Developing Critical Literacy: A Priority for the 21st Century

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Why is critical literacy important?

I was recently working with a class of 11-12 year olds on a history project about the Second World War. Among various investigations that we pursued, one group was set the task of gathering information about the Holocaust. As well as collecting suitable books from the class and school libraries, they also spent some time on the Internet-connected computer in the school library. The texts they brought back included the following three paragraphs of a much longer document:

A short introduction to the study of Holocaust revisionism
Arthur R. Butz

I see three principal reasons for the widespread but erroneous belief in the legend of millions of Jews killed by the Germans during World War II: US and British troops found horrible piles of corpses in the west German camps they captured in 1945 (e.g. Dachau and Belsen), there are no longer large communities of Jews in Poland, and historians generally support the legend.

During both world wars Germany was forced to fight typhus, carried by lice in the constant traffic with the east. That is why all accounts of entry into the German concentration camps speak of shaving of hair and showering and other delousing procedures, such as treatment of quarters with the pesticide Zyklon. That was also the main reason for a high death rate in the camps, and the crematoria that existed in all.

When Germany collapsed in chaos then of course all such defenses ceased, and typhus and other diseases became rampant in the camps, which quartered mainly political prisoners, ordinary criminals, homosexuals, conscientious objectors, and Jews conscripted for labor. Hence the horrible scenes, which however had nothing to do with “extermination” or any deliberate policy. Moreover the west German camps involved were not the alleged “extermination camps”, which were all in Poland (e.g. Auschwitz and Treblinka) and which were all evacuated or shut down before capture by the Soviets, who found no such scenes.

This text was simply added to the collection, from which members of the class later worked on extracting and summarising information. It was not until I sat with the group and we did a careful shared reading of this text that they noticed it was radically at odds with the other texts they had collected on this subject.

I should point out that this group were all operating at average or above average levels in their literacy. They were all very able to discuss texts in terms of structural features, to explain different uses of connective words and phrases within texts, to talk knowledgeably about tense, active and passive sentences, and vocabulary choice. But this ability had only taken
them so far. When faced with texts like this, they needed to be able to ask critical questions such as: ‘What is the evidence for the claims this text makes?’; ‘What is the author trying to convince me of?’; ‘How do I know whether to believe this or not?’.

Asking questions such as these involves the operation of critical literacy. We are all – adults and children alike – constantly bombarded with text which tries, sometimes blatantly and sometimes extraordinarily subtly, to persuade us to a certain viewpoint or action. Fully literate people are aware of such persuasion and know how, or whether, to resist it. Critical literacy is a crucial skill for surviving in the information-dense twenty first century.

What is critical literacy?

Of course, critical literacy is not an entirely new concept. Rather like a chameleon, it changes from context to context and is known in different parts of the world by terms such as critical language awareness, critical social literacy, critically-aware literacy. Nevertheless, some common threads run through the different approaches and serve a useful starting point for discussion.

Firstly, critical literacy rests on an assumption that language education can make a difference in children’s lives. Being literate in a ‘basic’ sense is not enough. Teachers who value critical literacy will thus tend to have a stake in social change and will encourage their pupils to investigate, question and even challenge relationships between language and social practices that advantage some social groups over others.

Secondly, critical literacy approaches assume that the meanings of words and texts (which can be verbal, digital, printed, moving or pictorial) cannot be separated from the cultural and social practices in which - and by which - they are constructed. The way that we use language to read, write, view, speak and listen is never neutral or value-free. Even activities as seemingly benign as reading a picture book to young children are culturally and politically complex. We select texts we deem to be appropriate, which then become naturalised as ‘the way things are, or ought to be’, potentially excluding children who belong to and identify with different cultures.

Thirdly, critical literacy is about analysis and evaluation. Ira Shor (1992), for example, offers the following definition:

analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context.

