Critical Literacy

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Abstract

Historically, the term "literacy" was defined as the ability to read and write. However, this limited definition of literacy has been challenged through the emergence of social theories, where it was recognized that literacy is more complex than traditional perspectives allow The New London Group (Harv Educ Rev 66(1):60–93, 1996). A body of work associated with the term new literacy studies (NLS) views literacy as a set of socially and culturally situated practices, rather than simply as a range of technical academic skills that operate at an individual level (Gee, Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses, critical perspectives on literacy and education. Falmer, London, 1990) (Heath 1983; Street 1984). This shift in perspective has embraced the plural and discursive nature of literacy and integrates ways of *being and doing* in the world (Luke, Genres of power? Literacy education and the production of capital. In Hasan R, Williams, G (eds) Literacy in society. Longman, London, 1995; Gee, An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method. Routledge, Abingdon, 2005).

Critical approaches to literacy recognize the link between meaning making, power, and identity (Janks, Literacy and power. Routledge, Abingdon, 2010). While there are a number of orientations associated with critical literacy, all share the perspective that "human action is mediated by language and other symbol systems within particular cultural contexts" (Lewis et al. Reframing sociocultural research on literacy. Routledge, Abingdon, 2009, p. 5). Language therefore plays a key role in how we make sense of the world in which we live. Below is a brief review of some of the existing literature related to the history of critical literacy and some of its distinct orientations within the field of education. An account of the ways in which critical approaches to literacy have influenced teacher

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education programs and been instrumental in shaping teacher identity is considered. Finally, challenges associated with critical approaches to literacy are foregrounded and linked to future possibilities.

Contents

Early Developments

Critical literacy education is commonly associated with Freire (1970), who advocated a political orientation to teaching and learning. Influenced by Marxist philosophies, Freire (1970) forged a concept of literacy that had the potential to develop critical consciousness within educational practices. Freire believed that the ruling class constructed and legitimated school knowledge and constructions of reality and that these were lived out in everyday practice. He proposed that school literacy practices played a role in creating passive recipients of certain bodies of knowledge. He argued strongly that the traditional schooling system was based on the "banking model" of education, where knowledge was transferred directly from the teacher to the learner. A learner's preexisting knowledge and experiences within this transmission model were deemed to be inconsequential. Freire (1970) advocated a more learner-centered participatory approach to literacy where dialogue and disparate interpretations were valued, thus promoting transformative and liberatory pedagogies that provide opportunities for social and political analyses.

Critical Theories

Critical theories associated with literacy emerge from the wider discipline of critical social theory and foreground issues of class, gender, and ethnicity (Morgan 1997). Both of which are oriented towards a critique of social life that includes

institutionalized schooling with the aim of exploring and understanding how society works. Leonardo states that within education, critical social theory is conceptualized as a critical form of classroom discourse that "cultivates students' ability to critique institutional as well as conceptual dilemmas, particularly those that lead to domination or oppression" (2004, p. 11). Building on this tradition allows a critique of the ways in which certain social groups construct and control particular ideologies, institutions, and customs within their society, thereby reproducing and sustaining their dominant role (Morgan 1997, p. 1). Critical social theories are therefore considered to be transformative in nature as they seek human emancipation from the circumstances that constrain and control them. Such perspectives are particularly relevant to education as they allow an examination of existing ideologies and educational practices that often limit and oppress certain groups of learners. A critical theory of education, which is rooted in critical theories of society, attempts to challenge oppressive and limiting pedagogies. This promotes the cultivation of educational spaces that allow for the social transformation and development of all individuals for full participation in their society (Freire 1970).

These sociological accounts inform and underpin critical literacy education and enable an understanding of the way language is used in society to maintain control of specific ideologies and practices and promote the dominance of the *status quo* (Janks 2010). Traditional notions of literacy value particular textual practices associated with reading and writing and these are used as *cultural tools* to justify a variety of messages and practices within society (Janks 2010). However, poststructuralism emphasizes the value of difference and heterogeneity and draws attention to the varied experiences of those who have been marginalized or suppressed within traditional approaches to literacy education. This allows for an engagement with issues of race, class, gender, language, and sexuality and other dimensions of identity that traditional approaches to literacy may have ignored.

