

Fight the Dragons: Using Online Discussion to Promote Critical Literacy in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Today's children are bombarded by a range of media, and it is the responsibility of teachers to equip students to engage critically. Just as teachers are responsible to teach critical literacy, teacher educators must help empower teachers to become more critically literate. This paper explores the role of online discussion in the ways it fosters critical literacy by analyzing the online discourse of the teachers in an online literature course. Implications relating to both the online nature of teaching and the various strategies to foster critical literacy in everyday classrooms are described.

Children are bombarded on a daily basis with images of models and super stars in books, magazines, school.... can it be avoided? How can we, as educators, help to reinforce self-esteem and individuality in today's children? Can we fight the media hype? (Jessica, graduate student, online children's literature course)

Censorship and deciding when to expose students to certain issues and language is something I wrestle with. My 8th graders are products of total media saturation. Most of them have been wallowing in a real mess of information and images their entire lives. They still retain shreds of innocence, however, and I loath to pull that last bit of comfort away from them, even as I want them to wake up and get ready to fight the dragons. (Kathryn, graduate student, online children's literature course)

As teachers and teacher educators, many of us can strongly relate to that notion of wanting to empower our students to “fight the dragons,” as Kathryn, a student in my online children’s literature class so eloquently put it. When much of what students read reflects a gendered, classed, and racist society, the responsibility of teachers is to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate multiple media and to engage critically with it (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers., 2006).

Yet, this task is not easy. As children and adolescents embark on adulthood and seek to figure out their place in life, they are bombarded on a daily basis by a myriad of visual images, such as photographs, television, and movies, as well as by the discursive content of texts. To read their texts critically requires a newly educated eye. Their literacies are indeed filled with mixed messages that are inscribed in their bodies and minds, which play a role in their negotiations of self, further literate practice, and knowledge construction (Davies, 1993). However, just as it is the responsibility of teachers to teach critical literacy, it is also the job of teacher educators to help empower teachers on new levels to become more critically literate themselves, to value social justice, and to have a deep sense of the cultural contexts in which they work (Dozier et al., 2006).

Unpacking the term, “fight the dragons” is essential in order to treat the metaphor in a complex way and not as a simplistic or hyperbolic view, which undermines the difficult work of educators and researchers. To examine the word *fight*, texts and images must be deconstructed, and everything should not be taken at face value. Both teachers and teacher educators must help students analyze the social and cultural assumptions in texts they read and write and in the world in which they live. We need to look deeply into students’ writing and see the social and political themes in what seem to be personal thoughts. We must model how to test books’ assumptions against the concepts, discourses, and communities of our larger experiences. In order to “fight,” we must read critically by paying “attention to concepts that, although they are ever-present in daily life, usually go unexamined” (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 27).

The dragons in this metaphor may be seen as the daily onslaught of media, but can also be seen as any commonly encountered concepts that typically require critical engagement in the lives of busy Americans. The dragons emerge in traditional spaces such as texts, too, and they are not all negative. For example, Bomer and Bomer (2001) identified 17 concepts that required timely and extensive deconstruction with students of all ages (p. 29): social groups, power, taking things for granted (naturalization), fairness/justice, voice/silence, multiple perspectives, representation, gender, race, social class, money, labor, language, intimate relationships and families, relationships to nature, violence/peace, and individualism/collectivism. Concepts such as these are dragons simply because they require educators to maintain consistently discerning eyes.

“New media demand new literacies. New media coalesce into a collage” (Ohler, 2009, p. 9). In contemplating dragons, we must consider the “texts” in which the dragons emerge. We need to blend traditional and emerging literacies. Dragons emerge in old-fashioned books as well as in contemporary media. Dragons and the texts in which they emerge are best understood as a set of social practices; these can be inferred from events mediated by written texts.

Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible, and influential than others. Thus, discussion of literature and media does promote richer understandings of dragons for both teachers and students. “Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices. Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently

acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7).

As Dewey said, “It is not enough to have a map in hand; we need to have made the journey” as quoted in (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 155). In order to teach students how to do something, teachers need to be doing it themselves. For teachers to create classrooms as spaces where students engage critically, participate in democracy, and adopt social action as part of their processes of thinking, we need to be involved in active communities outside of school. Otherwise, teachers contribute to the banking model of education, in which the scope of action in which students may engage extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (Freire, 1970).

With all of these thoughts in mind, I asked myself, as a former classroom teacher and now as a teacher educator, how can I provide a safe and stimulating environment in which all of my students and I can explore these difficult questions of critical literacy together, in a meaningful fashion? For me, the vehicle was a hybrid online graduate-level children’s literature class. I designed the course in such a way that students were all able to engage in hearty, sincere dialogue about these very matters.

The online nature of the course played an integral role in the teachers’ reflections on the need for critical literacy, and the tangible steps educators can take to promote more critical engagement in our students. The flexibility of the online format provided opportunities for busy teachers to freely and deeply participate in a more relaxed, yet intimate fashion, which yielded fine quality and in-depth interaction. The teachers and I created and sustained multimodal networks, allowing more dynamic and interactive discussions, in addition to a space for shyer students to have their voices heard. Perhaps most importantly, the online context provided more freedom for highly critical discourse.

Theoretical Grounding

Literacy continues to be inadequately understood, despite its crucial role in individual’s social, cultural, economic, and political lives (Yagelski, 2000). In particular, literacy practices occurring outside of school are especially undervalued in our culture, despite the significance they may have in sculpting many students’ negotiations of adulthood and their roles in our society (e.g., Collins & Blot, 2003).

