

Critical Thinking and Critical Literacy¹

Charles Temple, Ph.D.
Hobart & William Smith Colleges
And
Critical Thinking International
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In the early days of our work around the world in the Reading & Writing for Critical Thinking project (see www.rwctic.org), confusion sometimes arose when we used the word “critical.” In many languages, that word does not have the meaning of “discerning,” “reflective,” “analytical,” or “focused” as we assumed; and were it not for the vigilance of our translators, many RWCT trainers would have left our audiences wondering why we were so excited about *attacking, undermining, or humiliating someone* when we spoke of critical thinking. Now there is another movement gaining ground in educational circles that also has the word “critical” in its title. Critical literacy is an increasingly influential movement with practices that will be welcomed by critical thinking advocates. The origins and aims of the two movements are different, though, so an exercise in disambiguation may be in order.

As a founder and co-director of the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project and author of a good many of its materials I was responsible, along with many others, for interpreting concepts and practices of critical thinking to an enormous group of teachers—perhaps as many as 50,000 of them in 30 countries. I also served-- along with Alan Luke, Jerry Harste, David Pearson, Pat Smith, Jeannie Steele, and others--on the Joint Task Force on Critical Literacy of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. Thus it has been my lot to ponder both critical thinking and critical literacy. I am enthusiastic about both movements.

Certainly the critical literacy movement contains many dimensions that we critical thinking advocates find useful; yet the critical thinking movement

¹ A version of this article appeared in *The Thinking Classroom/Peremena*, VI, 2 (Winter, 2005), pp. 15-20.

promotes many practices and principles that should be maintained, even as we entertain new practices. This article begins with a brief illustration of what we often mean by critical thinking, and then explores what critical literacy is and where it came from. Note that although the proponents of critical thinking don't all espouse the same thing, and the proponents of critical literacy may not wish to see it too tightly defined or its approaches reduced to a methodology, this article will give one example each of how critical thinking and critical literacy can look in classroom practice.

Critical Thinking

There are many, many practices that go under the name of critical thinking. When arguments are made explicitly, we can use practices in argument analysis that have been used for millennia, dating back to Aristotle. The procedures outlined below were adapted from Brown and Keeley (2000; Temple, Lee, and Brophy, 2000; Temple, 2001). They ask students to identify the parts of an argument, hone in on those parts where authors are likely to mislead, think of what is missing from the argument, and, if appropriate, construct a counter-argument and decide which is more forceful.

In order to examine an argument, you may ask—

- ❑ What is the main question posed by this piece?
- ❑ What answer does it offer?
- ❑ What reasons are offered in support of that answer?
- ❑ What evidence is offered in support of each reason?
- ❑ What reasons or facts are left out—things that might have supported different answer to the question?
- ❑ What “facts” are we expected to accept on faith?
- ❑ What **nominal assumptions** are made—that is what labels are used (like “here,” freedom fighter,” or “terrorist”) that carry embedded judgments?

- ❑ What **value assumptions** are made—that is what state of affairs is assumed to be worthwhile?
- ❑ Given all we have considered, does the argument (the reasons, the evidence, the way these are marshaled to support a claim) justify the conclusion?

It may help to go through a written argument and label the parts, as shown below:

Q	What is the question ?
A	What is the answer that is offered?
R	What reasons are offered?
E	What evidence is given?
“F”	What “facts” are we expected to accept on faith?
NA	What nominal assumptions are made?
VA	What value assumptions are made?
M1, M2	What information or arguments are missing ? (Write a number in the margin and write out the missing idea)

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is usually traced to Paolo Freire, the Brazilian lawyer turned educator. Freire developed a revolutionary pedagogy that shared reading and writing with the illiterate peasants who were crowding into the *favelas*, the ramshackle slums thrown up on the garbage dumps around Sao Paolo. His approach began with Socratic conversations to develop his students’ power to use language as an aid to thinking. Only when they could name their problems did he take his students a step away from spoken language toward the written word. Careful to approach the students as equals, Freire used pictures to remind them of a problem in their lives, and through dialogue he led them to examine causes and effects and possibilities for action. The written word was then introduced to anchor the students’ insights. They wrote words for ideas that aroused powerful feelings, and then later as they read their words they could return to those insights,

debate them, and create further insights. In this dialectical manner, Freire's pedagogy could raise his students' consciousness, a process he called by the Portuguese name *conscientização* (Freire, 1970).

Freire was aware, of course, that it is possible to teach without raising consciousness. His urban peasants, fresh from the countryside, thought in patterns that he called *magical consciousness* (Freire, 1974). Although they were often victims of oppression—they may have been forced off the land, and now that they were in the city, they suffered from grinding poverty—they saw themselves as part of nature, if they saw themselves at all, and neither recognized the sources of their distress nor the possibility of acting on the world to change their circumstances. Traditional teaching wouldn't help them much. It would not make them find root causes and possibilities for change, but would rather fill their heads with other people's static ideas. Freire called the effects of this kind of teaching *massification*. Massified students, he said, have the illusion of being educated, of being free, of being able to understand and control their circumstances. But they are not much more conscious or analytical than their illiterate counterparts. Only those whose critical faculties have been nurtured through dialogue about the issues that matter in their lives develop critical consciousness.

Freire's observations of the differences between magical consciousness and critical consciousness sound like political constructs. But they are strikingly similar to the findings of the Soviet psychologist, A. R. Luria (1982). Luria visited villages in rural Uzbekistan in the 1930's and asked a series of interesting but innocuous-sounding questions that explored the villagers' ways of thinking and communicating: how they used words to name things, their ability to reason with syllogisms, their self-reflectiveness, and even their ability to ask questions about ideas that were foreign to them. When he compared the responses of illiterate peasants with those of adults who had had even a few years of education, the differences resembled something like magical consciousness in the former case and something like critical consciousness in the latter case. Literacy, or schooling, or both made a palpable difference in the way Luria's subjects thought about language, about themselves, and about the world.

