the meaning of freedom based on human values, just social relations, and equality by illuminating the past and current social relations, documenting their consequences, and analyzing dialectically the society's contradictions as opportunities for change toward more just relations" (Shannon, 1990b, p. 148).

Grounded in critical theory, advocates of critical literacy view knowledge as socially constructed and, therefore, subject to scrutiny. A concept which applies to the use of language in all disciplines, critical literacy requires that students *and* teachers question, reflect, and consider action. According to Ira Shor (1987):

> *Critical literacy goes beneath the surface to understand the origin, structure and consequences of any body of knowledge, technical process, or object under study. This model of literacy establishes teaching and learning as forms of research and experimentation, testing hypotheses, examining items, questioning what we know (p. 24).*

An example of the application of critical literacy at the high school level was described by Bigelow (1989), a teacher whose students analyzed the impact of Columbus' voyages. By contrasting their textbooks with other materials about Columbus, students learned that history was distorted by those in power and that "facts" must be challenged. Connections were made between this use of power and other societal conditions, and students' reactions in their journals hinted at future social action. In an example of critical literacy with university students, Shannon (1990a) described a graduate class in which students investigated equity in schooling. His students, all practicing teachers and administrators, were challenged to critique their own work in schools. In their critical projects, students were required to address the following questions: "How do we wish to live together, who benefits and who loses under current social conditions at school and in society, how were these conditions developed and how are they maintained, and what changes are desirable and possible" (Shannon, 1990a, pp. 379-380). My readings helped me to understand that the goal of critical pedagogy is a new, more equitable, social order and that the creation of this new order would begin with a critique of knowledge and process toward action. Therefore, my next step was to select critical approaches suitable for literacy education courses.

Implications for literacy education courses

In literacy education courses based on critical pedagogy, the traditional roles of teacher and student are transformed.

Instead of just presenting information, the teacher uses questioning to help students organize and present their thoughts. Topics come primarily from students' interests, and students pose problems instead of solving problems posed by others (Wallerstein, 1987). Furthermore, students' recommendations for optimal learning experiences are solicited and implemented.

Giroux (1987) provided four specific implications of critical pedagogy: 1) different student voices are heard and appreciated as the basis for critical dialogue; 2) curriculum materials are analyzed critically; 3) students learn a "language of morality" through which society is evaluated (p. 179); and 4) students come to believe that their actions have an effect on the world. In the sections that follow, these implications will be explained, and teaching approaches congruent with critical pedagogy will be presented.

Encouraging different student voices

Giroux's first condition of critical pedagogy is that different student voices are heard and appreciated as the basis for critical dialogue. According to this view, voice is the means by which we "make ourselves understood and listened to, and define ourselves as active participants in the world" (Giroux and McLaren, 1986, p. 235). The role of the critical pedagogue, then, is to make it possible for students — particularly minority students whose voices often go unheard — to participate in classroom discourse. One way to ensure that all students' voices are heard is through the use of collaborative activities. The power of group learning experiences and their relationship to critical literacy were expressed by Wilson (1988):

> *Most of the real learning that occurs in classrooms results from the intellectual and emotional excitement generated from the group learning experience.*

Collaborative learning bests reflects the concepts of critical literacy. Ideas do not develop, become modified or solidify in a vacuum. Readers/thinkers need one another for those ideas to bloom (p. 548).

To make collaborative activities successful, teachers must develop risk-free environments in which students feel free to express their ideas on wide-ranging topics. Team definitions, writing response groups and expressive writing are collaborative activities that contribute to such an environment. With team definitions, students write their definitions of an important course concept — such as educational equity — independently (Kagan, 1990). Students then meet in small groups of four or five students to create a team definition. Finally, the groups report to the class, and their statements are written on the blackboard or overhead projector. The major benefit of this approach is that team definitions are invariably of higher quality than the individual efforts, demonstrating the synergy within the groups.

Writing response groups are another way to encourage student collaboration and discourse. An assignment such as an *I Search* paper (Macrorie, 1988) is a good starting point for writing response groups. With the *I Search* paper, students write a paper on a self-selected topic. Drafts of the paper may be shared through either unstructured or structured writing response groups. Unstructured groups may follow the writing workshop format in which students write drafts and collaborate freely with peers (Atwell, 1987).

Structured groups may take the form of Elbow groups. Following Elbow's (1973) guidelines, students read their drafts aloud to a small group twice. During the first reading, other group members listen without writing. When drafts are read a second time, listeners respond by pointing to the most

effective part, summarizing the main idea, and describing the writing with a metaphor. In these writing response groups, listeners share "movies" of how they received the piece of writing (Elbow, 1973, p. 85). In both structured and unstructured writing response groups, students hear their peers' opinions on topics related to literacy while they learn approaches to teaching writing.

Related to writing response groups is the use of expressive writing to respond to controversial issues, particularly issues brought forward by voices outside the mainstream. For example, students could respond to Delpit's (1986) contention that progressive methods may put minority children at even greater risk of school failure. Or students could respond to authors who believe that school reading lists should represent the experiences of all children, and not only the dominant culture (Aoki, 1992; Barrera, Liguori and Salas, 1992; Bishop, 1992). Writing could also be used to encourage students to express their own experiences and personal histories. During such an activity, one of my students wrote the poem shown in the box on the next page.

As shown in this poem, students are often willing to share their personal histories when teachers develop an atmosphere in which all students' voices are heard and valued. By sharing their writing in either small groups or with the whole class, students hear the voices of their peers and come to interpret their own experiences in new ways. As students collaborate on activities such as those described above, they have many opportunities to express opinions and to hear the opinions of others.

