



Critical Literacy: Putting a Critical Edge on Your Curriculum

Literacy education is not about skill development, not about deep competence. It is about the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources, about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts, and about access to technologies and artifacts (e.g., writing, the Internet) and to the social institutions where these tools and artifacts are used (e.g., workplaces, civic institutions).

Allan Luke & Peter Freebody, Notes on the Four Resources Model

In this Inquiry Study, you will explore the concept of *critical literacy* and its implications for classrooms. Your study group will reread cultural texts—media, print, commercial—to consider how we, as well as the younger learners we teach, are “positioned.” This new awareness provides the opportunity to be more informed and proactive as we participate in a world where various ideologies and social relations are constantly in play, including the contexts in which we ourselves teach. Again, your group will leave the study with new ideas, new tools, new questions, and a new lens through which to view your practice.



Vivian Vasquez and Kathy Egawa
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LEARNING CONCEPTS

The following is a list of learning concepts that will be explored in the study. You are encouraged to add additional concepts that reflect constructivist, inquiry-based learning, as it is not meant to represent an exhaustive list.

- Learning a language is learning a culture.
- Reading always involves cultural interpretations of meaning.
- Readers use their cultural experiences to interrogate a text.
- Discourses are ways of doing and being in a community; language users construct discourses while at the same time being constructed by discourses.
- Language is a form of cultural capital; some forms of language are considered to have more power in society than other forms.
- As language users learn, they take in different oral and written social languages, e.g., the language we use at a ballgame versus the language we use at the ballet.
- There are always multiple voices and historical and cultural positions at play in texts that serve different interests; these are instances of “heteroglossia” and reflect various ideologies and social relations.
- The intent of education is to increase and broaden our use of multiple social discourses.
- All language occurs within a set of social circumstances.
- Control of a discourse supports personal/political power.
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FOCUSING QUESTIONS

These are questions that we, as authors of this study, generated to focus the experiences provided in this Inquiry Study. Everyone in your Reading Initiative group is invited to add questions throughout the study and throughout the year.

- How do texts work?
- How do texts do what they do in constructing readers?
- How do we understand what texts attempt to do in the world and to people?
- How do we move students to take active stances with texts as a means to de-construct and re-construct the social spaces in which they live?
- How can students and teachers together see how texts work to construct their world, their cultures, and their identities in ideological ways?
- How can texts be used as social tools for re-constructing identities, cultures, and worldviews?
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TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS TOPIC

In addition to asking the questions that came to mind when we considered teachers as active inquirers of their own practice, we generated an initial list of words and phrases related to research and inquiry. You might elect to begin your own list—graffiti-style—on a large piece of butcher paper that can be added to over time. You are also invited to add terms to those below. This list helps frame the territory of our work.

Ideologies	Assumptions	Positions	Texts	Reconstruction
Perspectives	Social construction	Literacies	Disruption	Discourse
Deconstruction	Interrogation	Class	Gender	Race
Culture	Intertextuality	Intercontextuality	Critique	Multiple voices
Genre	Postmodern	Postcolonial	Dominance	Dominant discourses
Multiple readings	Cultural capital	Interpretation	Discourse analysis	Interest
Social practices	Political	Identities	Power	Hegemonic
Tension	Heteroglossia	Social languages	Disenfranchise	Culturally responsive
Practices	Disadvantage	Critical analysis	Contested	Problematize

READING INITIATIVE LEARNING STRANDS

The Reading Initiative professional development experience could be envisioned as a complex tapestry of beliefs, engagements, readings, questions, and reflections. Each engagement is woven onto a foundation provided by the following strands.

Personal Literacy as Part of a Cultural Community	Knowledge Base	Close Observation	Supportive Literacy Contexts	Professional Culture
Focused observations and analysis by each participant of his/her own literacy processes and theories, including the forces that impact those theories	The concepts and experiences explored and supported by professional reading	Focused observations and analysis of students as literacy learners	Exploration and development of contexts that support and encourage readers and writers	Exploration and development of procedures and contexts that encourage collegiality



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An Overview of the Study

Initiating Engagements

Shared experiences that help participants reflect on their personal experiences and knowledge—getting those out into the class conversation—as the group predicts the direction of the study.

The consultant facilitates several or all of these experiences to get the study under way.

I1 Collecting What We Know

As a group, participants contribute to four ongoing collections: 1) questions about the language study, 2) at least five resources for a group-created text set, including books, journals, articles in the popular press, reading/writing developmental continua, 3) a graffiti board collection of all related words and phrases, i.e., social construction, discourse, and 4) a list of possible ways to study how to put a critical edge to teaching and to study the success of that effort.

I3 How Does Our Reading Change?

Group views examples of texts from across several decades and discusses how we read these texts in 2000 and how our current readings differ from readings of the past.

I5 Timelines of Our Reading Lives

Participants create a timeline of favorite texts across their lifetimes and inquire into why they made these choices. What influences the choices that we make? In what contexts did these choices take place?

