Critical Literacy and Inquiry

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Rule number one:
Don't believe everything you read.

Rule number two:
Don't read only what you already believe.

Most progressive educators believe if either rule is not followed, learning will not occur.

Rule number three:
Through critical selection of what you read, hear and observe, apply actions to change your self and/or society's status quo in order to move closer to the common good.

Most teachers of critical literacy and inquiry believe if rule number three is not followed, meaningful learning of any real value has not occurred.

Learning that Empowers

Advocates of critical literacy emphasize the empowering role that literacy can and should play in reshaping the environment in which one lives and works. Through mastering the skills of critical literacy, students apply the inquiry process and knowledge gained as a means for political or social action. By gathering appropriate information, organizing, and defining specific objectives, literacy serves as a method to change the status quo. More than an academic exercise, critical literacy is not complete unless change is proposed, contested, debated and ultimately determined by the power of evidence and argument.

Information resource professionals, such as school media specialists, must understand the goals of critical literacy and judicial inquiry if they are to collaborate effectively with teachers who want to promote critical thinking. In elementary school settings this means access to books that raise and provide examples for discussions on social issues. In secondary schools, it means access to factual documentation that will help students content with local social issues. Information literacy is not complete unless students understand how to identify issues, gain a context for the arguments surrounding an issue, and move through information as intelligent selectors of evidence in order to dialogue, debate and propose change.

More than seeking meaning through the selection and use of information, critical literacy is the process for seeking self. The student who has reached mature levels in critical literacy will challenge, de-construct, and re-construct information in terms of arguments to justify social and political reform. Through this process, the student defines himself or herself. In authentic application, critical literacy is the strongest form of due process and judicial review in a democratic society.

Patrick Shannon (1990), Professor of Education at Pennsylvania State University relates critical literacy to the public education setting. He writes in response to Kathleen Jongsma (1991), column editor, in The Reading Teacher:

Critical literacy education pushes the definition of literacy beyond the traditional decoding or encoding of words in order to reproduce the meaning of text and society until it becomes a means for understanding one's own history and culture and their connections for fostering an activism toward equal participation for all [in] the decisions that effect and control our lives. This type of education has a distinguished history in America. When led by teachers who demonstrate the power of critical literacy, students of all ages have learned to read and write both the word and the world as perceived through multiple-symbol systems.

For example, intermediate grade children in Chicago at the turn of the [last] century were able to read why technological change in industry always causes new social problems. In McDonald County around 1920, children were able to read about typhoid problems of local farmers and to write a plan for a community health cooperative. During the 1920s and the 1930s, at the Work Peoples College in Duluth, Minnesota, workers were reading about the advantages of organized labor and writing a union of the Farmer and Labor Parties. Throughout the southeastern United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, disenfranchised blacks were learning to read the Constitution in Citizenship Schools and were writing an end to apartheid in America.

Critical literacy has a rich history in development of education settings. From John Dewey to Lev Vygotsky to Paulo Freire, progressive education has been based on providing students not merely with functional skills, but with the conceptual tools necessary to critique and engage society along with its inequalities and injustices. Horace Mann, known as the Father of the Common School and free public education, challenged his students to, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." (p. 518)

Critical Literacy in K-6 Classrooms

Powerful case studies about elementary classrooms where teachers integrate inquiry methods to increase student conversations based on their own questions derived from critical literacy are illustrated in Learning Together Through Inquiry (Short, et al 1996). These cases, however, also document elementary school library collections that contain many out-of-date resources, fail to provide depth to support student inquiry, and do not describe a collaborative role for professional school media specialists as co-teachers of the inquiry process. While students eventually are successful through classroom collections and community resources, true teachable moments for critical discussion of social issues and supporting materials are lost without the support of the school librarian.

A more recent series on critical literacy in elementary classrooms has been published by the International Reading Association (Vasauez 2003, Hefferman 2004). While the school librarian is still not shown as a collaborating professional, this series highlights several useful trade books that trigger critical inquiry and set the stage for student questions concerning local and historical social issues. Successful methods to help students journal, discuss, and seek community resources to address these questions are clearly outlined. The collection of fiction, nonfiction and biographical resources should be extensive in both the classroom and the school library, with duplicate copies of key books that will stimulate social issue conversations. Examples include:

- Bartoletti, S. (1999). *Kids on Strike!* Houghton Mifflin.
- Cronin, D. (2000). *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type.* Simon & Schuster.
- Fradin, D., & Fradin, J. (2001). *Ida B. Wells: Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.* Clarion Books.
- Loribiecki, M. (1996). *Just One Flick of a Finger.* Dial.
- Ringgold, F. (1999). *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks.* Simon & Schuster.

Regular communication between classroom teachers and the school media specialist, perhaps also involving the local public librarians from youth services, could generate an extensive list of quality resources to give a rich foundation for elementary level critical inquiry (Bush 2003, Bush 2006b). Such titles provide the basis for regular book and curriculum discussions among these professionals. Teachers and librarians practicing critical literacy themselves can generate lesson activities tailored to meet local issues and historical events that will open greater perspectives than those often summarized and limited in scope as outlined in standard textbooks (Bush 2002).