Fourthly, notions of social awareness and active citizenship run through most of the writing about critical literacy. Chris Searle (1998), for example, discusses developing what he calls ‘imaginative empathy’. He uses a range of texts to encourage pupils to imagine themselves in the lives of others and to write poetry and prose from these different viewpoints. The outcomes include books of professionally produced poetry which challenge the racial and class tensions that characterise their schools and communities. Seen this way, critical literacy
is about transforming taken-for-granted social and language practices or assumptions for the good of as many people as possible.

There are a number of approaches and strategies which can be used to develop critical literacy with primary and secondary pupils, including textual analysis, text clustering, the use of texts for social action and critical writing.

Textual analysis

Here is an extract from History can be fun by Munro Leaf, a book I found on the library shelf of a Warwickshire primary school. First published in 1950 (in the US), the 1976 British edition is very attractively illustrated and appealingly presented.

… now that you’ve read this far you’ll know what generally happened as soon as a new country was discovered. Two things, first, other nations came along and tried to get a share, second, the native people, like the Indians and ‘red’ Indians, found themselves being ruled by white men. With Australia and New Zealand things were better. No other European nation tried to take them, and in Australia there were only a very few black people so that colonists did not have to lead armies against them. In New Zealand there were splendid native people called Maoris and they fought against the British at first. But now the Maoris and the settlers who have come from Britain live peacefully side by side and there are Maori members of the New Zealand Parliament.

Passages like this are not uncommon in school history books, especially those written before the 1970s, and can be a useful source of textual analysis practice for primary pupils.

Key points in this text to draw to pupils’ attention are:

- The suggestion that countries were unknown before Europeans set foot there: “… as soon as a new country was discovered …”.
- The way the text provides the opinions or viewpoint of one group only: “With Australia and New Zealand things were better.” Better for whom?
- The way it minimises the damage and distress caused by colonisation to indigenous peoples: “…the Indians and ‘red’ Indians found themselves being ruled by white men.” “But now the Maoris and the settlers… live peacefully side by side…”

This sort of textual analysis can be guided by asking the pupils to make their way systematically through a list of questions such as the following:

- What is the subject or topic of this text?
- Why might the author have written it?
- Who is it written for? How do you know?
- What values does the author assume the reader holds? How do you know?
- What knowledge does the reader need to bring to the text in order to understand it?
- Who would feel ‘left out’ in this text and why? Who would feel that the claims made in the text clash with their own values, beliefs or experiences?
• How is the reader ‘positioned’ in relation to the author (e.g. as a friend, as an opponent, as someone who needs to be persuaded, as invisible, as someone who agrees with the author’s views)?

Another approach to analysing texts is to use a checklist such as CARS (Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, Support), which was originally developed for use in evaluating web sites. In learning to apply the CARS criteria, pupils will significantly sharpen their critical faculties when engaging with textual information.

**Credibility**

Evidence of authenticity and reliability is very important. If we read a newspaper article saying that the area where we live will experience major flooding in the next few weeks, we need to know whether or not to believe the information. Some questions to ask would include: what makes this text believable (or not)? And how does the author know this information?

Tests that help the reader judge the credibility of a text include:

• **The author's credentials:** look for biographical details on their education, training, and/or experience in an area relevant to the information. Do they provide contact information (email or postal address, phone number)? What do you know about the author's reputation or previous publications?

• **Quality control:** information texts should pass through a review process, where several readers examine and approve the content before it is published. Statements issued in the name of an organisation have almost always been seen and approved by several people.

By the same token, you can sometimes tell by the tone, style, or competence of the writing whether or not the information is suspect. Anonymity, bad grammar or misspelled words suggest carelessness or ignorance, neither of which puts the writer in a favourable light.

**Accuracy**

Information needs to be up to date, factual, detailed, exact, and comprehensive. For example, even though a very credible writer said something that was correct twenty years ago, it may not be correct today. Similarly, a reputable text might be giving up-to-date but incomplete information. Things to bear in mind when judging accuracy include:

• **Timeliness.** Some texts, like classic novels and stories, are timeless; others, like texts about computers, have a limited useful life because of rapid advances in knowledge. We must therefore be careful to note when information was created, before deciding whether it is still of value.