I2 Finding Our Lives in Books

Read Aloud followed by key questions to engage a conversation on how texts construct readers.

I4 Unpacking Our Assumptions and Beliefs

Read the epitaph of Sarah Lloyd (Mellor et al., 1990) and engage in a discussion of the assumptions that readers need to share in order to read the text in particular ways.

I6 Examining Our Ideologies

Read *The Children's Story* (Clavelle, 1989) out loud to the group, stopping at four different points in the story to engage a conversation on how our ideologies are often invisible to us.

Potential Resources

Multiple and varied sources of information that provide alternative perspectives and create opportunities for complex connections.

All participants in the study group contribute resources to a collective text set. NCTE provides key articles and video footage. Consultant reads all articles in planning the study.

R1 Professional Reading and Viewing

A number of key articles and video clips have been chosen to offer a theoretical frame from which to engage with the various experiences, inquiries, and engagements throughout this study.

R2 Creating a Text Set

Over the course of the inquiry, each participant contributes at least five children's books or adolescent novels that raise social issues that can be used in the classroom to engage critical literacies with children.



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Engagements

Opportunities to test out and explore multiple perspectives on the language process.

These experiences might be facilitated by the consultant or by a group leader in the consultant's absence. Some experiences are lived outside of the study group time.

E1

Classroom Scenarios

Participants read two classroom scenarios and discuss what it means to be literate in each scenario and how different teaching practices construct different literacies. What are the differences and similarities? What theory of literacy is constructed in each case?

E3

Key Phrases

Read *Megaboy* or *Seedfolks*. Participants note key phrases to later reconstruct, in small groups, into poems, and tease out the underlying issues in the selected phrases. They then consider from whose perspective their poem was written. Participants then reconstruct their poems by deliberately selecting phrases that allow them to create their poem from a different perspective.

E5

Different Realities

Read the poem "Honeybees" by Paul Fleischman and discuss the following questions:

- What kinds of social realities are portrayed by each of the voices?
- What kind of language is used? To what effect?
- What ideologies can you uncover?

E7

Deconstructing Everyday Texts

E2

The Same but Different

Different versions of a similar text are shared with participants to engage a conversation on the social construction of texts, e.g., traditional Cinderella story, *Fanny's Dream*, *The Paper Bag Princess*. Participants are asked to consider other versions and possibilities for use in the classroom.

E4

Defining "Critical"

Look across the critical literacy invitations. Develop a list of criteria for what makes an invitation critical.

Invitations are opportunities for learners to explore specific concepts, issues, and topics using one or more sign systems.

E6

A Critical Look at Professional

Books

While reading through a number of different books deemed to be professional resources for teachers, participants critically look at how teachers are constructed by these professional books and resources.



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Demonstrations

- theoretical
- praxis
- for the classroom.

Demonstrations are led by the consultant and help build new knowledge and understandings. They generally follow the preceding group and individual experiences.

D1

“Teaching Reading” Practices

Use Manning’s Framework for locating instructional practice as a way of situating practice from a theoretical perspective and to engage a conversation on reconstructing curriculum.

D3

Deconstructing and Reconstructing a Timeline

Using one of the timelines created in **I5**, work together to uncover the underlying assumptions and the historically and culturally situated beliefs represented in the participants’ timelines. What might a future timeline look like?

D2

Four Resources Model

Use Luke and Freebody’s Four Resources Model to discuss opportunities and ways of engaging critical literacies in the classroom.

D4

Literacy, Diversity, and Schooling

View a segment of the Comber video on critical literacy and schooling to engage in a theoretical conversation regarding possibilities for engaging critical literacy in elementary school.

Invitations to Inquiry

Applying questions, tools, and methods of inquiry to a specific issue.

Invitations to inquiry provide opportunities to conduct focused, short inquiries to further explore concepts and questions that have been raised. Participants are invited to choose or create their own inquiries as appropriate. They can be explored by individuals, small groups, or by the entire group.

Q1

Curriculum Conversions

Take existing curriculum and consider ways to make it critical.

Q3

What’s on the Students’ Minds

Make observations of the different issues raised by children in their informal conversations, the kinds of books they choose to read, the kinds of dramas they act out, the songs they choose to sing.... Find ways to highlight some of these issues in the curriculum.

Q5

Voices in the Park/Voices in the Classroom

Read the book *Voices in the Park*. Create an invitation that allows young learners to explore some of the socio-cultural issues in the book. Stand back and take notes. What are you learning?

Q2

Create a Text Set

Create annotated text sets on issues of social justice and equity. What does one need to know about one’s community to create a powerful set of texts?

Q4

Media Literacy

After viewing a video sequence of television commercials, engage in a discussion about how audience is constructed.

Q6

Creating Invitations

Revisit the Critical Literacy invitations in **E4**; then create invitations using the books contributed to the “Create a Text Set” resource list by participants or using the books in the *Adventuring with Books* chapter included in the Critical Literacy article packet.