“All literacies serve particular social functions, and students can acquire a literacy that fits them well for developing and participating in a democracy, or for a very different kind of society” (Dozier et al., 2006, p. 18). Although classic texts and official school literacies are deemed acceptable by dominant culture, students are bombarded on a daily basis, and they need armor to discern the texts and images, since their literacies play a decisive role in their lives.

At the pivotal crossroads in their lives when children and adolescents are leaving youthful innocence behind and entering the sometimes-confusing boundaries of early adulthood (Lesko, 1996, 2001), they must understand the intricate roles literacies play in negotiating what it means to them to become adults in today’s society. Rather than feeling lost, unaware, overwhelmed, or victimized by the constant bombardment of media, youngsters could instead feel empowered by critically reflecting on the roles of the literacies in their lives, if they were more informed by critical literacy theory in accessible educational settings.

Not only is it important to consider *what* students are reading and writing, it is even more vital to examine *how* they are thinking about and engaging in texts, especially to enhance literacy pedagogy. Although readers cannot be safeguarded against particular kinds of appropriations of texts, meaning and knowledge construction reside in the reader and his or her background (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

With a focus on critical literacy theory, we are reminded that readers are not merely to interpret literature, but also to engage in some form of transformation and learning. Critical theorists argue that literacy is not only the ability to understand and construct textual meaning, but is also a means through which individuals participate in constituting themselves and their worlds (e.g., Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Yagelski, 2000).

Literacy is not a skill to be acquired, but instead is an interwoven piece of one's identity as an individual.... Literacy matters in different ways to different people, based on how writing and reading play a role in a given person's life. That particular role itself is based on theory that literacy is one of numerous sociocultural attributes which make up an entire continuum of interrelated attributes that affect one another. (Lassonde & Woodcock, 2001, p. 97)

Although most teachers are concerned about students' critical engagement in our media-frenzied world, some teachers and students reject the idea that social justice has anything to do with literacy and learning. This attitude is not surprising, given the demands the current U.S. educational culture is under, with high stakes testing and the political push to accelerate. Furthermore, it is not shocking that critical literacy is an uncomfortable topic with many teachers because it involves "consciously reexamining comfortable cultural practices and values" (Dozier et al., 2006, p. 19). However, until ways of engaging with texts and media in a systematic, critical way are enacted, existing regimes will remain intact.

In their work with critical literacy and teacher education, Patel Stevens and Bean (2007) asserted that the field of teacher education must adopt a critical perspective to counterbalance powers that may control students' literacy development within a rapidly moving world of multimedia texts. In this multimedia world, teacher educators must prepare future teachers of literacy to rethink and increase the various forms of representation typical in the school classroom and to restructure the purpose of school on the production of diverse representations of experience and knowledge (Myers & Beach, 2001).

As teachers and students learn to use technology to construct representations of a social world's characteristics, they produce reflective critical thought through their analysis of the identities, relationships, and values constructed by the cultural practices and discourses in that social world (Myers & Beach, 2001, p. 258).

Moreover, if teacher educators and teachers do not engage themselves and their students in critical literacy, then who *will* empower students to fight the dragons? Educators are responsible to provide students with the freedom to explore their lives and what is important to them, and powerful literacy is one definite pathway to that freedom.

The teaching profession has come to understand that teaching literacy does not mean simply installing the ability to read and write into students' heads once and for all. It means something more complex.... Literacy means different things in different communities and situations, and teachers work

to help students become strategic inquirers and inspired participants.... As teachers we create environments that bring out various properties of literate participation common to situations outside of school... we create social worlds in which students live and work with language. As teachers we try to make those worlds receptive to student voices, even the smallest of them. (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 156)

However, we must be reminded again that to be able to teach students how to do something, we must be doing it ourselves. It is the responsibility of teacher educators to provide stimulating environments in which to experience firsthand the powers of critical literacy. Just as one would ski in order to learn to ski, or one would dance in order to learn to dance, one must engage in critical literacy in a meaningful fashion in order to embody the practice and be able to enact it independently. Teachers must learn to think for themselves before they can teach students to think for themselves (Dozier et al., 2006).

What better vehicle than through children's literature to discuss and explore such complex issues as those surrounding critical literacy in teacher education? After all, we learn about the world through literature, and children's literature, in particular, is such a profoundly pleasurable experience (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003). Moreover, the online discursive nature of an online course can yield wonderful results when considering that "much of the pleasure children's literature offers children and adults comes from dialogue: from thinking about it, talking about it, and even arguing about it with others" (p. x).

Other researchers have experienced great success with promoting critical engagement via online learning. For example, in their work with adolescent girls and their technology-mediated literacy practices, Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) found a distinct importance of online relationships in mentoring the girls in their education, especially with their focus on multimedia popular culture texts as a way of understanding their lives. Likewise, Guzzetti, Young, Gritsavage, Fyfe, and Hardenbrook (2002) found electronic texts to play a distinguished role in interventions made in classrooms regarding gender and literacies, making a difference, and raising awareness of democracy and social justice.

Since acts of critical literacy are embedded in larger cultural practices that define how and why texts are created and used, teachers must pay particular attention to the pedagogical frameworks and tools such as online courses in which we ask students to explore and enact critical literacy (Myers & Beach, 2001). "It will be just as critical in the next 10 years, as it has been in the last 10, to constantly remind ourselves that the power of technology is generated within our cultural uses of these tools and not simply determined by the nature of the tools themselves" (p. 1). The use of tools such as online learning systems can help students negotiate the culturally valued purposes of a community and navigate the opposing values of multiple communities.