Critiquing curriculum materials

Giroux's (1987) second condition of critical pedagogy involves the critical analysis of curriculum materials (p. 179). Such analyzes would have the dual purposes of clarifying the

White(ness)
is the starting point,
the norm,
the standard,
against which all other "colors" are compared.

He
(white male from South Africa, come to America to escape the ugliness)
said,
"You speak so well (for a Filipino girl)."

I said,
"Yes, sometimes I feel like I should have been born white."
(Feeling uneasy, offended, embarrassed, confused)

He
said,
"No, if you were born white you would be just normal."

Why did I say yes?
Years later I understand
White(ness)
is the starting point,
the norm,
the standard, against which all other "colors" are compared.
--Alma R. Alonzo

relationship between knowledge and reality and, also, helping students to understand their own histories. In describing his high school students' attitudes toward text, Bigelow (1989) observed:

> *Most of my students have trouble with the idea that a book — especially a textbook — can lie. When I tell them that I want them to argue with, not just read, the printed word they're not sure what I mean (p. 635).*

For students who have not been challenged by a critical educator such as Bigelow, teacher education may be their first opportunity to critique the viewpoints presented in textbooks and other class readings. Students should be encouraged to apply their personal experiences and read multiple sources in order to evaluate the truthfulness of printed materials.

One way to model text critique is through a comparison of books written on the same topic, such as Columbus (Bigelow, 1989; Taxel, 1992). Literacy education students could read or listen to children's books and textbooks about Columbus that provide a range of attitudes toward indigenous peoples. Discussion should focus on "how school knowledge is produced, where it comes from, whose interest it serves, (and) how it might function to privilege some groups over others" (Giroux, 1987, p. 176). Through such demonstrations, students learn that books are written to serve the interests of specific groups, most often the dominant culture.

Reading response groups also provide students with opportunities to critique curriculum materials. For example, each group of four or five students could select a book for supplemental reading. During class, the groups meet to critique this outside reading, focusing on the sources and effects of the knowledge presented. Summaries of each group's responses are kept in group journals, with the instructor contributing probing questions to enhance future discussions.

A third way to encourage students to critique curriculum materials is through the use of dialogue journals. Andrasick (1990) suggests that students keep a double entry notebook with sections labeled, "What the Book Says" and "What I Say." Students critique interesting textual passages by reflecting on personal experiences and other readings. Then, other students and/or the instructor respond to their ideas.

All of these approaches provide models of the critical stance that prospective and inservice teachers are being encouraged to take, particularly concerning their own teaching. Beyond teacher reflection, teachers who have this critical stance are more likely to ask their own students to critique curriculum materials.

A language of morality and hope

To meet Giroux's (1987) third condition of critical pedagogy, students are introduced to a "language of morality" through which society is evaluated (p. 179). This moral language allows students to consider how communities should be structured. The fourth condition adds a "language of hope" through which students learn that they affect the world through their actions (Shannon, 1990b, p. 149). To this end, students develop curriculum, school and community projects in preparation for their future roles as "active community participants" (Giroux and McLaren, 1986, p. 237).

To acquire a language of morality, issues discussed in literacy education courses are evaluated in terms of equity and fairness. In other words, students consider the effects of the present situation on disempowered individuals and groups. Concurrently, the dialogue presents a "language of hope" in which students discuss possible plans for action. Morality and hope can be emphasized during both whole-class and small-group discussions. During whole-class discussions, the

instructor guides rather than controls students' consideration of important topics. Open-ended questions challenge students to control the direction of the dialogue. The instructor's role is to lead students to question what the present situation is, why, and what can be done to improve the status quo.

This same emphasis on morality and hope can be established during small group activities. In one such activity, "value lines" (Kagan, 1990), students mark a continuum according to their personal opinions of a statement related to the course. For example, students could mark a continuum ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* for a statement such as "Grouping children by ability maintains societal inequities." After marking their value lines, students discuss their opinions in small groups. Then, they mark a second, identical continuum to see whether their opinions have been changed by this dialogue. The group processes as well as opinion changes are then discussed. Another way to encourage students to examine their opinions is through structured academic controversy (Johnson, Johnson and Holubec, 1987). This approach uses a debate format to encourage dialogue among students. Given a controversial topic within the course, groups of four students are formed, with one pair of students preparing an argument for and the other against the statement. The pairs present their arguments on a topic such as whether standardized tests should be used to assess literacy. Then the pairs switch sides and prepare the opposing argument. After the second debate, the group attempts to reach consensus on the issue.

Whole-class discussions and problem-solving formats such as value lines and structured academic controversy allow students to examine their own positions as well as those of their peers. Through dialogues on controversial issues, students evaluate the present situation and suggest possible

changes. To truly develop a language of hope, however, additional steps would be necessary. Students would need to take action by developing curriculum projects that address societal inequities. Students could also implement these projects in the schools and communities for which they were developed.

The approaches described above encourage different student voices, critique of curriculum materials, and a language of morality and hope (Giroux, 1987). Will teacher education students be more empowered if their instructors use approaches such as the ones described in this article? Not necessarily. By maintaining strict control over classroom events, an instructor would obviously fall short of creating a democratic classroom. By becoming critical, teacher educators make a political statement. Ideas will be challenged, students and instructors will be empowered, and action will be considered that could change both education and society (Wilson, 1988). These goals are worth pursuing.

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