In collaboration with the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association has compiles several examples of lesson plans through their online ReadWriteThink series and Focus on Critical Literacy (Accessed May 22, 2006). These lessons, if supported with a rich information base of books, reference materials, links to quality online documents, and contacts with local experts for interviews and provide for engaging social action experiences. These lessons include:

- Critical Literary: Point of View
- Magazine Redux: An Exercise in Critical Literacy
- Critical Media Literacy: TV Programs
- Critical Media Literacy: Commercial Advertising
- Identifying and Understanding the Fallacies Used in Advertising
- Persuasive Essay: Environmental Issues
- Analyzing the Purpose and Meaning of Political Cartoons

Discussion and Debate for Secondary School Students

As with other literacy applications, critical literacy can be found in poems, essays, dramatic narratives, documentaries, and even autobiographical or biographical texts. Such often rely on emotion as well as reason and may be tied to historical contexts that reflect some social or political injustice. The most common form of critical literacy, however, rests in informal and formal formats for discussion and debate. Formulations of proposals for change, based on evidence and argument, require the student who practices critical literacy to gain expertise in selection of evidence to support a targeted cause. Critical literacy asks the student to consider the politics of

the authors or evidence read and to decide on which side of the debate the student is as he or she communicates or presents responses.

Critical debate asks students to make the strongest possible case for a position that is diametrically opposed to their own. It's the kind of exercise, according to Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill (1999), that may help them strengthen their own argument by anticipating the claims of opponents, or it may cause them to look at the issue in a new light and bring about a shift in their point of view. Here's how critical debate works:

1. *Find* a contentious issue on which opinion is divided among participants. Frame the issue as a debate motion.
2. *Propose* the motion to participants. Ask people to volunteer by a show of hands to work on a team that is preparing arguments to support a motion or one that is preparing arguments to oppose it.
3. *Announce* that everyone will be assigned to the team opposite the one for which they volunteered.
4. *Conduct* the debate. Each team chooses one person to present the arguments. After initial presentations, the teams reconvene to draft rebuttal arguments. A different person presents these.
5. *Debrief* the debate. Discuss with participants their experience of this exercise. Focus on how it felt to argue against positions to which you were committed. What new ways of thinking about the issue were opened? Did participants come to new understandings? Did they change their positions on this issue at all?
6. *Ask* participants to write a follow-up reflection paper on the debate. Students should address the following questions:

- What assumptions about the issue were clarified or confirmed for you by the debate?
- Which of these assumptions surprised you during the debate?
- Were you made aware of assumptions that you didn't know you held?
- How could you check the validity of these assumptions?
- What sources of evidence would you consult?
- In what ways, if any, were your existing assumptions challenged or changed by the debate?

Formal Debate

Formal debate follows three styles.

Lincoln-Douglas Debate. This style is modeled after the famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas. This type of debate is also known as "values" debate. Debaters focus on competing values inherent in the proposition and are expected to argue on the basis of the underlying principles of their side of the resolution or motion. For example, an affirmative argues that "Government ought to provide for the needs of the poor," and would make a broad philosophical case for this government obligation. The affirmative would not have to prove the effectiveness of any particular government program. In general, Lincoln-Douglas Debate centers on the ideas, values, and spirit governing the political, economic, social, moral, and aesthetic positions held.

Parliamentary Debate. This style is modeled on the British House of Parliament. One team represents the Government and the other the Loyal Opposition. A Speaker of the House officiates and judges. A specific resolution is offered with a definition of terms. Usually two debaters represent each opposing side and debate may center on specific practical approaches to solve a problem or change the status quo. Audience members are free to interject opinions, insights, questions, or even provide a good heckle.

Policy Debate. The focus is on a specific plan to meet a resolution (Hensley and Carlin 2001). Such may be statements as "Government should provide public works jobs for the unemployed" or "Government should ban all tobacco advertising." Each term of the resolution must be defined, a series of needs to justify change must be introduced and defended, and a plan to resolve the issues must be detailed. While the affirmative must provide evidence for such change, the negative side will seek to show that there is no real need for change and that the affirmative team's plan may actually cause more problems than it solves. Specific time limitations are placed on each speaker. Often time is set aside for face-to-face cross examination. Usually a single judge determines the winner with feedback provided on value of the arguments presented and the merits of the evidence offered.

In policy debates, arguments are usually based on specific data that can support a claim. The affirmative team, in favor of the resolution for change, will try to present evidence (facts, observations, or opinions from experts) that allow them to make a claim for a new approach rather than the status quo. Based on a series of claims, the affirmative will tie these to a warrant for revision of the current way things are being done and present a plan for addressing the problems raised.

The negative side will show evidence that the claims are not valid or exaggerated. They will also attempt to show that not only is change not necessary, but to adopt the affirmative plan can cause more problems and perhaps also be more expensive, inconvenient or even more dangerous than the current practice.