Coupling online learning with critical literacy pushes students further when they create and reflect on texts to contemplate explicitly how symbolic interactions construct community and ideology. "How we speak, dress, gesture, listen to music, and use texts from print to video provide the symbolic tools through which we interact and interpret one another and the world" (Myers & Beach, 2001, p. 1). Students' ongoing interactions and activity within an online community focused on critical literacy not only result in their implicit acquisition of the symbolic tools needed to keep the community going, but also construct the ideology of possible identities, relationships, and values realized within that community (Myers & Beach, 2001, p. 1).

Method

Background

The course I taught was designed to investigate the content of various examples from many genres within children's and young adult literature. Teachers considered how readers' cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional needs are met. Of particular interest was developing the ability to read critically, which enabled the teachers to identify and evaluate messages, both explicit (without vagueness, unambiguous) and implicit (understandable, though not revealed), comprising the particular worldview presented in the texts.

The online format helped to engage the teachers in precisely the critical literacy pedagogy of which we spoke. In other words, we were practicing what we preached. Of course, I realized the obvious complication—since I required student participation a certain power dynamic was asserted. Naturally, online discussions do not come without their downfalls, and a college course discussion board is not the same as one for personal use (e.g., Lohnes, 2006). There is no denying the research, however, that online discussions “can foster the development of a distinct, discriminating voice.... Students can gain a sense of empowerment and personal identity while learning to interact with others online” (Oravec, 2002, p. 6). I took into consideration the obvious implications of a required online, interactive component, yet still feel much can be gained in analyzing the process and its benefits for education.

My course was hybrid in nature on several levels. First, the entire class met approximately once a month in-person, and the remainder of the semester course content was discussed online. Second, since the teachers completed the online portion mostly from home, there was an interesting hybridity between in- and out-of-school positioning and discourse. The teachers discussed both personal and professional reflections online and engaged in a variety of formal and less formal writing. Teachers were able to position and recreate themselves as readers and writers through the discussion boards and through our in- and out-of-school meetings. Using the discussion board appeared to support teachers' developing collective intelligence and resources and allowed them to combine personal insights with intellectual arguments, gaining deeper understandings of various topics (as in Wilber, 2007).

Setting and Participants

During the 2006-2007 academic year, I taught the graduate-level children's literature course, entitled “Critical Issues in Literature for Children and Adolescents,” at a small, rural, public college in New England. The course was offered as an elective for several majors in the masters degree program for teachers in the education department.

The 13 participants, five men and eight women, were mostly in-service teachers in K-12 settings throughout the area. All of the teachers were white, although several worked in culturally diverse classrooms. A great deal of poverty existed in the area surrounding the college at which the course was taught, so the teachers in my class were no strangers to the issues surrounding poverty and the needs of working-class students.

Set-Up of the Course

Creating a successful online course that is conducive to authentic discussion is no easy task. Course materials must be of discernable quality, assignments must be

professionally meaningful, and feedback and communication must be first rate (Tricker, Rangescroft, Long, & Gilroy, 2001). Of course, both students and instructors play equally as important and recursive roles. In successful online courses, written communication skills, meticulous design of activities that promote discussion, and timely feedback are all imperative (Spangle, Hodne, & Schierling, 2002). In a study by Young (2006), students shared that valuable online teaching reflected instruction that adapted to student needs, provided meaningful examples, motivated students to do their best, facilitated the course effectively, communicated well, and showed concern for student learning.

Perhaps most importantly, the logistical aspects of the online learning environment must facilitate self-regulating activities for students. Successful online courses include features that scaffold time management, pacing of work, timely completion of tasks, the use of appropriate learning strategies, and a student's sense of the ability to succeed (Norton & Hathaway, 2008).

Critical Issues in Literature for Children and Adolescents was a course set up to provide an overview of many genres of literature written for children and adolescents, allowing class participants to hone their skills in selecting and evaluating the quality of literature, developing aesthetic and critical responses to literature, and increasing knowledge and understanding of literature as a resource for teaching and learning. Participants were required to read several popular titles of children's and young adult literature and complete a range of assignments, including critical reflections on both the textbook and the literature.

The participants were assigned only one textbook, *The Pleasures of Children's Literature* by Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer (2003), which created a positive tone for critical engagement. One of the reasons this text was selected was because throughout it, on nearly every page, are well-crafted, open-ended discussion questions in easily identifiable gray boxes that enrich specific topics explored in the text. In every online module I required the students to respond to at least two different textbook exploration questions and to respond to their classmates' musings.

The course was organized into 10 modules, and each module lasted approximately 1 to 2 weeks. Course participants could log on at any time during a designated module, and I requested that the participants each post at least six messages for every module. I purposefully set up the course to be interactive. I communicated to the participants, both in writing and in-person, that I wanted them to treat their online discussions as they would treat in-person discussions, truly interacting with one another, as opposed to simply making random statements with no relevance to what had been asked or said.

In most online modules, I began the week with leading questions and big ideas, to which the participants responded and interacted with one another to answer, and through which they could create further questions. Since the length of a posting is often a curiosity to students, I asked the participants to be mindful of quality and personal or professional meaningfulness. In most cases a high quality paragraph or two was adequate, rather than long postings, which may have been less tempting to read thoroughly.

I knew that at times the exchange of personal information may seem desirable and natural to the participants. I did not want to discourage instinctive bonding among peers, so to keep our academic discussions focused, I created a "Common Room" section of our online course, which worked well for personal communication. Although it is both undesirable and nearly impossible for an instructor to respond to every post a student makes, I was careful to log on several times a week to read everything the students had

written, and I responded in a timely fashion (within 24-48 hours) to all major threads and issues. I was careful to respond to the students specifically by name and precisely to concepts of which they had written. Often, I would answer questions or extend or enhance concepts that had been addressed by students.