• **Comprehensiveness.** It is not always possible to give a comprehensive picture: nobody can read every single thing on a subject. It is always a good idea to consult more than one text.
Indicators that a text is inaccurate, either in whole or in part include the absence of a date or an old date on information known to change rapidly; vague or sweeping generalisations; and the failure to acknowledge opposing views.

**Reasonableness**

Reasonableness involves examining the information for fairness, objectivity and moderateness.

- **Fairness** requires the writer to offer a balanced argument, and to consider claims made by people with opposing views. A good information text will have a calm, reasoned tone, arguing or presenting material thoughtfully.
- Like comprehensiveness, **objectivity** is difficult to achieve. Good writers, however, try to minimize bias.
- **Moderateness**. If a text makes a claim that is surprising or hard to believe, the reader needs more evidence than might be required for a lesser claim. Is the information believable? Does it make sense?

Some clues to a lack of reasonableness are: intemperate language (“these stupid people”, “those who believe differently are obviously deranged”); exaggerated claims (“Thousands of children are murdered every day in the United Kingdom”); sweeping statements (“This is the most important idea ever suggested!”); and conflicts of interest (“Welcome to the United Tobacco Company Home Page. To read our report, ‘Cigarettes Make You Live Longer’, click here”).

**Support**

Support for the writer’s argument from other sources strengthens their credibility. It can take various forms:

- **Bibliography and references.** What texts did the author use? Are these listed? It is especially important for figures to be documented. Otherwise, the author might just be making up the numbers.
- **Corroboration.** It is a good idea to triangulate information, that is to find at least three texts that agree. If other texts do not agree, further research into the range of opinion or disagreement is needed. Readers should be careful when statistics are presented without identifying the source or when they cannot find any other texts that present or acknowledge the same information.

**Text clustering**

Text clustering involves confronting pupils with texts which obviously contradict each other. The task is to use whatever evidence they can find to try to make judgements about where the truth actually lies. Sometimes these judgements are relatively easy. Some 9-10 year olds, for instance, were recently investigating the planets and found the following conflicting information about Saturn.

1. **Four new moons found circling Saturn**
   **By BBC News Online science editor Dr David Whitehouse**
   Saturn has become the planet with the greatest number of known moons, 22, following the discovery of four new satellites around it.
The four, faint bodies were detected during the past few months by several telescopes around the world. Further studies in the next few months will establish the satellites’ precise orbits around the ringed planet.  
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/992494.stm) (page dated Thursday, 26 October, 2000)

2. New moons discovered around Saturn
Astronomers have discovered 12 new moons around Saturn, bringing the planet’s tally to 30 - the largest satellite family in the Solar System. The new moons are small, measuring between six and 30 kilometres in diameter, and move in irregular, tilted orbits. They fall into several clusters, leading scientists to conclude that they are the remnants of larger moons fragmented by collisions. The moons probably began life as wandering bodies that were captured by Saturn’s gravity. French astronomer Brett Gladman, from the Observatoire de la Cote d’Azur, and colleagues found the moons by scanning Saturn with sophisticated electronic detectors mounted on Earth-based telescopes. Their findings were reported today in the journal Nature.  

The children were puzzled about how many moons Saturn actually has, and how to reconcile this conflicting information about when these moons were discovered. Further investigation revealed a third text.

3. Satellites orbiting Saturn (date discovered in brackets)
Pan (1990); Atlas (1980); Prometheus (1980); Janus (1966); Enceladus (1789); Tethys (1684); Telesto (1980); Pandora (1980); Epimetheus (1966); Mimas (1789); Calypso (1980); Dione (1684); Helene (1980); Rhea (1672); Titan (1655); Hyperion (1848); Iapetus (1671); Phoebe (1898).  