Poststructuralist theories recognize that the texts that operate within society are socially constructed and ideologically laden, and this has had a significant impact on approaches to text analysis. It is recognized that ideological meanings are not only within political discourses but embedded in the ways in which society communicates its ideas, beliefs, values, and the actions that accompany these. In other words, ideology is a production of meaning and a way of viewing the world that is classified as common sense (McLaren 2009, p. 69). As a result, no text is neutral but reflects the perspective of the producer (Janks 2013). Analysis within such critical approaches is "put to work to reveal the hidden ideologies of texts" and the norms that serve particular interests within a society (Janks 2010, p. 35). Scholarship within critical approaches to education recognizes the importance of context and social constructions within society and emphasizes the possibility of reconstruction in order to transform and improve the way we live (McLaren 2009). The reconstruction of text is therefore considered to be a continuing process of transformation.

A recent review highlights the central aim of critical approaches to literacy as one that critiques and transforms "dominant ideologies, cultures, economies, institutions and political systems" (Luke 2012, p. 5). Luke proposes that the diverse philosophical foundations associated with critical approaches have led to:

(a) A focus on ideology critique and cultural analysis as a key element of education against cultural exclusion and marginalization

(b) A commitment to the inclusion of working class, cultural and linguistic minorities, indigenous learners, and others marginalized on the basis of gender, sexuality, or other forms of difference

(c) An engagement with the significance of text, ideology, and discourse in the construction of social and material relations, everyday cultural and political life. (Luke 2012, p. 6)

Major Contributions

It is recognized that there are a number of distinct orientations to critical literacy education. The following section considers how critical pedagogy and discourse analysis have influenced the ways in which it has been conceptualized and implemented in educational contexts.

Critical Pedagogy Approaches

Critical pedagogy is rooted in poststructuralism and argues for practices that conceptualize difference as a resource and allows for the "fashioning of new identities within existing configurations of power" (Giroux 1992, p. 28). Following on from the work of Freire, proponents from North America such as Shor (1980), Giroux (1983), and McLaren (1995) further developed key concepts linked to *critical pedagogy* with the aim of critiquing and challenging societal and institutional inequalities. These accounts established a strong theoretical basis for *critical pedagogy*, by linking it to critical theories and education (Crookes 2013). This cross-fertilization enables us to understand better the various links between ideology, power, culture, and language and to recognize the ways in which the messages and practices of those who are positioned in dominant roles in society are legitimated.

Giroux's (1992) work on critical pedagogy addresses issues of agency and seeks to expose the reality that certain groups are marginalized, silenced, or excluded within educational settings. He calls for a disruption of the rigid pedagogical borders that have often been used to achieve these ends within institutionalized schooling. Within educational practice, the critical pedagogy movement "aims to develop students' critical awareness of those oppressive social forces, including school structures and knowledges" (Morgan 1997, p. 6). Such practices allow students to be involved in a critique of dominant ideologies and world views that are portrayed through the media, popular cultural texts, literature, textbooks, digital materials, and functional texts (Shor and Freire 1987). Viewing literacy through such a lens establishes a clear link between the "reader" and the social world and provides a way of enacting critical theories within classrooms. Literacy is therefore not viewed as simply reading or writing in a functional sense but as a set of social practices where students engage in a critical reflection and examination of the world in which

they live. Critical literacy education therefore seeks to enhance students' agency in order to hear the voices of those who are limited by existing "norms" and to challenge the dominant cultural practices in school settings (Shor 2009; Lewis et al. 2009). Critical practices within schools are seen as offering spaces where pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, literacy, and language can be reenvisioned and reconstructed (Lewis et al. 2009).

Contemporary accounts of critical pedagogy therefore emphasize its dialectical nature and position school sites as contexts that are not only places of domination but places of liberation (McLaren 2009). Within such perspectives, institutionalized schooling is not simply "an arena for indoctrination or socialization or a site of instructions, but also a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and transformation" (McLaren 2009, p. 62). Such accounts challenge the traditional role of schooling that seeks to create homogeneous groups of citizens and instead provide a vision of the possible, where schooling fosters opportunities for students to become "inventors, critics and creators of knowledge" (Luke 2012, p. 7).