In my efforts to foster interaction online, I modeled and provided tangible suggestions to scaffold our discussions. For example, I encouraged participants to refer to one another by name, to use their own names in each of their postings, and to respond directly to one another, using specific examples and personal connections. In addition, in every module I asked that participants engage in literature circles (Daniels, 2001), a method of small group literature discussion. Over time, course participants were encouraged to modify the literature circles roles to suit their needs as teachers. For example, course participants became creative with the roles, making new ones, such as Lesson Connector, for which a circle member would suggest a range of lesson ideas pertaining to the topic or book being discussed. Their roles evolved into imaginative and personally applicable passions, all while they related meaningfully to the course content and to one another online.

Analysis

The theoretical framework used for the analysis of discourse in the online class was informed by sociocultural literacy studies (e.g., Gee, 1996; Street, 1995).

A Discourse-based, situated, and sociocultural view of literacy demands that we see reading (and writing and speaking) as not one thing, but many: many different socioculturally situated reading (writing, speaking) practices. It demands that we see meaning in the world and in texts as situated in learners' experiences? experiences which, if they are to be useful, must give rise to midlevel situated meanings through which learners can recognize and act on the world in specific ways. (Gee, 2000, p. 6)

This theory guided coding of the data and identification of themes related to the challenges the teachers faced, their concerns, their revelations, and their suggestions.

Since the online discussion boards were archived, I was able to revisit them once the class had ended. I reread the entire course with respect to my research question of how my students and I could explore the fostering of critical literacy together in the online format. First, I extracted all lines that mentioned fostering critical literacy. Once these lines were extracted in chronological order, I then highlighted the lines and exchanges I found to be the most prominent or repetitive.

As in any analysis, whether for the purpose of theory testing or generation, I brought particular perspectives to the analysis that shaped what I was able to see in terms of data categories. Although I did not change my focus or research question throughout the study, my understandings of the implications of the question evolved.

The participants' online discourse was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It was a nonlinear, recursive, dialogical process, and as I saw patterns in the data, I color-coded them according to my research question. Two themes emerged with regard to critical literacy. First, the teachers had clear revelations about the role of critical literacy in their work. Second, they articulated tangible strategies for classroom use to promote critical engagement in students. These

themes certainly overlap, however, and are to be thought of as interweaving, one informing the other.

During analysis, I was also a member of an interpretive community (as defined by Tappan, 2001; Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995). This community was a collaboration of other educators sensitive to the issues involved in my particular study. They were a willing and engaged audience, who met regularly to offer support and suggestions for interpretations of data.

Of course, there is a value-laden role in being the researcher. The very act of investigating my own practice aligns me with the work on teacher research (e.g., Dozier et al., 2006). I will always deeply respect the intuitive knowledge the teachers in this study brought to the teaching-research process. Rather than being regarded as the objects of research, I see the teachers as coconstructors of the research endeavor and as interpreters of knowledge as they questioned common practice (as in Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Dudley-Marling, 1995; Fecho, 1993; Strickland, Dillon, Funkhouse, Glick, & Rogers, 1989).

In fact, at the conclusion of the course, I met with participants to gather their feedback on what they felt helped to make the course successful and what would improve it in the future. The honest and more objective role of the interpretive community helped to minimize any unfair generalizations I may have made as the teacher researcher. The interpretive community's careful and frequent analysis of data helped me to remain as unbiased as possible.

Findings

The online space was a pedagogical context that fostered an interactive, dynamic freedom for highly critical discourse. In this section are analyses of the two themes—revelations and teaching strategies—which emerged and developed from within the online space.

Revelations

The teachers had clear revelations about the role of critical literacy in their work. Their revelations were not necessarily always new realizations, but a way in which they were somehow seeing something differently. Their revelations often took the form of a bold statement or even a quandary. In short, the course was a space to have their voices heard, especially with regard to new perspectives and refreshing revelations on what they may or may not have been previously pondering. Three subcategories within this theme of revelations that were frequently discussed online were gender, exposure, and negotiating power.

Gender. Gender issues frequently arose in our course. In chapter 7 of the textbook, the issue of gender roles in toys, books, and society in general were addressed. The textbook provided ongoing, open-ended, thought-provoking questions on all topics covered, including gender, to which I required the participants to respond. For example, "In this section, we've focused on popular toys that communicate assumptions about femininity to girls. What assumptions about masculinity might be conveyed in toys currently popular with boys?" (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 136). In response, Laurie wrote,

Unfortunately, the world is not always so black and white. The children who may not identify with either role get lost in confusion as to where they fit in and often times feel like they are outcasts. We tell children which toys are

an appropriate fit for them or buy them what “all the other kids have.” But is this normal or is it actually harming them?

Laurie, along with several of her classmates, was coming to a new level of understanding gender roles and how they are represented in children’s literature, in our teaching, and in popular culture. These types of reflections and quandaries were typical and prompted lengthy conversation threads on the discussion board. The class would often contemplate the notion of a large gray space between the black and white world to which we are so accustomed in our culture and to which Laurie referred in her quotation. Gender was a tangible concept to which everyone could relate, and one that could be easily deconstructed. It led the way to even more sophisticated quandaries.

