

Critical English Education

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Background

Language is foundational to all learning. Whether it is the medium for the communication of our thoughts or whether it comes from the texts we consume and produce, there is little doubt that we are constructed and we construct ourselves through language. For these reasons and more, the most important participants in our most important institutions are those who teach language at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. It is from the inspiration and genius of these individuals that our citizens, our workers, our social theorists, our artists, or scientists, and our leaders emerge. There is no higher social calling, no work more honorable than teaching critical approaches to the consumption and production of language. It is no accident, either, that English is a core subject required of the 69 million students enrolled in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions in the United States.

Our English teachers, however, face a myriad of challenges that threaten to intervene in the potentially symbiotic relationship between language pedagogy, social consciousness, and individual liberation. The changing nature of literacy, the technocratic demands on the K-16 literacy curricula from an information-based economy, the fragmentation of college English departments, and external constraints imposed by the latest testing regime leave these educators alienated, ambivalent arbiters of a hotly contested and highly ambiguous discipline. At the same time, the proliferation of new literacies; the development of women's studies and cultural studies; and the emergence of semiotics, discourse, and critical literary theories have made the study of language, literacy, and literature as relevant and desirable as ever.

What we need, for the profession, for preservice teacher education, and for the

students in secondary classrooms is an increased emphasis on a *Critical English Education*. A critical English education is explicit about the role of language and literacy in conveying meaning and in promoting or disrupting existing power relations. It also seeks to develop in young women and men skills to deconstruct dominant texts carefully (i.e. canonical literature, media texts) while also instructing them in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice. Further, critical English education encourages practitioners to draw upon the everyday language and literacy practices of adolescents to make connections with academic literacies and to work toward empowered identity development and social transformation.

In my own work, I have endeavored to make these connections. My practice draws upon the fundamental assumptions of new literacy studies, media and cultural studies, and critical theory as I explore language and literacy practices of adolescents in everyday sociocultural contexts. I believe, along with cultural psychologists and activity theorists (Cole, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991), that all people are learners and learn language and literacy as they participate in local, socially-situated cultural practices. As Street (1995) reminds us, though, certain literacy practices have a greater proximity to the dominant ways of reading and representing texts that have been cast as the only ways of being literate. Thus, it is vital to move beyond deficit explanations for the failure of many marginalized populations to develop essential academic literacies, and instead to consider sociological theories about the role schools play in reproducing social inequality (MacLeod, 1987). Those who believe in a critical English education see language and literacy learning as political acts, realize literacy as tied to power relations in society, and recognize literacy educators as political agents capable of developing skills which enable

academic transformation and social change. In my own work, I have examined the inherent logic and intellect of how people are literate in the world as they participate in everyday activity and have explored potential connections between these literate behaviors and the types of literacies promoted in schools.

My work also seeks to develop among urban secondary literacy educators the ability to understand and build upon local, situated literacies to facilitate empowered and empowering ways of decoding existing dominant texts and of producing new texts. I employ theories and methods from ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and the humanities to brainstorm ways to engage marginalized populations so that they can empower themselves through their decoding of old and producing of new texts. In this way, I believe that sociocultural theory can be used not only to investigate non-school literacy practices but also to create learning environments that facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy skills. Finally, I have an explicit interest in academic and critical literacy development being tools within a revolutionary process intended to challenge existing norms and disrupt existing power relations. By academic literacies I mean successful strategies for engaging (reading), producing (writing) and talking about texts across the content areas and levels of education (Harris & Hodges, 1995; Street, 1995; Venezky, Wagner, and Ciliberti, 1990). By critical literacies I mean literacies involving the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations; and promoting individual freedom and expression. While we generally aim for the development of academic literacies in English classrooms, we must remember that these

literacies are neither harmless nor neutral. Acknowledging the ideological, elusive and rapidly shifting nature of academic literacies forces us, as educators and researchers, to also consider the development of critical literacies as central to our work.

Particularly I have worked to make connections between the literacies associated with young people's participation with popular culture and the work in secondary English classrooms (Morrell, 2002a; Morrell, 2004a). What I have tried to advocate in my work is what I call a *pedagogy and praxis of access and dissent*. It remains important for English educators to help facilitate access to academic literacies for populations that have not traditionally been granted this entrée, but it is also important to help members of these populations learn to analyze and deconstruct the dominant institutions (such as schools and the media) that they are forced to confront on a daily basis. In my opinion, it is not contradictory to imagine a pedagogy that seeks to increase access to the very sites of oppression and potential contestation; to imagine literacy education as not only a pathway for professional membership, but one of development for engaged citizenship, positioning adolescents as learners of literacies of power and participants as agents of change.

