What is critical literacy and why do we need it?

Critical literacy's synonym is analytical reading. When analytical skills are employed, there is a thorough investigation so that all components are taken into account. When a reader analyzes a piece of text or other media, he/she must look at all of its components, starting with why it was written, whom it includes and excludes, and self-questioning, "Are there any biases?" According to McLaughlin (2004), "Critical literacy is defined as not only a teaching method but a way of thinking and a way of being that challenges texts and life, as we know it." Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action. It encourages readers to be active participants in the reading process: to question, to dispute, and to examine power relations. It also asks us to second guess what we believe is true, ask harder and harder questions, see underneath, behind, and beyond the texts, see how these texts establish and use power over us, over others, on whose behalf, and in whose interest.

School is an institution within our society that promotes literacy. However, Gatto (2001) said, "School as it was built is an essential support system for a model of social engineering that condemns most people to be subordinate stones in a pyramid that narrows as it ascends to a terminal of control." Freire (1993) agreed with this concept when he discussed the oppression of the poor. An essential tool used for this oppression is the everyday material that we as a society read. "Books can deceive, delude, and misrepresent, as readily as they can enlighten and expand our knowledge" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). The reason that books have this power is because text goes unquestioned. During this article, readers should question both the author's perspective and their own. This is a persuasive essay that will only give one side of the story. After reading this, the reader must question further, going beyond the words written on this paper. The emergence of a liberated voice will be the result.

Why did the author write this?

When an author begins to write, there is at least an idea of what the purpose is. It may be to inform, explain, illustrate, entertain, explore, persuade, or a combination thereof. With this purpose in mind the author will make decisions on what needs to be included in the writing, such as contexts, language, and structure. The writer wants us to see the story from his/her point of view, so the story is angled to manipulate the reader into that point of view.
view. Authors have the ability to choose to emphasize certain facts or people and de-emphasize others. As an example of this kind of power, we might think about talking to two children after they have had a fight in the school playground. Each child tries to arrange the facts and people in the story in a way that favors his or her version of the story. In the same way, an author has the power to write about a particular topic, from a particular perspective, and choose to include or exclude some ideas about a topic. Warnock (1989) notes, “Writers read situations critically, and decide how to write, and they read drafts critically, their own and those of others, in order to revise them for particular situations.”

Using critical literacy helps pull the power away from the author and makes it an equal relationship between the author and the reader by allowing us to see the texts from all angles, not just believing what is written down. We need to read against the grain. This will not only help the reader to establish equal status in the reader-author relationship, it will also help:

- To understand the motivation the author had for writing the text
- To see how the author uses the text to make us understand in a particular way
- To understand that the author’s perspective is not the only perspective
- To become active users of information in texts to develop independent perspectives, as opposed to being passive reproducers of the ideas in texts.

An advantage of reading to determine the author’s purpose is that the reader will have a better understanding of the text. As Homeyer said, “Comprehension used to be our ultimate goal, but now it’s the point at which we begin our critical discussions” (McLaughlin, 2004).

How does it fit into the curriculum?

“In every classroom, teachers make decisions about how to shape the attitudes and stances that kids will learn to take towards the writing, the images, the narratives, and the media that make up the fabric of everyday life in information and text-saturated societies and cultures.” (McLaughlin, 2004) Thus the classroom becomes a construction by the teacher for which students can later be held accountable for having heard and noted. Critical literacy connects into the school curriculum in a number of ways including:

- National/State standards - an example of this would be TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills): (4.12) Reading/text structures/literary concepts. The student analyzes the characteristics of various types of texts (C) Identify the purposes of different types of texts such as to inform, influence, express, or entertain. Bloom’s taxonomy is used when creating the National and State standards. The synonym for critical is analytical, which is part of the higher-level stages of thinking.
- Subject areas - it spans across the curriculum and extends beyond teaching and learning to everyday experiences.
- Multiple modes of expression - students are encouraged to express their
ideas in a variety of ways: discussion, sketching, dramatizing, singing, and so on.

- Multiple types of text - 'text' is so far-reaching because reading from a critical stance permeates every aspect of life, and materials could be trade books, informational articles, song lyrics, movies, television shows, etc.

- Technology integration - in addition to providing access to numerous meaningful informational texts, it also helps students to understand that the act of challenging text and authors extends beyond books and magazines to websites.