This gender discussion continued to flow, and later Kelly responded to a notion that had been brought up about the concept of “happily ever after” and whether certain aspects of fairy tales or the ways the American Dream is depicted in literature are detrimental to children, painting an unrealistic picture of happiness, or they way “things are supposed to be.” This more complex notion is inherently tied to gender, and the gender roles that are negotiated by children, adolescents, and adults alike in the constant stream of literature, popular culture, and so forth. Kelly articulated and extended this online discussion of gender:

I do believe that the “happily ever after” scenario can be somewhat detrimental to children, both boys and girls. Girls are made to think that they need to be saved by a strong man, and that without one they are not whole, and are powerless. On the other hand, the same could be said for boys. These stories may put unrealistic expectations on these boys that they need to save women. They may alter their view on the strength and power a woman holds.... As teachers we need to be aware of blatant or subtle gender role messages that are portrayed in the literature we provide.

Kelly’s reflections were powerful in the ways she called teachers to be more aware of notions that are often taken for granted. When teachers acknowledge inequity, students then have a space to deconstruct it. Bob continued the conversation and pushed us in our thinking, reminding us that it is not so much *what* we are reading, but *how* we are reading it. Whether it is fairy tales, Web sites, or feminist literature, children need that critical lens intact.

I agree with you in that I think children should be exposed to fairy tales. It gives them a perspective of how times have changed, and hopefully helps them to see that the ways vulnerable people were treated back then have evolved over time. I think it is great for them to see that women were not considered valuable at one time so that they can say, “Wow, I cannot believe that happened.” I think it can give them a sense of empowerment because they can see that situations can change for the better.... It gives them hope.

In the end, so much of children’s literature *is* about hope. Even the darkest sides of life and literature have their bright points, and Bob, along with our class, came to the bold realization that humans need the black, the white, and the gray to learn. Since children’s literature often contains positive messages and hopeful perspectives, it is an ideal medium for this depth of inquiry. Yet in our online class, we commonly examined texts and topics that contained potentially sensitive content. We would have lengthy online conversations about whether or not to expose students to certain materials?whether it was fairy tales because of old gender stereotypes or more contemporary titles with other sensitive issues.

Exposure. Related to the last excerpt, exposure was a topic that surfaced frequently. Teachers often ponder whether or not to expose their students to particular texts and ideas. I questioned the participants about this quandry, and we examined it at length, especially with regard to critical literacy. The reality is that children *will* encounter all sorts of negative things in life, whether we like it or not. It is the job of educators to equip them with strategies to read the world critically rather than censor certain things that come their way. Our choices and biases are reflected in the selections we make for children. At times, that makes us censors. Although I would never promote showing children disgusting and clearly inappropriate material, I suggested to the participants of my class that we push the limits of what we think is safe and comfortable.

A student named Chris responded immediately:

This is an interesting question because where do we draw the line? And who is truly qualified to make these decisions, as censorship of particular materials will be determined by personal ideologies? I'm so unsure of how to tackle this issue.

This hot topic of exposure continued for several threads on our discussion board. One aspect that facilitated this conversation was our textbook's explanation of ideology, which was defined as a set of assumptions, and to which Chris referred in the quote above. In response, Daniel offered his thoughts:

I actually think it is important to expose children to older literature, specifically because it allows the reader to explore the mores and beliefs of other cultures and earlier times. There is a tendency, though, for teachers and other adults to be persistent in their literature choices and views.... Socially acceptable practices change over time. That is an important lesson for any child to learn.

Daniel brought up an important point of which all teachers need to be reminded—that children *will* be exposed to and perhaps *should* be exposed to particular texts and images, because it equips them for more discernable negotiation. Socially acceptable practices *do* change over time, and literature, and the discussion of it, is a powerful conduit to see this change and to apply it to the navigation of other texts and media. Perceptions of what is culturally acceptable leave some youngsters feeling lost, weak, and blurred by a vision of what they *should* become, in lieu of what they *want* to become (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Such feelings can perpetuate a disconnection from students' own knowing, which we certainly do not want.

In response to these types of conversation threads, Jess would often interject her concerns that the class would veer too far from the joys and pleasures of children's literature by focusing too heavily on critical engagement. Several other participants, myself included, would try to remind one another that balance is necessary. When we read a lighthearted, funny book, we can still be learning. When we read an expository text or watch a documentary, it we can still be entertained. After one of these types of online conversations, Melissa offered the following viewpoint, in which she realized the role of exposure and how it leads to power.

I don't see it as jading a child, but equipping a child to critically evaluate what they hear from the youngest most impressionable years... creating an awareness in children. Reading in general has to be taught as a way to empower ourselves and who we are and who we want to become. Being able

to read leads us to having new ideas and ways to problem solve.... Reading, in all forms, allows us to have a certain amount of power.

Negotiations of power. In an inherent fashion, negotiations of power surfaced throughout our online course. Whether we discussed children being empowered, the power of teachers, or others' use and misuse of power, it was a major subcategory within this theme of revelations, which also naturally lent itself to an exploration of the various ways teachers are positioned in their lives and profession, by school officials, our culture, one another, and even our course. In a class focused on critical literacy, not surprisingly, negotiations of power surfaced within the first week of our discussion board. Kathryn shared a story about one of her eighth-grade students:

We spend a good amount of time studying *The Diary of Anne Frank* and several other works of Holocaust literature.... One boy chose to read Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as his supplementary work. I thought it was a good choice—a graphic novel about a very serious subject.... Two... days later I met his mother at the grocery store and she tells me, apologetically, that he had to put it down. He had gotten to a part where people are walking on dead bodies in a concentration camp and it disturbed him.... Of course it disturbed him! I would be worried if it didn't, but I had blithely nodded when he picked up that book and I never gave a thought to the notion that I would be responsible for putting an image like that into his mind, ready or not. Information is power, and we are obligated to empower our students, but I have since warned my students.

