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# Critical Literacy: Going Beyond the Demands of Common Core

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# ***Critical Literacy: Going Beyond the Demands of Common Core***

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## **Introduction**

*Trust me, Wilbur. People are very gullible.  
They'll believe anything they see in print.*

—E. B. White, *Charlotte's Web*

Despite the pressure teachers have been under to have students “pass” standardized tests and meet grade-level standards (Assaf, 2006; Suskind, 2007; Valli & Chamblis, 2007), the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have increased teacher accountability to have students be “college and career ready” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). Classroom teachers find themselves with less time for flexibility in their daily instruction and are content as they work to stay on schedule with the demands of benchmark practice tests, scripted curriculum, and premade pacing guides (Assaf, 2006). Unfortunately, this pressure on teachers can result in narrowing the curriculum, especially in language arts, to specific content

or skills that are heavily represented on standardized tests (Miller, Callahan, Schroeder, & Hartman, 2001; Smith, 1991; Stillman & Anderson, 2011).

The dilemma with this narrowed literacy instruction is that it can potentially create readers that are only “proficient” enough to understand texts at a surface level (Stevens & Bean, 2007), despite the emphasis on “close reading” and teaching with rigor. Hence, there is a need for students to critically negotiate more types of texts than those that appear on these tests. Students are surrounded by texts of all kinds—from video games, websites, and movies, to blogs, advertisements, and books. As the importance and volume of these texts grow in students’ lives, it is essential to consider how students are interpreting the messages they receive and what role teachers should play in students’ understanding of these messages (Gainer, 2010). This is why focusing on critical literacy skills in classroom instruction is essential for teachers of all grades and content areas.

Critical literacy is not an “add-on” to the existing curriculum; instead, it is a perspective or way of thinking that challenges texts and our viewpoint on the world (Luke, 2007; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2010). It offers students a lens through which to view texts and become aware of how those texts are constructed, as well as how they impact our thinking (Stevens & Bean, 2007). In the following sections, we will share a brief overview of critical literacy and why it is necessary in literacy instruction. We will then connect these tenets of critical literacy to the existing components of reading that teachers currently include in their classrooms in the age of the CCSS.

## **Defining Critical Literacy**

Critical literacy, which draws its roots from critical theory in education, recognizes the value of using literacy as a tool for individuals to become empowered by questioning texts, challenging

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the status quo, and using literacy to enact social change (Comber, 2001; Lewison, Flint, & VanSluys, 2002; Luke, 2007; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010; Morrell, 2005; Shannon, 1990). While critical literacy can be defined in several ways, most critical literacy theorists agree that the act of literacy itself is a “social and political practice rather than a set of neutral, psychological skills” (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000, p. 148). As such, being critically literate involves not only being decoders and creators of texts (Freebody & Luke, 1990) but also learning to “detect and handle the ideological dimension” of language and literacy (Lankshear, 1997, p. 46).

Critical literacy helps students to reject or reconstruct texts “in ways that are more consistent with their own experiences in the world” (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001). In contrast to critical thinking strategies, which consider higher levels of comprehension and interpretation as instructional goals, critical literacy theorists consider the goal of instruction to be the development of a critical consciousness (Cervetti et al., 2001). This means that students who engage in critical literacy not only develop higher levels of analysis and interpretation but move beyond to think and act in new ways for the betterment of their own lives and the lives of others in society. In short, engaging students in critical literacy helps teachers go beyond the CCSS’s expectations.

### **Getting Started: Incorporating Critical Literacy into Daily Literacy Instruction**

Making critical literacy practices part of ongoing literacy instruction is not something extra to “fit in” as a teaching unit or separate part of the day. Rather, it involves the regular application of a lens that will help create readers and writers who are better able to analyze all texts and think more deeply about texts they encounter. Freebody and Luke (1990) lay out four processes that readers use when navigating

text. The first three—code breaker, meaning maker, and text user—are common elements of literacy instruction in most classrooms. The fourth—text critic—is just as important. This is the dimension in which critical literacy lies.

Many literacy scholars have explored ways in which teachers incorporate critical literacy into their classrooms with strong benefits for their students (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Comber, 2001; Lewison et al., 2002). For example, Comber (2001) observed that when teachers and students were engaged with a critical literacy viewpoint, they asked questions regarding issues of language and power, and who is privileged by certain ideas, as well as who is disadvantaged. Studies have also suggested that the individuals and groups that are most frequently marginalized embrace critical literacy pedagogy with enthusiasm and passion, resulting in increased engagement with the texts (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Morrell (2005) has done extensive work successfully, engaging urban youth with popular culture through critical pedagogy. There are many ways for educators to get started with critical literacy, from the use of popular culture, to exploring media with a critical lens, to employing critical literacy strategies while reading children’s picture books.