Reading from a critical stance requires readers to analyze and evaluate texts (books, media, lyrics, hypertext, life relationships), meaningfully question their origin and purpose, and take action by representing alternative perspectives. “Research supports that reading from a critical stance adds a new dimension of understanding”(McLaughlin, 2004). With critical literacy, the text becomes an interactive tool to discover hidden meanings and agendas, not just a worksheet to answer comprehension questions.

Strategies to use for the Critical Literacy classroom

McLaughlin & Allen (2002a) give us a Guided Comprehension 5-step direct instruction process in which we first explain what is the strategy, then demonstrate how to use the strategy, guide the students being placing in groups to create responses, allow practice by applying the strategy to actual text, and finally reflect on how the strategy worked.

Another strategy that is suggested is using problem-posing questions to assist in exploring the text. Examples of questions (modified from McLaughlin & DeVoogd 2004) that may be asked are in Table 1.

The rest of the story (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) is an adaptation of problem-posing that encourages students to use their background knowledge to examine what is missing or underrepresented in a text and research that perspective. An example of this is pondering what is missing from a history text’s account of World War II; some may note that information concerning the Japanese-American Internment is not included.

Another helpful technique is the bookmark (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). The students create four bookmarks by folding and cutting an 8.5” X 11” piece of paper into four equal parts. Then, as the students read they make decisions about and record specific information on each bookmark, including the page and paragraph where their choice is located:

- Bookmark 1: Write about and/or sketch the part of the text that they find most interesting.
- Bookmark 2: Write and/or sketch something they find confusing.
- Bookmark 3: Write a word they think the whole class needs to discuss.
- Bookmark 4: Choose an illustration, graph, or map that helped them to understand what they read.

Finally, after reading, the ideas the students have recorded on the bookmarks are
Critical Literacy ... / 53

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is this text about? How do we know?</th>
<th>How is the reader or viewer positioned in relation to the composer of the text?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who would be most likely to read and/or view this text and why?</td>
<td>How does the text depict age, gender and/or cultural groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are we reading and/or viewing this text?</td>
<td>How does the text construct a version of reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does the composer of the text want us to know?</td>
<td>Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the structures and features of the text?</td>
<td>Who is allowed to speak? Who is quoted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sort of genre does the text belong to?</td>
<td>Why is the text written the way it is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do the images suggest?</td>
<td>Whose view: whose reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do the words suggest?</td>
<td>What view of the world is the text presenting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kind of language is used in the text?</td>
<td>What kinds of social realities does the text portray?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are children, teenagers or young adults constructed in this text?</td>
<td>What is real in the text?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are adults constructed in this text?</td>
<td>How would the text be different if it were told in another time, place or culture?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why has the composer of the text represented the characters in a particular way?</td>
<td>What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed the text?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there 'gaps' and 'silences' in the text?</td>
<td>What view of the world and values does the composer of the text assume that the reader/viewer holds? How do we know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is missing from the text?</td>
<td>What different interpretations of the text are possible?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has been left out of the text?</td>
<td>How do contextual factors influence how the text is interpreted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What questions about itself does the text not raise?</td>
<td>How does the text mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In whose interest is the text?</td>
<td>How else could the text have been written?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who benefits from the text?</td>
<td>How does the text rely on inter-textuality to create its meaning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the text fair?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which positions, voices and interests are at play in the text?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An alternative to book marking could also be story mapping (Walter, 1996). This can be in many forms. And in each form the important parts of the story are identified and organized into a visual format. These can be completed as a group or individually. Some examples of story mapping are: Story Reporting, Simple Retelling, Excitement Map, Actual Map, and Symbolic Map.

- In Story Reporting, students identify and report specific information about the story, which will include characters, setting, problem, sequence, and solution elements.

- In Simple Retelling, students will identify five to seven major events in the story and do illustrations for each one. Students are guided through the story to identify the beginning, middle, and end. The teacher will ask questions about what is happening in each of the stages of the story and will continue through at least five of the events.

- Excitement Mapping is an extension...
of Simple Retelling, only it illustrates the events on small pieces of paper. The students draw a graph on chart paper. Along the horizontal axis, in sequential order, are the events. Along the vertical axis, numbered 1-10, they will rank the events from 1-10 and place on the graph above the matching number. The most exciting part of the story is placed on the “ten” at the top of the chart. The completed map will visually show the building excitement and climax of the story.