Kathryn's compelling reflections beautifully capture what so many teachers feel, as they wrestle with the complexities of their roles. Teachers are in such positions of power, and they want to empower their students, and the content itself is powerful. How do they negotiate it all? The work is difficult and multifaceted, and our online discussion board was a safe and open space to discuss the intricacies of it all, even if there were no answers. As may be seen in this example, simply sharing with one another helped, even if it was sometimes in a rhetorical fashion.

Whether sharing surprises, quandaries, or newly perceived reflections, the participants of the course had opportunities to “unpack” the concept of power and what it meant in their daily lives as educators. Laurie offered her perspectives on how and why people use or misuse their power.

Perhaps it has less to do with power and more to do with the adult's own lack of comfort with discussing sensitive topics with children.... I think it is empowering for children to read literature that they can relate to.... As teachers I think we have a responsibility to expose children to a variety of topics through literature, but also to familiarize ourselves with what the child is reading, what potential emotions the work might evoke and prepare to deal with whatever comes up.

Laurie's thoughts are intriguing and astute in the ways she pondered the tasks teachers face and the affective dimensions of teachers' needs to deliberately reexamine comfortable cultural practices and values. As educators sharing together in this online space, we were able to admit and, perhaps, remind ourselves that the teacher's own discomfort with a particular topic often veers him or her away from it, when the lesson could be helpful to a young student. The online format was a space for the teachers to explore and vent about topics they found uncomfortable, allowing opportunities to move

beyond the discomfort, to move forward into lesson ideas for safe, responsible pathways to examine culturally sensitive topics with students.

Tawny led an impressive and honest discussion thread about her struggles to read more actively and to not take whatever an author states at face value.

Most of my college books I would read without “thinking” about how I felt.... Rarely did I question a textbook or think statements made in it were not true or subject to an author’s opinion.... I will try to make a conscious effort to question this book, just as I would an Internet website. Training ourselves to constantly question this book keeps us from being sponges, just soaking up information. We can feel that we are more engaged in the learning process, making it more meaningful to us. Isn’t that how we want our students to feel?

In this triumphant moment, I was reminded again of Dewey’s metaphor of needing to make the journey ourselves instead of simply having a map in hand (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 155). Tawny and many of her peers in the course traversed powerful terrain in coming to such meaningful connections between their personal values and practices and those they enacted in their classrooms. Critically literate teachers will foster critical literacy in their daily classrooms (Dozier et al., 2006).

Teaching Strategies for Critical Literacy

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of teacher education is when a course erupts with ideas for tangible classroom use, meaningfully bridging the practice-theory cycle. From as early as the first week of class, teachers were enthusiastically offering excellent suggestions for classroom use, and the ideas continued and became more sophisticated as the semester progressed. Two subcategories within this theme of teaching strategies that were frequently discussed online were intertextuality and the need for conversation.

Intertextuality. Teaching critical literacy is certainly no easy task. Educators must create spaces for discussing the impact and effects of hegemony in institutional settings such as schools. People can actively use texts of all sorts to develop capacities for interrogating interests and injustices. Teachers need to provide students with a language for discussing such matters. One concrete way of doing this is to provide students with a countertext, so that they may begin to read intertextually and begin to conceptualize what it means to make distinctions between texts and ways of thinking. This strategy also initiates a relational process of reading, in which the link between source, message, social construction, social formations, and pedagogical implications are understood as interrelated parts of a literacy whole (Weiner, 2002).

The participants of my course quickly began discussing the benefits of intertextuality and ways of using it in their classrooms as a way to foster critical literacy. While reading and discussing *Aesop’s Fables*, Chris offered the following reflections:

It would be a great lesson to compare and contrast interpretations of the fables after students see the different illustrations.... It would be fascinating and fun for them to see how differently they each artistically portray the same stories.... In doing so we are encouraging creativity and freedom of thought.... As they are exposed to more literature, and taught to look more critically and to make connections, the lessons and influences become deeper based on what they as readers are bringing to the piece.

Of course, seeing ideas from different perspectives is extremely valuable, yet it can be far too abstract a concept for some students. Chris's suggestion of using tangible approaches, such as various illustrated versions of the fables is a concrete approach for making it accessible.

Sue brought up the notion of how technology changes the ways in which we read intertextually. In addition, she pointed out the role of connections in fostering community, comprehension, and critical literacy:

I truly believe that facilitating connections is a big part of what we do as teachers. As the world becomes smaller and smaller, connections not only become more possible, they become more necessary.... As technology grows and makes making connections easier, it also makes making connections more necessary. I think every teacher should learn to share in the community afforded by the Internet and teach their students how to do so as well. It may be the most important literacy we pass on to them.

In this posting, Sue reminded us that online discussions can foster the development of a distinctive voice. Students can gain a sense of empowerment and personal identity while interacting with others online (Oravec, 2002). Engaged in literacy practices, we are meaning negotiators who adopt, resist, or stretch words and worlds (Dyson, 1997).

Last, the class considered how certain texts—magazines, comic books, romance, etc.—loved by many children and adolescents, are referred to as “trash” by some contexts of dominant culture (e.g., Davies, 1993; Radway, 1984). In terms of literary quality, “the general question of literary value remains a contentious one” (Nodelman, 1996, p. 187). In the case of mass-produced texts, such as romance fiction, magazines, or coming-of-age tales, their low literary merit is based on predictable, repetitious, formulaic patterns, many of which are linked in series format. Yet, according to Nodelman, a text's lack of uniqueness does not necessarily indicate the text is uninteresting. In fact, the accessibility of these texts in price, in reading level, and in their patterning is comforting to some readers, providing them with avenues through which to relax, to seek pleasure, and to reflect on their lives.