The pupils’ conclusion (with teacher help) was that the number of moons thought to orbit Saturn depended upon the date that the moons had been discovered. Therefore, it was important to pay particular attention when the text had been written.

Other sources of material for text clustering activities include newspaper reports, everyday texts and fairy stories.

Newspaper reports

Collect reports of a current event from four or five newspapers, making sure you include a range of tabloids and broadsheets. Use extracts for shared reading. As you read, demonstrate to the class the kinds of questions you might ask yourself to judge the credibility and accuracy of each report. Ask groups of pupils to compare pairs of reports and to list the questions they have about items which might seem to conflict. Bring the class together to discuss what they have found. Draw their attention to (among other things):
Selective quotes. Newspaper reporters will all get their original information from the same speech by a person involved in the event, or the same press release. Why do they often use quotes slightly differently or not at all?

Descriptors. Look at the use of adjectives and adverbs in reports. What impression does the newspaper want to create and why?

Order. Newspaper editors know that the average reader only ever reads the first couple of paragraphs of any report. What information do they choose to go in these first paragraphs, and which is left until later? Why might they plan things in this way?

Everyday texts

Ask pupils to collect examples of advertisement, brochures and leaflets for the purpose of comparison. Get the pupils to look carefully at how different texts which, on the face of it, are doing similar jobs, are written and structured differently.

As an example of this kind of activity, look at the 3 texts given below, each of which was found in a hotel bathroom.

1. Help Us to Help Our Environment

Environmental care is often a matter of taking little steps which reduce the demands on the earth’s natural resources. Help us to do this by kindly considering using the bathroom towels a second time.

Place your towels on the towel rail to USE, THEM AGAIN
Place your towels in the bath or shower to CHANGE THEM.

2. In the interests of the environment

Imagine just how many towels are unnecessarily washed each day in all the hotels throughout the world. The truckloads of washing powder used, the reservoirs of water needed and the energy consumed to wash and dry them.

TOWELS PLACED IN THE BATH/SHOWER MEANS PLEASE EXCHANGE TOWELS REPLACED ON THE TOWEL RAIL MEANS I WILL USE AGAIN

Thank you for your co-operation

3. Help us to help our environment

In an effort to exercise the dual responsibility to both you and to the environment Menzies Hotels has introduced a fully ecological bathroom policy.

TOILETRIES
The "Press and Wash System" installed in your bathroom provides products of the highest quality. All products are dermatologically tested, kind to the skin, packaged in recyclable, biodegradable plastic and are not tested on animals.

TOWELLING
To help us reduce the use of laundry chemicals and save precious energy, placing used towels on the bathroom floor will indicate that you wish to be provided with clean linen. Used towels placed on the rack will not be changed.

Questions to ask about these texts include:

- Two of the texts talk about ‘our environment’, and one says ‘the environment’. What difference does this make to the way the reader responds?
- Two texts ask for the reader’s help: ‘Help us to help our environment’. One text simply tells us what to do. Again, what effect does this have on the reader?
- Notice the use of ‘by kindly considering using these bathroom towels a second time’ in the first text. This is a very gentle way of asking readers to do something. Compare it with the more direct language of the other two texts.
- Why does the third text only mention towels after it has told the reader what the hotel has done to help the environment?
- Notice that none of these notices mentions the fact that the less washing the hotel has to do, the smaller its laundry bill will be.

Fairy stories

Younger children will enjoy comparing different versions of well known fairy stories and discussing how these make them feel. One class of 6 year olds were read a version of the story (taken from Andrew Lang’s Blue Fairy Book, first published in 1899) which ends with both Red Riding Hood and the grandmother being eaten by the wolf. This caused great discussion as the children compared other versions that they knew. One little boy spent a good ten minutes trying to find what he insisted must be a page missing from the story (the bit where the woodcutter comes to rescue Red Riding Hood) and was only persuaded that there was no missing page by looking at the page numbers in the book. Such an activity is a good example of critical literacy as it focuses children’s minds on the fact that stories are constructed, from a number of possible alternatives, by an author.