In this article I briefly outline what a critical English education might entail using the conceptual frames of New Literacy Studies and Media and Cultural studies to frame my own work with urban students and literacy teachers over the past dozen years. I will conclude by considering what it means for English educators and English teachers to position themselves as activists and intellectuals.

New Literacy Studies and English Education

The past twenty years have witnessed the revolution of the sociocultural

framework of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), a sub-field which seeks to expand and challenge the prevailing concepts of literacy that underlie much classroom instruction. Key theorists such as Street (1995) and Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (2000) critique autonomous models of literacy which view reading and writing as technical, neutral processes with cognitive consequences for possessors of literacy and argue instead for the existence of multiple ideological, culturally-informed, socially-situated literacies that are also linked to existing power relations (De Castell & Luke, 1983). Gee (2000) argues that NLS are based on the view that reading and writing only make sense when studied in the context of the social and cultural practices of which they are but a part.

I advocate that English educators borrow from NLS to engage in ethnographies of literacy; that is, investigative work to determine how adolescents are literate as members of various out-of-school cultural communities. Moll (2000) and Barton (2000) have each provided examples where ethnographies of literacy have played a prominent role in the preparation of English educators. NLS opens up spaces for consideration of multiple literacy practices outside of schools as points for connection with academic instruction. In my own work (Morrell, 2004b), for example, I have drawn heavily from NLS in conducting research that investigates the empowering literacies associated with apprenticing youth as critical researchers of the language and literacy practices of urban communities and cultures.

Starting in 1999, I began co-directing a seminar for urban teens in Southern California. The five-week seminar brings together students, teachers, and parents from urban schools and communities to design and carry out critical qualitative and quantitative research projects on issues of immediate concern to these schools and

communities. The students work in groups of four or five on research teams that are led by a teacher in the local schools. Two primary goals are (1) to use the seminar space to help students acquire the literacies and tools they need to function within the academy and (2) to engage teachers, students, and parents as collaborators in community-based praxis-oriented research.

Over the six years of the research project, I have documented the various ways that students have tapped into their own non-school literacies to investigate the language and literacy practices of urban schools and communities. For example, students have investigated the language practices of students of color in urban schools, they have researched the language and literacy practices associated with popular culture, and they have investigated the language mainstream media uses to construct youth of color.

I argue in my work that the students demonstrated powerful academic literacies, both in the process of critical research and in the work products that emanate from the seminar. For example, in a recent seminar, students averaged more than 100 pages of notes each in their composition notebooks. These pages consisted of lecture notes, discussion notes, reading summaries, drafts of research protocols, field notes, interview transcriptions, analytic memos, and preliminary data analyses. These students also produced 1500-word critical memoirs that encouraged them to reflect on their own personal experiences as they related to the research process and to make connections between their changing identities as critical researchers and their plans for the future; three-five minute iMovies that reported some aspect of the groups' research findings; 20-minute PowerPoint presentations that were prepared for an audience of university faculty and public officials; and 30-page collaboratively-written research reports that contained introductions, literature review, a methods section, discussion of findings, and implications for policy, research, and social action (Morrell, in press). These students have also translated this research into presentations and publications at the national peer-review level as well as into changes in practice and policy at the local school level (Morrell, 2004b).

In the summer of 2004, for example, the seminar focused on *Urban Youth, Civic Literacies, Political Participation, and Educational Reform*. Students explored: a) What literacy skills are associated with urban youth civic participation; b) How urban youth can learn to participate in such ways; and c) What *civic literacies* young people now learn in and outside of urban schools. The students talked with youth, educators, community leaders, and elected officials about: a) Issues facing young people in the local community; b) How young people should participate in civic life and what language and literacy skills are needed for such participation. Each team conducted research at a high school site and a community center in a local neighborhood. The teams also developed research tools for examining civic literacy education their schools. These tools included: survey instruments, interview and focus group protocols, and rubrics for examining textbooks and other curricula.

What does this mean for English education? Why these examples? An NLS framework opens spaces for English education practices that include the investigation of language and literacy in cultures and communities. Gee (1999) argues that a central strategy for improving the literacy education of marginalized students entails making these students social theorists of social languages. Similarly, Fairclough (1995) argues that there is an intimate relationship between people's critical language awareness and the development of their own language capabilities and practices. Given that a key component of critical pedagogy is the raising of consciousness (Freire, 1970), a critical English education that forefronts inquiry into the relationships between language, literacy, culture, and power can make students and teachers conscious of the various uses of language and literacy in society while also developing skills needed to facilitate

academic achievement.