Furthermore, young readers of formulaic books have the potential to learn basic patterning for future literary engagements with less-formulaic texts. “Most readers... will in fact create priorities among the genres in which they claim competence” (Gerhart, 1992, p. 36). Among many others, Lisa commented on these notions:

Hi, everyone. All of your thoughts have me thinking, why do we want children to read in the first place? If we think that reading is so valuable a skill that it is better for them to be reading trash than to be reading nothing, then we had better be busy teaching them to be critical and questioning. Allowing, or even encouraging children to read multiple works by the same author can fit into this plan.... I think the most important thing to teach children today is to think for themselves, always ask questions, and never depend on one source for the complete truth.

Lisa was strong and helpful in reminding us all how this online framework, and hence our teaching, can focus attention on interdiscursive formations (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). That is, we can ask questions and encourage our students to ask questions about the kinds of cultural competencies that are learned as a consequence of certain social formations and how those are activated and perpetuated within and through multiple,

related genres or discourses. In short, we need to read and discuss our (inter)textual engagements, whether in person or online.

The need for conversation. The participants in this course clearly identified the benefit of sharing ideas with one another to best approach and teach critical literacy. Their interactions were inspiring and empowering to one another. Through their own interactions, they saw the need to foster such conversations in their own classrooms. Many of the participants in the class would often write sentences such as, “I must comment on what you said because I never really heard it put into words like that.” Kelly shared the following reflections early in the semester.

I am amazed by the insight of the teachers in this class. In reading all of your postings, I find myself having to re-think beliefs and ideologies that I never really knew I had because I thought I was protecting my children. I look forward to learning a lot from all of you.

Among many others, Kelly pointed out that learning is a social activity (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), and the online format allowed and encouraged their critical discourse to flow. In addition, literacy is a social activity (Johnston, 1992). It is connected to human relations and emotions. Our uses of literacy constitute aspects of our individual worlds. Literacy should be linked to deeper understandings of social practices and how people make sense of their lives through their everyday practices. In order to understand literacy development, we must understand the social conditions in which people engage in literate activity (Johnston, 1992, p. 8). Students establish and shape their literacy in social interaction. To really understand literacy, we need to describe the social contexts of literacy learning—the interactions and how the student contributes to those interactions (p. 8).

Numerous scholars have contended that collaborative literacy experiences promote peer interaction and engagement in learning (Gambrell, Anders Mazzoni, & Almasi, 2000). “The type of interaction that occurs during collaborative literacy experiences may play an important role in shaping students’ perceptions of the purposes and goals of reading and writing” (p. 119).

Kathryn may have summed it up best:

The conversation is the thing, isn't it? So often, difficult material, whether difficult to understand or difficult to handle, can be processed if there is a real conversation about it. As teachers, we would like to have the time to be able to really look our students in the eye and listen to what puzzles or troubles them. While I think that there is a limit to what young children should be deliberately exposed to, I also think that most kids are able to look at tough things if they have a loving adult to bounce things off of. Ideally, the adult is wise, but I do not think that that is even the most important requisite. I think that as long as we adults (parents or teachers) are caring enough to listen and honest enough to admit what we don't understand, the child can deal with mature issues.

Implications

At the onset of this study, the teacher participants in my course and I wrestled with the notion of how to empower our students to “fight the dragons.” As people in K-12 and teacher education, we were naturally concerned about how to equip today’s youth with a

critical lens to negotiate safely a variety of media with powerful messages. Equally important, however, was providing a meaningful way for teachers to explore their own critical lens, and my online children's literature course was one way to do so. The participants of this online course navigated vigorous terrain in coming to such significant connections between their personal values and practices and those they enact in their classrooms. Critically literate teachers will foster critical literacy in their daily classrooms (Dozier et al., 2006).

Concrete Suggestions for Teaching With a Critical Lens

Teachers, parents, and other adult leaders must be educated on how to read students as individuals, with individual dreams, hopes, and fears. Teachers can read students' class, gender, and racially specific lives in ways that are more literary (Hicks, 2002). "From teachers' discerning readings of children's histories and language practices, I argue, emerge the teaching actions that draw on listening, watching, feeling, and understanding. This is how I view critical literacy practice" (p. 13). This view, of course, means that teachers themselves must be involved in critical literacy.

A more explicit focus on the politics of media, literary texts, and social events would be a stepping stone toward helping children and adolescents prepare for the challenges they will face in "fighting the dragons." Teachers and students alike need and deserve safe classroom spaces for challenging the injustices they see in their lives. The starting point for critical classroom practice is students' own words and experiences (Hicks, 2002).

Students can take up new practices of literacy as they form relations with teachers and take the risks involved in trying out new practices and identities.

This is a kind of multiplicity that reflects the situated locations of students and teachers. Teachers have to contend with their own class specific histories and the feelings they evoke, as the (students) they teach learn which kinds of fictions will be safe to write, voice, and live in school. (Hicks, 2002, pp. 96-97)

Some tangible suggestions for implementing such pedagogies exist in all sorts of classrooms, from primary to college settings. First, teachers can use various creative ways to suggest that structures of power exist and then engage students in dialogue about them. Second, teachers need to provide students with a language with which to discuss such matters. Teachers can provide students with a countertext, so that they may begin to read intertextually and begin to conceptualize what it means to make distinctions between texts and ways of thinking. This also initiates a relational process of reading in which the link between source, message, social construction, social formations, and pedagogical implications are understood as interrelated parts of a literacy whole (Weiner, 2002).

