Creating a Space for Critical Literacy

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“In an age of manipulation, when our students are in dire need of critical strength to resist the continuing assaults of all the media, the worst thing we can do is to foster in them an attitude of reverence before texts.” (Scholes 1985:61)

Our Purpose

The purpose of this workshop is to facilitate growth and understanding of critical literacy. When this workshop ends, you should have a better understanding of teaching through the lens of critical literacy, a developing toolbox for the teaching of critical analysis, and individualized goals and plans for furthering your teaching of critical literacy. As the quote above implies, this is a mode of literacy that is imperative in today’s world and my hope is that you walk away with a strengthened commitment to developing students’ abilities to “read the word and the world”.

This workshop will require a stretching of your beliefs and assumptions of literacy and literacy education. As a community, we will need to individually share efforts of reflection, observation and communication to build on the idea that language is a social function. As we transition from experiencing the texts that our students read in their daily lives, to their rewriting for a more equitable classroom, all participants will develop an ability to identify and value critical literacy.
Workshop Participants

This workshop is intended for classroom teachers who are interested in incorporating critical literacy into their teaching practice or want to build on the strategies they currently use. All teachers, both beginning and advanced, are welcome. Most importantly, this workshop has been designed for teachers who want to prepare their students to better understand how to deconstruct texts so that they may produce change in their world. If you have asked yourself, “What are the hidden messages in my assigned texts?” or “Whose interest does this text serve?” then you are in the right place!

Workshop Goals

- To facilitate our development and understanding of critical literacy through discussion, analysis and writing activities and readings in order to...
  - View literacy as a social practice
  - Uncover deceptive or hidden meanings within individual works
  - Analyze the motivations of authors, illustrators and publishers
- To apply an understanding of how to reframe and create alternate versions of texts.
- To evaluate and reflect on current practices and set goals for introducing new lessons for critical literacy into the existing curriculum.

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Activities

1. **Quick Write Reflection**

How can my classroom community benefit from critical literacy?

Reflection is a key component of critical literacy. In order to gauge the best methods for proceeding, it is important for all of us to establish our goals, worries and experiences. For this reflection, you will have the opportunity to share your expectations for this course. Please be open with your reasons for attending, your worries about critical literacy and your experiences at this point. We will share these in small groups. These are very helpful as I continue to choose reading material choices and resources that reflect your needs.

**Viewing:** Chimamanda Adichie: *The Danger of a single story* (TED Talk)

2. **Critical Literacy Research Presentation**

Who’s behind critical literacy and what are they saying?

With every approach to education, it is important to understand the work of those who have helped to develop it. You will be provided with a choice of critical literacy researchers to research with a short description of their work. In small groups, you will research your chosen theorist and design a brief presentation to introduce their key ideas. We will combine your presentations in a set of resources you will be able to keep for your records.

**Reading:** Packet of readings on various critical literacy theorists
**Suggested Reading:** Paulo Freire: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

3. **Reading for Bias**

Whose voice is here? Whose voice is missing? What is the author really trying to say? Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged?

Recognizing bias in the texts we use on a daily basis is an important skill for educators, students and their parents. This activity based on the work of Linda Christensen and Bill Bigelow will allow you to analyze the books and texts within other genres for hidden messages, assumptions and implied values. We will use provided books and texts you bring in from your classrooms. After completion of an organizer with observations and reflection about these implications, we will have the opportunity to discuss this while modeling a Socratic Seminar. This activity will culminate in groups writing guidelines and prompts for a critical reading checklist.

**Reading:** Linda Christensen: *Reading, Writing and Rising Up- Chapters “Unlearning the Myths that Bind Us” and “The Politics of Language “*
4. **Rewriting the World**

To what extent can I make this text more equitable? Will a transformative text impact my students for the better?

This activity will ask you to re-envision a lesson you’ve previously taught. You will view the texts and examples used in this lesson with a critical literacy lens for reflection. Once you have captured the areas that could be biased or communicating hidden messages, you will re-envision the lesson so that it incorporates some of the ideas we discussed through our workshop. We will first observe and discuss several lessons, activities and student work to frame this process.

Reading: Enid Lee: *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-Racism Education and Staff Development, Chapter “What is the Bias Here? Staff Development for Critical Literacy”* (p. 80-81)


5. **Committing to Critical Literacy**

Where have I been? Where I am going to be?

As professionals, we must be honest with ourselves about where we are starting and where we hope to end up. This portion of the workshop asks you to reflect on the previous meetings and activities in order to assess your growth. We will use a strategy called “Back to the future” to help you frame your future unit as if it is occurring in the present so that you can expand and clarify your vision of your future incorporation of critical literacy strategies.


You will then work on an implementation plan using SMART goals for the ways you hope to bring critical literacy into your teaching practice.

Reading: Collection of critical literacy lesson plans and units for a variety of content areas.

