

The Case for Critical English Education

by Joan F. Mitchell

I believed that I was advocating for them. I thought my kindness and encouragement would be the key to their motivation and redemption in this place that represented years of failure and humiliation. Their skin color and socioeconomic status might have been the complete opposite of mine, but I believed that compassion was the balm that would smooth over these differences. If someone had asked me why my class was important in their lives, I would have heartily replied that it would prepare them to succeed in the outside world. And I would have believed every word of it. I was a first year teacher, and I was going to change their lives forever.

Never mind the fact that I continued to try and squeeze a “square” pre-planned curriculum filled with novels by British white males and isolated grammar lessons into the “round” hole of the harsh reality of their daily lives. Never mind the fact that I tried to teach them “Standard English” as if that was the Holy Grail for their future success and their “home language” was unacceptable. Never mind the fact that my insecurity about classroom management drove me to make sure that every lesson remained mostly teacher-centered because these kids were too rowdy to handle any responsibility for their own learning. I thought my class was “democratic” because I respected each student as an individual, and I assumed that the communication skills that I would teach them would be the key to their liberation. I never realized that, despite my good intentions, I was participating in their oppression.

What is Critical English Education?

Critical English Education is rooted in the assumptions of critical pedagogy (Freire, 2003; Gee, 1996; hooks, 1994, 2003) which presents education as a tool for liberation that is fraught with negotiations of power and authority. Rather than accepting the status quo of traditional schooling, advocates of critical pedagogy

recognize that this approach positions the teacher as the authority who makes all of the decisions in the class, controls the selection of material as well as how it will be taught, and manages the classroom dynamics. The students, then, become passive recipients of knowledge and classroom processes who are powerless to make decisions about their own learning (Freire, 2003). We accept this structure because “that’s the way it’s always been done” and we believe that students are not capable of handling responsibility for what they learn or the ways that they learn. By not questioning the status quo, according to hooks (2003), we “unwittingly collude with structures of domination” (p. 45).



While we do not intend to act as “oppressors” in our classrooms, we do so until we recognize our students as individuals with rich experiences, innovative ideas, and tremendous potential to shape the world around them. If we can empower them, our classrooms (and their lives) can be transformed. The key to this transformation in the English classroom is the critical literacy model that progresses through three phases of *deconstruction* (breaking down ideas and texts to reveal the power structures beneath them), *reconstruction* (rebuilding the identities of individuals who have been marginalized by these power structures), and *social action* (using this new critical awareness to do something about a social issue) (Jones, 2006). However, before we can guide our students through this crucial process, we must go through it ourselves. (continued on page 2)

Figure 1: Did I Really Say That?

CDA as a Tool for Transforming Pedagogy

We would all like to believe that what we say to students in the classroom is balanced, thoughtful, and respectful of their diverse perspectives and understandings. We also hope that our instructions are clear, our questions are open-ended, and our wait-time is substantial. But how do we know?

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a technique by which teachers can record a segment of classroom discussion and analyze it to uncover ways that our language may not be as “neutral” as we believe as well as patterns of instruction that may be inconsistent with what we *think* is happening in the classroom.

- Record a segment of at least 20-30 minutes of classroom discussion.
- Transcribe that recording and make decisions about what is important to include along with the words themselves (e.g. significant pauses, interruptions, tone, etc.). Create a “key” for the symbols you will use to suggest those additional details.
- Read the transcription over once looking for patterns or instances that seem significant or surprising.
- Then decide what you are most interested in that will improve your teaching (i.e. the way you respond to student questions, how you respond to student conflict, the amount of wait-time you give after asking a question, etc.)
- Go back through and look specifically for those instances in the transcript. You can repeat this process with other focus points as well.
- Draw conclusions about those particular aspects of your classroom discussion and determine how you will adapt your instruction as a result of what you have learned.