In recent decades, increased migration has reemphasized the need for a critical approach to language and literacy education, as it promotes an explicit focus on cultural and linguistic diversity (Norton and Toohey 2004; Janks 2010). It is recognized that within racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse Anglophone countries that the dominance of English as the medium of instruction is linked to monolingual and monocultural ideologies and policies (Luke and Dooley 2011). Well-documented research (OECD 2013) has reported inequitable schooling experiences within Anglophone countries for students from linguistic minority backgrounds, despite policy rhetoric that seeks to promote equality and inclusion (Luke and Dooley 2011).

Janks' (2010) critical literacy model addresses social, cultural, and linguistic diversity and offers a rich framework for thinking about issues in the classroom linked to dimensions of power, diversity, access, and design/redesign. Her work links each of these areas to language and how socially constructed ways of speaking and writing within communities inhabit what we term as *discourses* (Janks 2010). This body of work, along with others, draws on notions of discourse as a way of addressing the social, cultural, and language needs to learners from minority backgrounds.

Discourse Approaches

During the 1980s in Australia, a Hallidayan functional approach to language offered an additional dimension to critical pedagogy. This was implemented in two interconnected ways: through systemic-functional linguistics and the genre movement (Halliday and Martin 1993; Fairclough 1989). This movement allowed an exploration of the way that language is used within texts to position readers, speakers, and those being addressed. Opportunities to acquire knowledge of the linguistic structures of dominant discourses through text analysis, and to gain an understanding of how language is used to carry out social functions in the world, was

considered to be important for students from cultural and linguistic minority backgrounds (Rogers and Wetzel 2014).

Hallidayan linguistics was influential in the birth of critical pedagogy in the United Kingdom through the work of Fowler et al. (1979) and in Fairclough's (1989) account of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that drew on Halliday's analysis of language. Advocates of these language approaches to literacy education strongly argue that students need to be given access to "genres of power" (Halliday and Martin 1993) before they can successfully engage in ideological analysis and text desconstruction (e.g., Lankshear 1997; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Fairclough 2003). However, these views recognize difficulties in relation to notions of power when classroom practices are considered. Power is not easily transferred to learners through the explicit teaching of analytical skills and processes when engaging with texts (Wallace 2003). An examination of Foucault's (1982) concept of power shows that power is shifting, localized, unstable, and relational. Furthermore, certain social structures may function in a gate-keeping role to prevent access to specific social goods, social groups, and bodies of knowledge. Such considerations raise questions about the implementation of such approaches within classroom contexts.

Gee's (2005) model of Discourses draws together a consideration of issues of power and *language in use* and how these are socially constructed and transformed through dialogic interactions in society. Gee's body of work makes a distinction between Discourse with a capital "D" and discourse with a small "d." Small "d" discourses are defined as the bits of language that can take the form of an individual work, phrase, or longer utterances that make sense to particular social groups (Gee 2005, p. 18). Capital "D" Discourses draw on the larger narratives in society that address issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Discourses can therefore be considered as cultural repertoires or available ways of thinking that operate within sociocultural contexts. As a result, meaning is not established by simply decoding grammatical structures but by understanding the ways in which people within different Discourses have used language as a resource in a particular way to participate in various activities.

Given that critical literacy practices are considered to be communicative events situated within specific sociocultural contexts, it stands to reason that discourse analysis is a useful tool for analyzing the ways in which meaning has been constructed within texts and other semiotic resources. However, while advocates of such an approach argue that critical literacy practices are not possible without engaging in an analysis of discourse, it was recognized that the genre movement and CDA did not have explicit pedagogies built in and were, therefore, not enough on their own (Wallace 1992, 2003). As a result, greater emphasis on classroom application within educational contexts was highlighted through the critical language awareness (CLA) movement, which used CDA as a starting point (Clark et al. 1990; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999). Wallaces' work (1992) addressed such an omission by developing a critical language awareness framework for use in classroom settings.

Over the last decade, an increasing number of studies have focused on the intersectionality between discourse analysis and literacy research. (Gebhard et al. 2012; Janks 2013; Lewis et al. 2007; Gibbons 2009; Rogers and Mosley 2008; Rogers and Wetzel 2014). These bodies of work address the "complexity of movement across literacy sites and practices in an increasingly global world" (Rogers and Wetzel 2014, p. 11). Scholars offer theoretical frameworks, clear examples and pedagogical resources for classroom application, thereby bridging the gap between theories of critical literacy and teacher education. The following section reviews how such concerns are addressed within teacher education.