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Opportunities for Organizing and Sharing

Public displays, charts, webs, lists, notes. Ways of gathering ideas and plans and representing knowledge.

These are used at different places in the study and are saved to revisit over time.

Audit Trail

Create an artifact after each meeting that the group feels represents the main thrust of the conversation.

Interesting Questions Book

Throughout the duration of the inquiry, participants keep a small notebook or designate a section of their personal notebook in which they jot down questions that come to mind.

Double Entry Journal

Throughout the study, participants read the key articles and keep a double entry journal with “quotable quotes” for each article and their thoughts, questions, comments, etc. pertaining to a particular quote.

Graffiti Board

At the end of each session, participants are asked to use a graffiti board to jot down comments, questions, connections, and issues raised during the meeting. The artifact to be posted on the group audit trail could come from the graffiti board. Alternative: exit slips.

Group Portfolio

Participants contribute artifacts of their experience with the inquiry in a group portfolio.

Reflective Action Plan

Activities that help the participants reflect on their current experience and opinions in constructing their understanding of the unit of study and subsequent new practice.

An opportunity to take new action based on new knowledge, and an opportunity to reflect on future directions the group or individual learning might take.

RA1

Here’s What I’ll Do Now

Using observations of children from “What’s on Students’ Minds?” (Q3), create a focused study that is framed from a critical literacy perspective.

Hand out: focused study outline

RA3

Literacy Dig: Uncovering My Practice

Spend some time looking over current day plans along with materials and resources connected with your teaching practice. Think about the literacies supported by your practice. How might you rethink what you do in the classroom?

RA2

Creating Invitations 2

Use the Children’s menus collected for II to create a critical literacy invitation or experience.

What other everyday texts can you use to engage critical literacies in the classroom?



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Potential
Resources

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- R1 Professional Reading
- R2 Creating a Text Set



Professional Reading

- Alvermann, D. E. (2000). Fandom and critical media literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 436–446.
- Boran S. & Comber, B. (2001). *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Christensen, L. M. (1999). Teaching reading, writing, and outrage. In C. Edelsky (Ed.) *Making justice our project*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Comber, B. (2001). Critical inquiry or safe literacies: Who's allowed to ask which questions? In S. Boran & B. Comber (Eds.) *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
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- Egawa, K. & Harste, J. (2001). What do we mean when we say we want our children to be literate? *School Talk*, 7(1).
- Fox, R. (1997). Kids and advertising: What we know and need to know. *SLATE Starter Sheet*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Harste, J., Breau, A., Leland, C., Lewison, M., Ociepka, A. & Vasquez, V. (2000). Supporting critical conversations in classrooms. In K. M. Pierce (Ed.) *Adventuring with books*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Leland, C., Harste, J., Ociepka, A., Lewison, M. & Vasquez, V. (1999). Exploring critical literacy: You can hear a pin drop. *Language Arts*, 77(1), 70–77.
- Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 43(5), 448–461.
- Making Curriculum Critical (2000). *Primary Voices K-6*, 9(2).
- O'Brien, J. (2001). I knew that already: How children's books limit inquiry. In S. Boran & B. Comber (Eds.) *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Vasquez, V. (2001). Negotiating a critical literacy curriculum with young children. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 29.



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- Vasquez, V. (2000). Our way: Using the everyday to create a critical literacy curriculum. *Primary Voices K-6, 9(2)*, 8–14.
- Vasquez, V. (2000). Getting beyond “I like the book”: Putting a critical edge on kids’ purposes for reading. *School Talk, 5(2)*, 3–4.
- Vasquez, V. (2000). Language stories and critical literacy lessons. *Talking Points, 11(2)*, 5–7.
- Vasquez, V. (1998). Building equitable communities: Taking social action in a kindergarten classroom. *Talking Points, 9(2)*, 3–6.
- White, C. L. (2001). Examining Poverty and literacy in our schools: Janice’s story. In S. Boran & B. Comber (Eds.) *Critiquing whole language and classroom inquiry*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Suggested Study Group Titles:

- Constructing Critical Literacies* by Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody.
- Critical Literacies in the Primary Classroom* (1998) by Knobel & Healy (Eds.). Primary English Teaching Association (PETA), Australia.
- Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern* by Lankshear & McLaren, SUNY Press.

Video Clips

- What counts as literacy? Three different orientations (Videoclip #1)
- Taking a critical perspective on our talk and our teaching (Videoclip #2)

Both video clips are taken from the video *Literacy, Diversity, and Schooling* (Comber, B. et al., 1996). *Literacy, Diversity, and Schooling* documents innovative literacy and equity programs, raising key issues about socioeconomic disadvantage and school literacy teaching. Designed for preservice and inservice teachers, this program asks tough questions about why social inequality exists, how schools perpetuate it, and how teaching can be changed to empower the disadvantaged. Viewers will be challenged to begin thinking about these complicated issues, finding encouragement and models to further the debate in the U.S.