Deconstruction: *Language Instruction is Never Neutral*

While the word “deconstruction” connotes tearing down and destroying, the process itself is more like turning a light on in a dark room. As English teachers, our livelihood is the written and spoken word. We love language – finding just the right adjective to express our emotions or listening to the play of words as they bounce off of one another in a great poem. Language is our currency, and we recognize its power to express, inform, or persuade. What we don’t often recognize is its subtle ability to exclude, demean, or marginalize our students. I am not talking about the overt insults of their peers or the hurtful comments of their parents, but the way that we teach language in schools. Language is never neutral but always burdened by the power dynamics inherent in its social, cultural, political and economic contexts (Behrman, 2006; Morrell, 2008; Rogers, 2004). So when we are teaching “Standard English” to our students, we must recognize that for some students, this form of English is natural and constantly practiced at home, while for others both the language and the method of learning it is foreign to them (Baker, 2002; Gee, 1987; Heath, 1994). Therefore, the way we teach language usage can never be neutral because it will always benefit some groups of students more than others (Powell et al, 2001). [See Figure 1 for a method to analyze your own discourse and that of your students in the classroom.] Imagine what a student feels each day when he is told that the way he speaks, the way his parents speak is “wrong,” and this is the “right” way. To make matters worse, many of his peers already seem to use this “correct” language and breeze through lessons, and he is left to feel stupid and incapable.

Reconstruction: *Placing Students Back in the Center of the Curriculum*

In this scenario, the student has not failed us, but we have failed him. Our lack of awareness about his home language, our staunch belief in “proper English,” our praise of mainstream students who speak it so clearly – all of these actions disempower him. During the reconstruction phase, critical literacy educators attempt to reverse these unwitting mistakes by rebuilding these students’ identities and placing their lives at the center of each lesson (Clarke, 2005). The first step is to recognize and value the “funds of knowledge” that each student brings to the classroom from his or her home and community (Moll et al, 1992). Students possess a wealth of cultural knowledge that they have developed over many years, and we often ask them to check it at the classroom door. Tapping into these inherent understandings and skills can empower students to value what they already know and use it as a springboard for new knowledge and skills (Lee, 1995). For instance, Judith Baker encouraged her students to be “trilingual” so that they would have a command of “home” English (learned from their parents/peers), “formal” English (learned in school), and “professional” English (learned in a particular profession) (Baker, 2002). By removing the labels of “correct” and “incorrect” English from her classroom, students were empowered to appreciate their own

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Social Action: *Critical Literacy with Feet*

If we are engaging in critical literacy with our students, social action can take a variety of forms from inquiry projects about what to improve in the school environment to community projects to examine a social problem and work toward its solution. For our current purposes, it seems appropriate that our personal “social action projects” would involve taking steps to make our classrooms as democratic and liberating for our students as possible. If we can learn to recognize our power and then make a conscious choice to share it with our students, allowing them to co-construct the course with our guidance, then we are on the right track (Shor, 1996). One of the roadblocks to this co-constructed curriculum is the tenacity with which so many teachers guard a curriculum that has worked for them for many years. The question is, is it working for your students? Seemingly neutral processes such as the texts we



choose and the ways we teach them belie hidden agendas that we are not even aware of. For instance, one research study revealed a classroom in which the teacher taught *The Diary of Anne Frank* purely as a story of redemption while glossing over the atrocities of the Holocaust and the horrific death of the protagonist. This “Americanized,” optimistic approach to the text may have been more enjoyable, but it was certainly not accurate to the text itself or the atrocity of the Holocaust (Spector & Jones, 2007). In this case, the text served the teacher’s agenda, but it blunted the students’ awareness of the gravity of the Holocaust. Are we making students critical consumers of the texts that they encounter in our classes and the world that surrounds them, or are we merely promoting a “curriculum of ignorance” in which our students become passive recipients of others’ knowledge (Bigelow, 2005, p. 48)? The power is in our hands, but are we willing to share it? [See Figure 2 for Critical Literacy strategies for your students.]