Cultural Studies, Media Studies, and English Education

A critical English education also demands an examination of changing literacies in the new media age (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). As new media predominate and transform the nature of our communication and our lives, there must be an explicit focus on media studies and media pedagogy in English education (Durham & Kellner, 2000; Kellner, 1995). English educators can prepare themselves by examining the emergent discourse of media and cultural studies, noting how scholars from Adorno (2001) to Hall, Morley, and Chen (1996) have analyzed film, television, music, and the electronic media. In opening up spaces to consider media literacy pedagogy as media production, we might begin by analyzing, for example, how scholars and pedagogues have worked with high school students with desktop video production and uses of digital rhetoric (Goodman, 2003).

Let me offer some other examples, based in my own work, of how critical English educators might bring media-based youth popular culture into the traditional secondary English curriculum. One approach is to incorporate popular cultural texts with canonical texts. For instance, a colleague and I designed a unit that drew upon students' familiarity with hip-hop music and culture to teach critical approaches to the consumption and production of poetry (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). We found that students gained increased appreciation for classical poetry and role of poetry as social commentary. They also developed of analytic skills and presentation skills. Further, from interviews and observational data we noted increased motivation to participate in classroom activities. Finally, we documented that students produced greater quantity and quality texts across

genres including essays, presentations, and original poetry.

In another study, I drew upon adolescents' familiarity with court trials to teach critical reading strategies (Morrell, 2002b). I found that the students were able to invoke their schemata of court trials to begin interrogating the "evidence" from canonical text to prepare for their roles in the mock trials. Students who had labeled themselves as non-readers were annotating the text heavily in preparation for the trial. Further, in placing authors and texts on trial, students moved from a New Critical approach that assumed the supremacy of the author and the text. They developed the confidence to take a critical stance toward authors they had previously been told were too intelligent and inaccessible for them to understand. No longer did they need a teacher to make sense of the text for them and let them know how close to the "truth" of the text they had gotten, they became empowered within their own interpretations and learned that any text can be read multiple ways.

Using other strategies to investigate young people's relationships to popular culture and the mass media, I was part of projects in which young people investigated the proliferation of youth violence in the popular media and in which the portrayal of urban youth in popular media as criminals and social deviants (Morrell, 2004a). Using a NLS framework for inferring literacy practices from analyzing literacy events (Heath, 1983; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000), I was able to document the relationships between these classroom practices and the demonstration of powerful academic literacies. For example, students acquired the tools and literacies associated with activist research. They read graduate level texts on social theory and research methods and they created an article-length study of youth media that included the analysis of interview and survey data and a content analysis of major newspapers' coverage of urban youth.

Doing this work with secondary students is of great value; equally valuable,

though, is its translation into teacher education programs both at the inservice and preservice teacher levels where teachers can develop the skills and strategies teachers need in order to be successful with these approaches. What I have found is that teachers need opportunities themselves to learn about cultural studies, critical pedagogy, youth culture, and new media literacies. They also need spaces to talk about how to incorporate new and popular literacies into conservative classroom environments and schools. In credential and Master's-level courses, teachers need safe spaces to talk about this work in the language of standards; in course activities, for example, I have asked them to role play how they would justify this necessary work to multiple audiences. Part of the mission of critical English education is not only to develop innovative lessons, but also to help teachers develop language to articulate these non-mainstream approaches of English education in rhetorically powerful ways. A phrase I often use is that preservice and practicing teachers (and researchers as well) need to develop "multiple rhetorics for multiple publics." Rhetorically powerful language may open up spaces for transformational practice where none had existed. In the end, however, we will be limited in our ability to enact a critical English education until English teachers and English educators are positioned as activists and intellectuals.

English Educators as Activists and Intellectuals

A shift toward a critical English education implies a change in curricular content of secondary English classrooms as well as a change in focus of literacy pedagogy, textual consumption, and textual production. All of these proposed changes have reverberations for the preparation of teachers for tomorrow's English classrooms. We must ask ourselves, what kinds of teachers do we want working with the most

marginalized populations? What should count as essential content knowledge for tomorrow's English teachers? How seriously do we take our beliefs about the role of literacy education in promoting individual and social transformations?

It is also important, I argue, to be explicit about the need for English educators to become activists and public intellectuals if we desire to create the spaces for English education that I envision in the preceding pages. The discipline and the profession are under siege from external influences that seek to take us in directions we would not like to go. In order to make room for popular culture and new media literacies, in order to be explicit about literacy education for social justice, in order to demand access to digital technologies, English educators will need to become more explicitly political agents.

Apple (1990) reminds us that there is no neutrality in education, that all teaching is political. As I am advocating for a radical transformation of the discipline and the practice of training English teachers, I am also imagining a time when English educators participate collectively in movements for educational and social justice. This is important for our future existence, but it is also important to model for future English teachers just what it means to act as a public intellectual. I imagine collectives of English educators who take to the streets, who lobby and advocate strongly, who protest, who seek to use the discipline to transform the world. I would join a movement like that and I would argue that many of my colleagues would do the same.

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