- Actual Maps identify specific places that make up the setting or settings of a story. Students will begin with a “starting place” and draw paths leading to each event in the story until they reach the “end” of the story. The student determines the direction and shape of the path. They can add characters, labels, or anything they think will complete the story.

- Symbols and illustrations are used in Symbolic Mapping, which will represent important events in the story. The students will be able to retell the story with the way they represented the events of the story.

Connection Stems (modified from McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) are helpful in activating prior knowledge and allow for a personal connection to the text. Some of the connection stems are:

- That reminds me of…
- I remember when…
- I have a connection…
- I have a friend that…
- An experience I have had like that…
- I would like to do that…
- I felt like that character when…
- If I were that character, I would…
- I remember another book about this…

The students use the Connection Stems to make connections as they read a text. They can be completed orally, in writing, or by sketching. When sharing their completed Connection Stems, students use text support and personal experiences to explain their connections.

Switching (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) is a strategy that can help show biases in the text as well as make the reader more aware of the author’s intention. Some of the switches are:

- Gender switch - Change the sex of the main characters
- Theme switch - Make up a different story with the opposite theme: example ‘peace is good’ to ‘force is good’.
- Setting switch - Tell the story from a different time, place, or social class.
- Body-Style switch - Change main character body: fat to thin or tall to short
- Clothing switch - Change main character clothing: preppy, gang, formal, hip-hop
- Emotion switch - Imagine a story in which the characters have a different emotional tone: calm and thoughtful or cracking jokes all the time
- Ethnic/Race switch - Change characters’ race/ethnic characteristics
- Language switch - Use accents,
vocabulary, and expressions from somewhere different, such as another country, a university, or the “hood”

- Relationship/Organization switch - if the main characters are friends change to family members, enemies, etc.

Alternative Texts (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) represent a perspective that is different from the one the reader is reading, such as:

- A character substitution, where the reader replaces an existing character with a new character that has a different personality.
- A character perspective, in which the reader examines the motives of different characters and reorients the facts of the story to fit the desires of one character.

Juxtapositioning (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) involves examining two contrasting texts or two pictures next to each other to make the contrast between them obvious. This helps to clearly illustrate that various angles and points of view sway opinions.

Mind and Alternative Mind Portraits (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) is a technique where readers examine two points of view. Both may be represented in the story or one may appear in the text and the other silenced or missing from the text. An example would be in a book where we see the main character’s point of view during an interaction and we try to imagine, using prompts from the texts and our own experiences, the other point of view.

Focus (modified from McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004) groups help students to investigate bias and critically analyze how authors view events from different points of view. Every story has two points of view when studying a themed unit, such as the Civil War. Having books readily available with various points of view to assist in gathering as much information as possible is important. There can then be a discussion in which the various groups must defend a specific point of view.

A cloze exercise is a wonderful way to show point of view. Take an article from the popular press, such as a newspaper or a magazine. Then take out the words that show a bias towards a particular point of view. Have the students fill in the words they think are missing. Discuss the words they chose to put into the article and why.

Below is an example of a made up review of a Britney Spears concert.

Britney’s Concert Last Night
To a sold out crowd last night, Britney showed up on stage wearing a skin-tight black leather miniskirt with matching tank top and it was ______. After she sang for several hours, her _______ performance left the crowd speechless.

Conclusion
“Critical literacy needs to be continually redefined in practice” (Comber, 2001). Multiple strategies must be used in order to further meaningful critical literacy. The purpose of critical literacy is to determine meanings of text from each reader’s personal perspective. For example, to help get you started on the road to critical literacy,
I will assist you by helping answer some questions on this article using the problem-posed questions (see section 4). The voices I chose to be represented in this text are from people who want to get all sides of a story. The voices of my opposition are omitted in this text because they are from people who want us to conform to a set image or from those who are afraid of knowing any other point of view. My intentions are no secret. I want you, the reader, to critically read everything in this article, and then use it as a starting point to find out every other point of view, so that you may discover your own truth. Ask some hard questions and add to the list as more learning takes place. Fehring & Green (2001) sum it up by saying, “Critical literacy has the potential to give students the opportunity to read the word so that they can read the world.”

**Resources**


Fehring & Green (2001). *Critical Literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association*. Newark, DE.