Final Thoughts

If I could go back to that first 3rd hour class, I would change just about everything that I did. Although I did truly care for them, my teaching decisions did not reveal it, and I became just another teacher trying to fill their heads with knowledge that seemed irrelevant to their lives. How can I blame them? I didn’t recognize that I was misusing my power by removing their agency as individuals. I assumed that the language lessons that I was teaching them were neutral because I bought into the notion that “everyone agreed” that “Standard English” was the “correct” way to speak. I made assumptions about their home lives, but I didn’t assume that the skills they learned there were valuable in my classroom. Ultimately, I allowed them to be passive learners because it was easier for me to manage their behavior. I wish I had known then what I know now. Those students would have examined language, themselves, and the world around them with a critical eye, and they would have been empowered to act as both learners and citizens. As a first year teacher, I thought I was going to change the world, and now I realize that I missed the point altogether. The power to change the world lies with my students, and my job is to make sure they know it.

Figure 2:

Critical Literacy Classroom Strategies

Classroom Strategy [Adapted from Behrman, E.H. (2006)]	Advantage Over Traditional Instruction [Adapted from Behrman, E.H. (2006)]	Examples
Read supplemental texts	Traditional texts do not always encourage students to confront social issues.	Young adult novels such as <i>Stargirl</i> (Spinelli, 2000), <i>Bliester</i> (Shreve, 2003), and <i>How I Survived Being a Girl</i> (Van Draanen, 1997) focus on issues of gender and individuality. Reading <i>Nickeled and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America</i> during a unit on the American Dream
Read multiple texts	By reading a variety of texts on the same topic, students recognize that there is not one “true” perspective, merely one author’s portrayal.	During a study of <i>The Diary of Anne Frank</i> , allow students to examine multiple versions of the diary, the 1956 Goodrich & Hackett play, and historical documents related to the Holocaust (Spector & Jones, 2007). Read <i>Things Fall Apart</i> by Chinua Achebe, <i>The Heart of Darkness</i> by Joseph Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden” to compare perspectives of European Imperialism in Africa.
Read (or view media) from a resistant perspective	By reading a text from a variety of perspectives, students begin to see how the identity of the reader impacts interpretation. They are also encouraged to analyze the potential motives or ideologies that contributed to the writing of the piece.	Question an advertisement aimed at children in the newspaper or on television asking how it targets its audience and what stereotypes it conveys (Jones, 2006). Examine the dialogue in a “classic” such as <i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> from a Black Feminist perspective (Bloome et al., 2008). Read five versions of “Little Red Riding Hood” and answer the question: Whose values are being promoted in these different versions? (Behrman, 2006). Examine teen magazines to determine how they promote gender stereotypes (Clarke, 2005).
Produce counter-texts	When students create texts from a nonmainstream perspective, they have the opportunity to voice their own views or those of other under-represented groups.	Rewrite mainstream texts (such as <i>The Great Gatsby</i>) from multiple perspectives (e.g. Myrtle, Tom, etc.) (Jones, 2006). Rewrite the courtroom scene from <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> from the perspective of Tom Robinson. Write a letter to the framers of the Declaration of Independence from the perspective of a slave.
Conduct student-choice research projects	By allowing students to choose topics that have personal significance to their own lives, they are empowered to believe that the “stuff” of their everyday lives is valuable.	Ask students to take pictures of their school focusing the lens on what they like about it and what they would like to change (Jones, 2006). Students choose an issue that matters to them such as issues of access for young people in political venues and conduct critical research to study the problem (Morrell, 2008).
Take social action	Building upon the student-choice research projects, social action allows students to take what they have learned beyond classroom walls in order to impact the outside world.	Launch a schoolwide campaign to fight stereotyping (Jones, 2006). Students write letters to legislators, raise funds, and contact media in order to protect a part of their community from commercial development (Powell et al, 2001).

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