Critical Literacy and Technology: An Essential Intersection for Our Nation's Schools

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INTRODUCTION

More than likely, people who are reading this article use, on a daily basis, the abilities to read and write in ways that empower and enrich their lives. We write to legislators, old friends, colleagues, and computer-generated "unsubscribe" lists.

We use stationary, e-mail, yellow-pads, letterhead, Hallmark cards, and even yellow stickies. We write to keep our lives in order. We write because we need to get things done. We write because our world demands it of us

Our reading habits are just as diverse. We read editorials, old love letters, Oprah's picks, and the latest best-selling history books by David McCullough and Douglass Brinkley because these men were featured on a recent BookTV broadcast and because they were so eloquent.

We read new textbooks, the New Yorker, various journals, Stephen King novels, and even the odd poem or two by the newest poet laureate. Some of us have even finally begun Bertrand Russell's *The Conquest of Happiness* just in case we have accidentally missed something along the way while others of us are trying to move past Page 17 of *Ulysses* by James Joyce because we heard on NPR that it was the greatest novel of the 20th century.

We Google our own names to see where we pop up. We take a look at each others Web sites to see how we are all doing; and then we decide we need to be doing more.

We produce a digital video of teaching techniques. We create MP3s of our favorite sounds and music. We send jpgs all over the world. We watch United Streaming to supplement our course content. We watch our students text message and instant message each other during our best and most riveting lectures. We Skype our colleagues and friends from all over the world. We create webs of connections, information, knowledge, wisdom, power, and exponentially, more power.

We do all of this and more; and we all use our abilities to read and write and manipulate text, images, language, and power rather unconsciously. We engage in all of these rather unconscious literate behaviors because they are available, because we must, and because we can.

But imagine that you do not have the abilities to read and write text. Imagine that you do not have access to your Blackberry, your cell phone, digital camera, laptop, or the World Wide Web. Imagine that this level of power and this level of language have all been denied to you. Finally, imagine that you are in a situation where information is filtered, withheld, distorted, or narrowed in the name of protecting your safety or even merely to control your thoughts and behaviors. Imagine those things; and you now have the intersection of critical literacy and technology.

BACKGROUND

What is Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy is using text, images, language, and other people to engage in political action and social equity. Freire (1970) is largely credited with this notion of using reading and writing to enable people to improve their lives, balance their individual and collective power, and increase their social and financial capital.

An example of Freire's pedagogical efforts to teach his fellow, rural Brazilian citizens to read is outlined by Cervetti, Pardales, and Damico (2001). In one example that they provide, Freire chose to teach the farmers the word *well* in order to begin a dialogue of how the farmers' water *well* in their village was being used. Who owned it? Who used it? Who maintained it? Who had power over it? What did this power over the *well* mean to the farmers?

This practice of thinking and questioning was called critical pedagogy by Freire. Critical literacy is the subset of critical pedagogy in that critical literacy uses text to empower people to improve their lives, take political action, and pursue social equity all on their own terms.

Freire saw that teaching his Brazilian comrades to read and write would allow them to make choices, improve their lives, communicate their needs, and regain some degree of control over their lives.

A logical result of Freire's conversation with the villagers about their *well* may have been:

- The villagers needed to learn to read; and their *well* was an important aspect of life to them making this word, *well*, an easy starting point for Freire.

- The villagers needed to see that collectively they had power to come together and begin a dialogue about setting new rules and procedures for something that impacted their lives and livelihood every single day; their life-giving *well*.

- The villagers needed to see that collectively they could learn to read, write, and use their literacy to improve all aspects of life in their village not just the use of their *well*.

- The villagers could now use reading and writing to promote their causes and needs beyond the borders of their village.

Teaching his Brazilian comrades to read the word and read the world was Freire's goal (Flores-Dueñas, 2005). Critical literacy then is using ones literacies for political action and social equity.

Critical literacy is assuming control over your life, your livelihood, and your future in ways that you care about. For Brazilian farmers, that started with a *well*.

For public school teachers and students, this begins with the curriculum.

Critical Literacy in Today's Schools

Clearly, there is a dichotomy between types of reading and writing programs throughout our nation. One side of this dichotomy fosters critical literacy values while the other side promotes back-to-basic reading skills that focus on lock-step phonics lessons, scripted book discussions, and teach-to-the test standards.

The back-to-basics effort is supported by No Child Left Behind legislation founded in part by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Reading Panel (NRP) which promoted "scientifically-based research" perspectives only and yet was, and is, criticized widely for its elimination of all other types of valid and reliable research studies that favor holistic, progressive, and critical literacy types of programs (Flores-Dueñas, 2005, p. 238; Yatvin, 2002).

Teachers who use critical literacy pedagogy will have students engaged in learning that might closely resemble a high-powered United Nations conference where many voices speak passionately from many perspectives. Students in this type of atmosphere will be expected to use their literacy abilities to challenge ideas and confront social realities as they progress throughout their intellectual and academic journeys. Beck (2005) states that

Critical literacy has as its goal the development of responsible citizens, able to confront social inequities in their many forms and take action against injustices. Teaching critical literacy requires that the teacher highlight controversial, provocative issues in student-centered discussions that encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and to make changes in themselves and the world around them. (p. 399)

Teachers who value the critical literacy stance according to Cadiero-Kaplan (2002) will "promote classrooms that value students voices, experiences, and histories as part of the course content" (p. 379). Students will have the "opportunity to explore, create, critique, and transform curriculum within environments that encourage individual voices through dialogue, reflection, and action" (p. 380).

Students who receive the back-to-basics, prescriptive curriculum will be imminently prepared for a

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