Texts for social action

The importance of authentic literacy experiences for children’s literacy development is well established. When pupils are given opportunities to engage in purposeful and ‘urgent’ reading and writing, they begin to see the point of learning and practicing the skills of literacy. Yet it has always been extremely difficult to provide many pupils with experiences of this kind. For example, the accepted wisdom is that providing pupils with real audiences will improve their writing skills. Yet even when they are told that the audience is elsewhere, they usually know that the writing will in fact be read and judged only by their teacher.

If we wish our pupils to experience the power of literacy to influence people, then we need at some point to allow them the time and opportunity to use literacy in a socially active way. A good example are the letters sent to many people, including local councillors and the Prime Minister, by children in North Devon following a serious traffic accident outside the school.
Critical writing

Learning to write effectively teaches children to read more effectively. It is thus possible to argue that one of the most important teaching strategies for developing critical reading is to teach persuasive writing explicitly. How can this be done? One approach involves:

1. Providing models of writing and focusing pupils’ attention on how these work
2. Demonstrating writing processes
3. Participating in writing tasks alongside pupils
4. Scaffolding pupils in producing writing.

These steps can be summarised in the acronym IDES: Immersion, Deconstruction, Exemplification, Scaffolding.

**Immersion**

Just as immersion in spoken language is a crucial factor when babies learn to talk, so pupils learning to write persuasively need to be immersed in examples of persuasive writing. We have always tended to surround pupils with texts we perceive to be neutral, simply giving them information rather than trying to persuade them to a particular point of view. There are good reasons for this, of course. Teachers do not want to be accused of trying to influence children through the texts they use, and persuasive texts, by their very nature, can be controversial. However, unless pupils are confronted regularly with such persuasive, and controversial, texts and, crucially, taught to examine these texts critically, they will find it more difficult to resist the texts they regularly encounter outside the classroom.

**Deconstruction**

Of course, pupils do not learn how persuasive texts work and how to resist them simply through exposure. They also need to deconstruct these texts: that is, to explore how they are structured, how their style and choice of words make them persuasive. Shared reading is a very useful tool. By closely examining a text together, a great many textual tricks and techniques can be learnt.

**Exemplification**

Exemplification simply means that the teacher demonstrates how to write persuasive texts and is the essence of shared writing. Remember that the point of shared writing is not so much the pupils watching the teacher write, but hearing the teacher think aloud as he/she explains the processes involved in the composition. Shared writing has four major purposes:

1. It models for children how writers think, making visible the otherwise hidden mental processes that make up writing.
2. It provides a demonstration of how to compose, a process that can seem very mysterious to novice writers.
3. It provides an active demonstration of the full writing process, including:
   - selecting or clarifying the writing task
   - collecting and connecting information
   - gathering ideas and researching
   - planning
   - transcribing, reading and revising
   - doing final editing and proof reading
• getting feedback on what has been written
4. It shows that writing needs to be purposeful and written with readers in mind.

**Scaffolding**

Shared writing should lead to pupils writing independently using similar knowledge and skills to those demonstrated by the teacher. But the jump from teacher demonstration to pupil independence is not usually a rapid or simple one. Especially in writing, learners need support as they begin to work independently, in our case on producing persuasive writing. Such support can take a number of forms.

In **collaborative writing**, where pupils work together, either with or without a teacher, to compose a piece of persuasive writing, hesitant writers are offered a context for extending their skills. Support comes from other writers who may or may not be more expert at the particular writing task.

In **supported writing**, pupils write following a prompt such as a writing frame (Wray & Lewis, 1997) which guides pupils in the structure of a text, and the use of key connective phrases.

**Conclusion**

The main aims of this article have been to suggest that critical literacy is a vital element to teach to pupils in the 21st century, and that there are some practical ways in which this teaching might be achieved.

**References**