Debaters mature in their abilities to apply argument to social action and find that the true information search is not so much for a gathering of impressions and descriptions, but for hard evidence that supports or rejects specific arguments and plans. Further, they learn the use and meaning of the following terms:

- **Ad hominem:** attacking your opponent personally rather than his/her argument; fallacious argumentation.
- **Argument:** a conclusion supported by proof that may consist of analysis, reasoning, and evidence.
- **Assertion:** an unsupported statement or claim.
- **Burden of Proof:** the obligation to prove the need for change and establish a prima facie case.
- **Causal Link:** analysis that is based on cause and effect; the affirmative must identify and remove the causes of the supposed problem without creating a new set of significant problems.
- **Counter Plan:** accepting there is a need for change, the affirmative's plan may be rejected in favor of a different approach to solve the problem which may not be as costly or disruptive to the status quo.

- **Operational Definition:** beyond what is offered in the dictionary or expert opinion, but defining terms as they specifically relate to how things operate or will be managed in a proposed plan for change.
- **Prima Facie Case:** a case that would convince the average reasonable and prudent person that a proposal for change is warranted.
- **Refutation and Rebuttal:** counter argument to a proposal, opinion, evidence, or need for change based on reasoning and a line of argument with its own set of evidence to justify its merits.

Jurisprudential Inquiry

Bruce Joyce and Marsha Weil (2000) outline jurisprudential inquiry as a key instructional method for learning to think about social policy. Participants should be versed in three competency areas:

1. Familiarity with the values of the American creed and understanding of principles embedded in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. These principles form the values framework or basis for judging public issues and making legal decisions.
2. Skills for clarifying and resolving issues. This will involve coming to terms with value differences, clarification of facts, and definition of key terms of any proposal or resolution.
3. Knowledge of contemporary political and public issues. Although a broad understanding of the history, nature, and scope of contemporary issues is important, in the jurisprudential inquiry model, students explore issues in terms of a specific legal case rather than in terms of a general study of values.

Introduction of this critical education method often rests with the use of Socratic dialogue. In the Socratic style, the teacher asks the students to take a position on an issue or to make a value judgment, and then he or she challenges the assumptions underlying the stand by exposing its implications. For example, according to Joyce and Weil, if a student argues for freedom in some situation, the teacher will test whether the argument is meant to apply to all situations.

The function of the teacher is to probe the students' positions by questioning the relevance, consistency, specificity, and clarity of the students' ideas until they become clearer. Practice in this method should help both teacher and student to become skillful in the following:

- pose worthwhile questions;
- evaluate the adequacy of an argument;
- recognize facts, inferences, and opinions and use each appropriately;
- deal with quandaries and ill-formed problems that have no pat or unique solutions;
- give and receive criticism constructively;
- agree or disagree in degrees (based on common definition of terms, students may find they do not totally disagree but will find portions of issues on which there is common ground);
- extend a line of thought beyond the range of first impressions; and
- articulate a complex position without adding to its complexity, but begin to understand a wider range of opinions.

Constructive Dialogue and Socratic Circles

Matt Copeland (2005) teaches English in Topeka, Kansas. His strategies for fostering critical learning through open questioning and dialogue in secondary level classrooms guides students to find common ground as well as to challenge conventional wisdom. Copeland broadens the debate over social issues to include the more constructive aspects of open dialogue. He draws on the comparison between dialogue and debate as established in a law curriculum guide from Saskatchewan Learning (Accessed 2006). Selected comparisons include:

- Dialogue is collaborative. Two or more sides work together toward common understanding. Debate is oppositional. Two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.
- In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal. In debate, winning is the goal.
- In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement. In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.
- Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view. Debate affirms a person's own point of view.
- Dialogue complicates positions and issues. Debate simplifies positions and issues.
- In dialogue, it is acceptable to change one's position. In debate, it is a sign of weakness and defeat to change one's position.
- Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude, an openness to change. Debate creates a close-minded attitude, a determination to be right.
- Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer, and that together they can put them into a workable answer. Debate assumes there is a right answer and that someone has it.

Social Action and Information Literacy Standards

In one of the most important essays published in *School Library Media Quarterly*, Karen Sheingold (1987) detailed how even a small group of students in a large city can have an impact on the regulations that might improve their local environment based on their inquiry and presentation skills.

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) produced a series of video programs through Great Plains National Broadcasting in 1997 with several examples of students taking the initiative to change opinions and regulations in their community that resulted in better parks, safer bike paths or other improvements that city council members were willing to consider.

Gail Bush (2006a), associate professor at Dominican University, has recently proposed a tenth learning standard be added to the AASL (1998) list of nine for information literacy. This standard would place students in situations where they seek information that has real world use, especially in application to meeting social and political issues locally, or assisting in civic service to improve local living conditions (Kay 2003).

Social action learning is often a direct result of an increase in both student and teacher abilities to exercise critical literacy (Lewis, Espeland and Pernu 1998). The

school media center can serve as a clearinghouse for such projects with information on social organizations and contacts nationally as well as locally. Student projects that demonstrate application of information to make a difference in their own school or community can be tangible artifacts that show how debate, planning and application of critical knowledge are authentic learning experiences (Shor and Pari 1999).

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