Work in Progress

Teacher Education

Scholarship associated with critical literacy education has mainly focused on school-based classroom contexts and links literacy practices to localized community settings. However, recently there has been a growing body of research that explores critical literacy within teacher education programs, both preservice and in-service. Shor's (1980) earlier work addresses the need to "educate the educators" by implementing a Freirean approach to teacher education. He highlights that further research within these arenas is needed and this continues to be the case.

Historically, within the Australian context, federally funded educational initiatives, such as the Christie Report (Christie et al. 1991), proposed the integration of critical literacy education as a core component of teacher preparation programs. Despite the lack of success with this proposal, many teacher education programs in Australia implement aspects of critical literacy (Luke 2000). While it has taken much longer for critical literacy education to gain momentum within teacher education in other countries, contemporary work has recognized the need and has pushed the agenda for critical literacy approaches to be more visible within teacher education programs (e.g., Rogers and Wetzel 2014; Sangster et al. 2013; Janks et al. 2014).

There are reports of critical literacy within teacher education within the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa, and these bodies of work have raised questions about how we train teachers in critical literacy and what these educational practices look like (e.g., Lewison et al. 2015; Rogers and Wetzel 2014; Vasquez et al. 2013; Sangster et al. 2013; Janks et al. 2014). However, there is still a lack of understanding of the ways teachers make sense of, or engage in, critical literacy practices. Rogers' work in the United States demonstrates the "potential of critical literacy education to deepen awareness of power and language" (Rogers 2013, p. 9). She emphasizes the need for teacher educators to actively "seek out the diversity that exists within seemingly homogeneous groups of students" (Rogers 2014, p. 16). She argues that literacy practices that are intentionally draw on the varied cultural and linguistic resources within the classroom foster an environment that gives voice to difference.

While a variety of models are drawn upon for implementation in different contexts, the overarching aims are to broaden the knowledge base of preservice and in-service teachers, in an effort to promote democratic and equitable classrooms and to enhance school reform. Many of these studies address a gap in the literature on critical literacy and teacher education and explore how teachers themselves gain a pedagogical understanding of the principles and practices of critical literacy. Rogers and Wetzel (2014) claim that exposing student teachers to critical theories and pedagogies can result in them recognizing the need to include such practices in their own classrooms.

These contributions document new ways for teacher educators to consider a hybrid of critical literacy approaches for use within teacher preparation programs. They argue that the variety of approaches provide powerful ways of communicating to student teachers that there is no singular way to practice critical literacy. Rogers suggests:

> The intellectual work of designing critical literacy practices provides multiple learning opportunities for teachers to rethink traditional assumptions about literacy, learning and the role of literacy education in the lives of the children and families with whom they work. (2014, p. 257)

The critical educator is therefore someone who recognizes the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the individual learner and the social world.

Critical Literacy and Identity

Another direction that critical approaches have taken is to address the link between a study of language and issues of identity and power (e.g., Norton and Toohey 2004; Masuda 2012). Studies in this area advocate that critical literacy is needed within educational settings in order to enable teachers and students to understand fully the relationship between power, ideology, and schooling, thereby making issues of identity, agency, and power visible (Lewis et al. 2007, p. 16). The complex processes involved in teaching and learning are highlighted within these bodies of work, and attention is drawn to the histories of participation that teachers and students bring to bear on classroom practices – these leave a mark on the participant (Lewis et al. 2007).

Poststructuralist views dismiss the notion of a fixed identity and instead consider identity as something that is constantly in the process of being constructed and reconstructed, as a result of interactions that take place within diverse social settings (Masuda 2012). These social processes are rooted in contexts and render notions of identity as multiple, unstable, and shifting (Miller 2009; Masuda 2012). Participation in social routines and conversations associated with a range of diverse discourses forge specific ways of thinking, valuing, believing, and doing (Gee 2005). Gee (2005) links such understandings of identity to the ways in which both teachers and learners engage in literacy practices. Various studies align with this

understanding and foreground how critical literacy practices can help both teachers and learners to understand how texts and dominant socially constructed discourses shape the ways in which they have been positioned within educational contexts (e.g., Luke and Dooley 2011; Rogers and Schaenen 2014).