One curricular model to engage students in this process is Lewison et al.’s (2002) four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. These are not the only ways to engage in critical literacy, but many teachers find them useful in planning their curricular engagements. In disrupting the commonplace, readers consider what systems of meaning are operating. How do discourses and texts work? In interrogating multiple viewpoints, readers consider which voices are heard and absent. How can we make difference visible and create counternarratives? In focusing on the sociopolitical, readers consider how privilege, power, and injustice impact daily life. In taking action to

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promote social justice, readers consider how we use literacy to transform inequalities and our own complicity in domination (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015).

In the following sections, we will share several ways newcomers to critical literacy can begin to explore and implement the underlying principles in their literacy instruction for students of all grades. We recognize the demands placed upon teachers with the implementation of the CCSS in most states (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010); therefore, we will share ways in which the four basic tenets of critical literacy laid out by Lewison et al. (2002) are connected to the CCSS language arts-related practices of questioning text, analyzing language, and engaging in close reading.

### **Questioning Text**

Critically literate readers are actively involved in the reading process through questioning, examining, and disputing power relations that are present between the author and the reader (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2010). Engaging readers through the use of a critical literacy lens not only helps students disrupt the commonplace or interrogate multiple viewpoints, it also helps them pay close attention to texts.

One of the highest priorities of CCSS is for students to read texts closely and learn from them (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). Using high-quality text-dependent questions is a key tool in helping students achieve this goal. The *Revised Publishers' Criteria* state that “high-quality text-dependent questions will often move beyond what is directly stated to require students to make non-trivial inferences based on evidence in the text. Questions aligned with Common Core State Standards should demand attention to the text to answer fully” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). As Papola (2013) points out, however, “these questions need not be only literal comprehension questions to be considered ‘text dependent’” (p. 28).

For teachers interested in helping students use a critical literacy lens, the practice of problem posing is a great first step. Problem posing, a key critical literacy strategy (Freire & Macedo, 1987), consists of questioning a text in order to critically analyze it. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) offer the following suggestions for problem-posing questions: *Who is in the text/picture/situation? Who is missing? Whose voices are represented? Whose voices are marginalized or discounted? What are the intentions of the author? What does the author want the reader to think? What action might the reader take based on what is learned from the text?* Using questions such as these with *Each Kindness* (Woodson, 2012), a picture book in which Chloe learns about the impact kindness can have in the world, but only after the new girl Maya moves away, helps students not only disrupt the commonplace and consider multiple perspectives but also answer text-dependent questions. After all, students must have a deep understanding of the text in order to answer these types of questions (Papola, 2013).

After students become familiar with the types of questions involved in problem posing, teachers might want to introduce students to “radio call-in.” Allowing teams or small groups of students to plan the questions they want to ask, the “radio talk show host” encourages students to ask and answer their own text-dependent questions while still encouraging them to question and examine texts from a critical lens.

Questioning the text at the literal and inferential level is often a regular part of literacy instruction for students in all grades as well as across content areas. Including questions that promote critical literacy can be a natural way to begin using this lens in the classroom. Teachers can begin by asking themselves to which types of questions they typically give attention in the classroom and how they can extend this practice to include questioning that leads readers to uncover power relations leading to social change.

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## Analyzing Language

Critically literate readers and writers recognize that authors are very purposeful when selecting the words they use in texts and that these words have an overall viewpoint or position (Lewison et al., 2015). A major underlying principle of critical literacy is the idea that no text is neutral (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and that all authors position readers to think or feel a certain way about a topic. Students can go beyond the meaning of words to consider how language shapes one's identity and how it can be used to maintain or disrupt the status quo (Gee, 2012). When students learn to question the reasons why certain language is used in text and the messages certain words convey, they can begin to investigate language that perpetuates stereotypes and increases prejudice (Gainer, 2010).

The third CCSS Anchor Standard for Language states, "Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening" (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010). This standard connects the study of language and words to the principles of critical literacy by asking students to think closely about the author's purposeful selection of language in a text. It also connects to the idea that language is heavily shaped by social or cultural factors and varies in meaning based on the context (Gee, 2012).

By using the critical literacy principle of interrogating multiple perspectives, students can learn to recognize how language attempts to manipulate them and shape their beliefs as well as how texts are not neutral. One classroom activity to help students recognize that no text is neutral is to use advertisements, political campaigns, and other texts with a deliberate bias in lessons. Teachers can help students recognize the images and vocabulary used to strongly position them to feel a certain way about the topic. For example, there is an advertisement for a soft

drink brand that simply contains the name of the product in red, white, and blue. Students can consider the vocabulary and language this text elicits such as *patriotic* or *loyal*. They can discuss how they are positioned to think about the product—for instance, if they do not buy this particular soft drink, does it mean they do not love their country? For another activity, students can locate advertisements that perpetuate stereotypes and write counternarratives to disrupt the status quo. There are many print ads that maintain and disrupt gender stereotypes, particularly with toys for boys and girls. Creating counternarratives that show other perspectives on the same topic can help students understand that, as writers, they also construct non-neutral texts that attempt to position their readers.