In an online course, the technology can allow readers to connect to the text a vast array of multimedia life experiences that become relevant through their response to the text. By posting online, they may construct their own reaction to and version of the texts, including thematic annotations or intertextual links or paths to related texts, themes, topics, and so forth. Although much of talk or writing about texts focuses simply on response to a text, technology invites students to explain their textual experience within the larger cultural and ideological contexts that shape their interpretations (Myers & Beach, 2001).

Children, adolescents, and teachers alike need a language with which to constructively discuss sensitive, yet all too real topics, such as pop culture, gender, and sexuality. “Without a language with which to address sexuality, teachers’ critical approaches to popular culture are silenced, and we are left only to ignore or celebrate the norms and values such popular culture promotes” (Finders, 2000, p. 148). Educators, community leaders, and parents must all take a critical stance to deepen understandings of the influences of language and culture upon lives. Popular culture can open doorways to productive engagement with texts, opportunities for multiple readings, and deliberations of the politics in texts.

Adults, adolescents, and children need and deserve opportunities to develop a critical awareness of what they read, view, and hear. All texts position us in certain ways, and using a variety of texts is, therefore, vital—some texts that need to be read, listened to, or viewed, and some that require people attend to all three modes simultaneously. Attending to all three modes at one time may present one of the most valuable opportunities for developing a critical awareness of texts and a range of media (Alvermann, 2008).

Myers and Beach (2001) offered several concrete suggestions for teaching with both a critical lens and with technology. First, they suggested that students identify concerns, issues, and dilemmas that arise in their social worlds. By then contextualizing those concerns within the online forum up against textual examples, students become more aware of how the texts and images reflect certain ideologies. Third, students may use technology to share their beliefs or to explain how texts are used to represent worlds to achieve certain purposes.

Fourth, by analyzing how a representation of a social world privileges particular values and beliefs over others, students may analyze how particular literacy practices within a social world promote certain meanings while marginalizing other possibilities. Last, by engaging critically online, students both identify and experience how symbolic interactions and texts construct the ideologies of their social worlds. Students are, thus, exposed to using words, symbols, texts, and actions with others in alternative ways that seek to transform problematic social worlds.

According to Bomer and Bomer (2001), teachers have four complementary responsibilities: to teach for social action, to teach the language of democratic classrooms, to introduce the practice of cultural critique, and to conduct themselves as political agents (pp. 18-19). As teachers and teacher educators, we need and deserve to talk frequently with one another across contexts. As educators, we must constantly be asking ourselves, how do I make my own critical literacy visible to my students?

The more critical teachers are in their own lives, the more critical students will be. Teachers can ask themselves lots of helpful questions on a recurrent basis. For example, how does talking with others affect my own writing? How does caring about a particular issue help me to read differently? How do my social relationships help me to choose books to read? How does reading nonbook material (Internet sites, magazines, pamphlets, etc.) fit into my life? (Bomer & Bomer, 2001, p. 163). The more aware teachers are, the more aware students will be.

Concrete Suggestions for Online Learning Endeavors

It is time to move the writing processes required of students toward electronically created and connected texts that bridge student interests and expertise with the development of academic skills (Wilber, 2007). In addition, there is no denying the convenience factor of

allowing busy, tired teachers to log onto a course Web site from the comfort of their own homes. It truly enhances the experience. "Faculty need to understand these new literacy practices and consider regarding them as resources for creating new, multimodal practices" (p. 3).

When contemplating the aspects of my course that we felt led to its success, the participants and I both came to the following conclusions. The materials I chose, including the textbook used and the children's and young adult books selected, all lent themselves to critical engagement. I also modeled a great deal of the language and questioning necessary to promote discussion. I tend to be very organized. This was helpful to the participants, because all of their assignments and expectations were clearly articulated for them. I purposely made the Web site easy to navigate, and we had the same format each week. The participants quickly got used to it, so that they could instead focus their energies on content rather than the functionality of the Web site or tricky assignments.

The participants and I fostered a mutual respect. Since the class was hybrid, we met in person about once a month, during which time we took care to sit in a circle and bond and to get to know one another before venturing back online to faceless entities. The community we built online and in class fostered a safety and trust in which we could share personal thoughts and difficult questions. I provided the participants with consistent and early feedback, which gave them confidence.

Using interactive strategies, such as Daniels' (2001) literature circles, a method of small group literature discussion, provided structure, roles, and a distinct space to hear the voices of all of those involved in the class. Last, and perhaps most importantly, the course was personally meaningful to the participants because it was specific to their teaching. There is no denying what a huge difference personal passion makes in learning.

Conclusion

Some may question whether discussions of literature can teach us to fight the dragons. Major changes in literacy instruction are needed to provide students with a range of tools for interrogating their social worlds (Myers & Beach, 2001). Online learning coupled with critical literacy invites teachers, teacher educators, and students to connect their media-rich everyday lives to the print-dominant texts of school learning. In doing so, we may negotiate fuller meanings for all texts in terms of the possible identities, relationships, and values promoted within the literacy experience.

As we use technology and critical literacy to focus and contrast particular words and images, we can generate critiques of the ideologies that define their contested meanings and shared social lives (Myers & Beach, 2001). Teacher educators must foster these online spaces for teachers to explore critical literacy, so that teachers may then foster similar environments for their own students.

In today's classrooms, no teacher can safely assume a level of innocence. Teachers are naive if we think that our students do not know about some incredibly tough issues. To ignore tough issues can potentially silence those students who are unfortunately exposed to them, while still leaving all children ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their culture. Until ways of engaging with texts in a systematic, critical way are enacted, the dragons will remain intact. Since teachers themselves deserve spaces to engage critically, online formats can potentially provide a freedom for highly critical discourse. When

meaningful spaces and opportunities for critical literacy are provided in teacher education classes, teachers will do the same in their classrooms.

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