For more information on discussion protocols to incorporate into your classroom visit:

http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/protocol-alphabetical-list-2/
Syllabus Project Rationale Paper

Before a specific learning experience can occur, it must be carefully planned with a purpose. With this in mind, I created this plan for a multi-day workshop intended to inspire teachers to incorporate critical literacy more frequently in their classrooms. My vision was that this workshop might meet once a week or once a month for eight-ten one hour sessions. It would likely be focused within a professional learning community or a cohort of teachers from my high school interested in this area of literacy. Finally, this workshop was designed to reflect my increased knowledge of backward planning and creating a learning centered context.

The syllabus for this workshop began with two major questions: How would I inspire my colleagues to understand and value critical literacy? and How would I motivate them to modify current lessons by incorporating strategies of critical literacy? Bain (2004) supported this concept when he wrote best teachers begin planning a course by asking themselves what big questions will be answered by the course’s end (Kindle edition, loc. 535). This allows educators to plan backwards by creating activities that provide stopping points on a direct path to the goal. Making use of the unit question strategy from “Understanding by Design”, I also created an essential question for each course activity (“What is UbD”). The reason I chose this strategy was to create purpose with an essential question rather than writing a stated objective. Also, open-ended questions provide space for individual student inquiry. Bain (2004) similarly found that the
best teachers asked themselves how to present students with the conflicting nature of truth within their discipline (loc. 574), which was also a consideration that sparked the essential questions. With the use of the initial question word “how”, I will have established with the course attendees the notion that there are multiple ways to respond to this question so that learning can be purposeful for each individual. Additionally, it allows room for learners to disagree and even question the usefulness of critical literacy within their classroom. At a time where other types of literacy are promoted by standardized education, this will likely be an important debate that will lace its way through the workshops.

The majority of the sections include assigned theoretical text or teacher resources in order to help students become familiar with the language of critical literacy. Bain’s research on effective teachers found that most had a desire to support students with the development of sophisticated reading within their discipline (loc. 605). With a similar focus, I incorporated specific readings (Paulo Freire, Linda Christensen, Enid Lee, etc.) into the workshops to feed the minds of teachers who often yearn for intellectual discussions grounded in theory. Each theorist approaches critical literacy from a different angle in order to show that there is no right way to implement it into one’s teaching. Keeping my students in mind, I chose readings that were engaging and stimulating but not too heavy. I would also supply a list of supplementary suggested readings and other relevant media for teachers who wanted to continue their journey with critical literacy.
Activities for this workshop series were designed to meet the needs of busy professionals with varying levels of critical literacy knowledge. Due to my unfamiliarity with each person’s background knowledge, I incorporated a reflection piece for the first activity. Using McKeachie's (2011) “Question Posing” method, I would ask students to discuss and write about their expectations, concerns, goals and needs from the course (Kindle edition, loc. 932). This method would serve two functions; it would help me plan for students’ individual needs and also helps students become familiar with one another and build rapport with me. Using these responses, I would let students know that I will choose selected readings and videos for unit reflections and theories that reflect their interests. Additionally, if any activities needed to be modified for the group, this would provide me with information for a new direction.

Building on the idea of creating activities that meet individual educators’ needs, activities were designed to begin with reflection, build background with theory, explore and apply the theories of critical literacy in a real-world context, and finally plan for its eventual incorporation into lessons. This gradual release model was designed to provide advanced students with a degree of independence while creating a slower transition to encourage those who would be new to concepts covered in the course.

An underlying intention for all activities was to help teachers engage with strategies that they could transfer into their own classrooms. Bain (2004) refers to this as creating a natural critical learning environment because content holds equal footing to skills and engagement (loc. 647). Each activity includes
authentic tasks, such as requiring teachers to bring in texts they currently use, when assessing for bias. The units also include student-centered strategies like graphic organizers, discussion protocols and SMART goal setting with the intention that teachers might find them beneficial for use with their own students. Weimer and Svinivki (2002) explain that “Learning-centered teachers connect students and resources…design activities and assignments that engage learners [and] facilitate learning in individual and collective contexts” (loc. 1083). Even the workshop syllabus was designed to include a Wordle, visual course organizer and thoughtful quote with the aspirations that teachers would find exposure to these strategies engaging and worth using in their own classrooms. Each mini-unit was designed to ultimately lead up to the main purpose of the course-teachers’ goals and plans for implementing critical literacy into their lessons.

Although this workshop would definitely need fine-tuning before it began, it should be apparent that it was conceptualized with backwards planning and centrally focused on the learner. The syllabus was designed to be clear and teacher friendly. Assignments were purposefully planned to meet the ultimate goals of increasing student knowledge of critical literacy theory and strategies and encouraging students to incorporate these concepts into their teaching practices. My ultimate hope would be that this workshop would spark a professional interest that would lead to discussions and plans that would extend beyond the workshop parameters and meet the needs of those who would benefit most- our students.
References


What is UBD? Grant Wiggins Answers, with Video Cases [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsDgfC3SjhM