Teachers can incorporate critical language study into their reading instruction in many other ways. One activity that most literacy teachers already do in the classroom is character analysis. Students can analyze the words authors use to describe characters and how that word choice impacts the way the reader thinks about the character. For example, if an author is describing a character as *cheap* instead of *frugal* or *strong-willed* instead of *stubborn*, the reader may form a certain opinion of that character. The reader is positioned to think of that character in a more negative light rather than as someone with a sharp economic sense or an independent spirit. In Janet Steven's *Tops and Bottoms* (1995), the hare is described early in the text as being "clever." The hare goes on to trick the bear into letting him plant crops on the bear's land, with the hare retaining the parts of the crops that are edible, leaving the bear with worthless tassels and roots. After a reading of this text, students can discuss the word *clever* to describe the hare and then debate whether they believe this is a positive attribute or if they think other words like *tricky*, *deceptive*, or even *unfair* are better descriptors of the hare. They can also discuss if they think the author positioned them to

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be in favor of the hare's actions because he was described as being "clever." This same activity can be used with any text and across different content areas.

Critical literacy practices allow individuals to analyze vocabulary and language in text at a deeper level, enabling them to recognize how language positions them to think and feel a certain way. By making the slightest changes to the way vocabulary lessons are approached, teachers can meet the expectations of standards while also pushing students to use a critical literacy lens to examine language in all of the texts they encounter.

### ***Close Reading***

Despite the increased focus on close reading, it is not a new part of literacy instruction. It has existed for decades as both an instructional approach and a desired outcome for readers of all ages. Close reading can be defined as a deliberate and careful rereading of texts that ask students to go beyond what the text says explicitly and analyze what the text means at a deeper level (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Shanahan, 2013). This process can, and should, occur with complex and worthy texts across content areas. Students do not typically engage in this process without explicit guidance (Frey & Fisher, 2013). When teachers engage students in this process of careful reading through the use of a critical literacy lens, students become analytical, critical consumers of text, looking for sociocultural factors that shape them as readers and considering power relations within a text (Papola, 2013).

While close reading is not explicitly referenced in the CCSS, the *Revised Publishers' Criteria* (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012) connected to the CCSS makes numerous suggestions for teachers to engage students in close reading of texts. Several of the Anchor Standards for Reading in the CCSS (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010) relate to close reading of a text, ranging from analyzing development of theme (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.

CCRA.R.2), analyzing how events and individuals develop and interact throughout the text (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3), or examining how point of view shapes a text (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6). All of these standards can be met through the questions that promote critical literacy and use of a critical lens during a careful, close reading of the text.

In the classroom, critical literacy can be used in many ways to help students become close readers of text. Incorporating the tenet of viewing texts from multiple perspectives is a nonthreatening way to transition into the use of critical literacy, and this fits well with close reading. When students read a text, they can consider whose voice is included and whose is missing from the story. Teachers can ask students how the text would change if told from another perspective and what language would need to be altered. Additionally, having a text set that includes different viewpoints on the same topic, or a collection of current events articles that show different sides to a story, can help students analyze text for perspective.

Teachers can also focus on sociopolitical issues and social action as a way to approach close reading of texts. Lewison et al. (2002) worked with elementary classroom teachers who were just starting out using critical literacy in their classrooms. One teacher in their study noticed an increase in engagement and interest among her students when they included texts that focused on sociopolitical issues that were relevant to students' lives. Analyzing texts for the sociopolitical issues that are inherent within those texts can only be done through careful close reading. One example is the text *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts (2007). In this picture book, Jeremy desperately wants a pair of the popular shoes that many of his classmates wear, but he cannot afford them. His grandmother saves her money to buy him new boots, which he truly needs. After purchasing a used pair of "those shoes" at a thrift shop that end up being too small, Jeremy begins to rethink the idea of

wants and needs, learning about the value of his grandmother's love and the opportunity to show kindness to a friend. Readers are able to discuss the voices that are heard and those that are missing, as well as talk about issues such as poverty, social class, wants versus needs, and generosity. Close reading of this text is necessary to go beyond the surface level of the story and to dig deeper into issues that may be very relevant to students' lives, resulting in rich, meaningful conversations that lead to questions about social justice.

According to Frey and Fisher (2013), "A key purpose of close reading is to encourage students to examine in detail what the text has to say" (p. 13). The description of this activity can take many forms, ranging from rereading a text multiple times to responding to a series of questions about a passage. However, by utilizing a critical literacy approach, students are able to read closely while also considering the sociopolitical issues involved in a text and how the author's perspective positions them, enabling them to become empowered readers ready to enact social change for themselves and society.

## Conclusion

Getting started with critical literacy in the classroom does not need to be intimidating or daunting for teachers. By understanding the basic underlying principles, teachers can begin to pull in the practices of critical literacy through questioning, language analysis, and close reading of text as a natural extension of what they already do. Teachers who recognize the importance of this aspect of literacy help their students not only meet the expectations of the Common Core but push them further to become informed and empowered readers who are able to take action for the betterment of themselves and society.

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