Teachers' views about literacy practices are often built on the dominant discourses within their professional contexts, and these often determine what kind of knowledge is valued and who they are as teachers of particular "subject" areas (Masuda 2012). Contemporary studies claim that building the critical into teacher education programs allows both teacher educators and student teachers to explore critical literacy practices together (e.g., Vasquez et al. 2013). This promotes student-teacher-led enquiry into how language is used to disrupt the commonplace as it allows participants to position themselves as inquirers and constructers of knowledge (Rogers and Schaenen 2014, p. 13; Luke and Dooley 2011). Such perspectives claim that such approaches change the ways in which teachers think about language, literacy, culture, learning, and their own identities as agents of change (Lewison et al. 2008).

Problems and Difficulties and Future Directions

The discussion above demonstrates that human and social action is mediated by language and other meaning making symbols within a range of different settings. While some of the studies discussed in this chapter shed light on the different orientations and directions that critical literacy education has taken, there are some difficulties that need to be addressed in moving forward. The following section foregrounds some of these challenges, together with some considerations for future possibilities.

The integration of genre approaches with critical literacy practices is advocated by scholars as a way of providing access to meaning for a range of students. Genre approaches are often identified with the analysis of texts and how linguistic structures carry out social functions. Influenced by Hallidayan perspectives, scholars claim that it adds a useful dimension to critical literacy approaches as it allows an exploration and understanding of the language used by a writer to establish particular meanings across a range of texts. However, critics argue that this concept becomes problematic when considered in the light of diverse classroom contexts. They state that such claims overlook the need for students to grasp a comprehensive understanding of textual genres and the ways that lexical and syntactic functions are associated with particular discourses and ideologies. Luke (1997) recognizes that learners from low socioeconomic or diverse language and ethnic backgrounds are positioned as disenfranchised in such approaches due to the emphasis that is placed on ideological and textual analyses. These students often fail to recognize certain portrayals unless effective pedagogic practices are implemented in the classroom to enable them to discover such complex uses of language.

Problems also arise when classroom-based practices are considered. Critics argue that critical literacy appears to lack a set of pedagogical strategies that

would position it as a systematic curricular approach. Luke (2000) suggests that this is due to the diverse theoretical positions that underpin or inform critical literacy (e.g., Bakhtin, Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Freire) which are then translated into a broad range of pedagogic routines. Despite the plurality of theoretical perspectives associated with critical approaches, Luke (2000) cautions against the development of a specific blueprint for "doing" critical literacy in classroom contexts. A number of proponents of critical literacy (e.g., Luke 2000; Vasquez et al. 2013) align with this perspective and suggest that critical literacy practices need to be negotiated between teachers and students across a variety of teaching contexts. The range of conceptual positions and the reluctance to specify a formula for such practices place the responsibility for curricular design and classroom application on teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers (Behrman 2006). These challenges are not insignificant and suggest that the combination of critical literacy theories and practices requires creative and localized solutions.

Within critical literacy approaches texts are conceived as cultural tools or human designs that are used within particular environments to communicate specific meanings. It is essential within critical literacy practices that students from language minority backgrounds are given opportunities to deconstruct these meanings and understand the implicit ways that discourses of power are negotiated within texts. The field of critical literacy would benefit from an exploration of how teachers negotiate the complex ways of integrating critical literacy practices, discourse analysis approaches, and second language pedagogies within existing curricular frameworks. This focus on research would provide insights into the ways that teachers use such practices to support students from such backgrounds to develop the language needed to read beyond the text and question how they are being positioned by the text as readers. Investigating how teachers provide a critically literate curriculum that enables their students to engage with the risky topics that surround their daily lives would enable us to gain insights into local solutions to the various challenges linked to its implementation (Vasquez et al. 2013).

Given the increase in global migration, teachers need professional development opportunities to reflect on their sense of self as professionals as they seek to meet the literacy demands of diverse classroom populations. Classrooms in many Anglophone countries are now places where complex social, cultural, linguistic, and political issues intersect. This is a rich environment for the development critical literacy practices and the reconstruction of teacher identity, but many teachers lack professional development opportunities that allow them to reflect on such matters. Professional learning programs would enable teachers to understand how knowledge, identity, and classroom practices intersect (Miller 2009). Research that tracks teachers engaged in professional development over a period of time would allow researchers to gain an understanding of the complex and conflicted thought processes that take place as they seek to implement critical literacy practices and reflect on their image of self in complex landscapes.

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

D. Palmer and B. Caldas: Critical Ethnography. In Volume: Research Methods in Language and Education

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