Freire's pedagogy has traveled far beyond the slums of Brazil. At my own school, Hobart and William Smith Colleges in the United States, Freirean dialogues are popular with many faculty who agree that traditional teacher-centered instruction does not teach students to think for themselves. Many of us share Freire's belief that the first goal of education is to empower students to become questioning and analytical. It doesn't matter that our students are not destitute; they are still beset by assaults on their consciousness in the form of corporate-constructed images of gender, consumption, and class prejudices. Methods worked out by Freire for use with the poorest of the poor can be effective with our students, too.

From the 1960's into the 1980's, Freire's work formed the basis for the revolutionary educational systems of Guinea Bissau in Africa; El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Haiti in Latin America; and elsewhere. By the mid 1980's, though, those educational regimes were being replaced by more conservative ones and Freire's revolutionary pedagogy was abandoned (I once observed this process up close: on a visit to Cuba in the late 1980's, I asked the deputy minister of education if her government had considered Freire's ideas. She said that they had brought Freire to Cuba a few years back—but that now that the Cuban Revolution had been won, they had no further use for him!).

Critical Literacy in Australia

Where Freire's ideas have found the most fertile soil in recent years is in Australia. The Australians have led the world in a movement now called *critical literacy*. Critical literacy is not quite the same as critical thinking. Whereas critical thinking focuses on claims and their support, on interpretations and applications, critical literacy has a more skeptical slant, and something of a political orientation. Critical thinking starts from the assumption that we are often governed by our prejudices, and that language could free us if only we could use it clearly and rationally. What we read and hear is often in need of analysis and interpretation, and what we speak and write may need to be reworked, so that we make clear claims that are logically supported by evidence.

Critical literacy, in contrast, starts from the premise that language is always used in some context that includes power relationships. Thus language is a form of politics. All texts (including scripts for movies, television shows, and advertisements) are written by someone for a purpose. Since those purposes are not often transparent, readers need to develop and exercise their critical faculties to filter what they understand and believe from texts. We are constantly assaulted by language that is not just unclear, but often deliberately deceptive and manipulative. Students need tools for unmasking the true purposes of language within a particular context so they can both understand its true meaning and, as necessary, free themselves from its pernicious effects.

Proponents of critical literacy say their practices are not just for college-level philosophy classes, but for all readers, even at lower levels. As Alan Luke argues (Luke, 1994), the coming of the Internet has exposed students who are just old enough to click a mouse to whatever arguments anyone with access to a computer wishes to aim at them. Thus a student researching the Holocaust online will find nearly as many articles claiming nothing of the sort ever happened as those describing what did happen (Allington, 2000).

Luke and Freebody’s “Four Resources” Model of Critical Literacy

Allan Luke and Peter Freebody are critical literacy advocates, and they developed a four-part paradigm for reading that encourages different levels of critical literacy, shown below.

Luke and Freebody’s Model of Critical Reading (From Luke, 2000)

<p>Coding practices: developing resources as a code breaker: How do I crack this text? What are its patterns and conventions...?</p>	<p>Pragmatic practices: developing resources as a text user: ... What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives?</p>
<p>Text-meaning practices: developing resources as a text participant. ... What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed for this text?</p>	<p>Critical practices: What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both read and write this text naively and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices, and interests are at play? Which are silent or absent?</p>

Luke and Freebody's model can be used with any sort of text: essays, opinion columns in the newspaper, government documents, political speeches, and advertisements. In fact, one of the common practices of critical literacy advocates is to bring into the curriculum and scrutinize items from popular culture, and not limit themselves to canonical works.

I teach an undergraduate class called "Literacy" for juniors and seniors here at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Upstate New York, in the United States. When we were discussing critical literacy in a recent class, my students applied Luke and Freebody's four resources model to an advertisement we found in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, a publication aimed at middle aged, financially secure adults. The advertisement consisted of a page-sized photograph of a woman's hands opening an engraved invitation to a 25th college reunion. On the table behind the invitation were a silver ash tray and an expensive vase of cut flowers. The text across the bottom of the page read, "Don't you think it's time?" and below that, in fine print, was the name of the sponsor of the advertisement, Botox. (For those who don't know, this is a strong medicine –actually a poison-- that is injected into the muscles of the face to counteract the normal effects of aging).

Looking at the text through the lens of the four-resources model, my students' discussion ran as follows.

Coding Practices: In response to the questions, "How do I crack this text? What are its patterns and conventions?" the students agreed that the patterns and conventions were those of an advertisement.

At this point, I gave a mini-lecture. I suggested that the "grammar" of advertisements usually includes a scenario meant to reflect back the reader's own image, but in a distorted way that highlights some problem or shortcoming in the reader's life. Then the advertisement suggests that the shortcoming can be remedied by consuming the product being advertised. (This is often untrue, of course. Buying an expensive car does not make a person successful, nor does smoking a certain brand of cigarettes make a person popular, or drinking a certain

brand of beer improve athletic abilities).

Now the students began to examine the text to determine (1) whose image was being reflected, (2) what shortcomings were being suggested, and (3) what solutions were being offered by the text. It was pretty obvious that the text was aimed at an early middle aged woman, who was told that she should be unhappy because she was showing signs of aging, and that she should consume this product, Botox, to erase those signs and be happy again.

Text-meaning practices: In response to Luke and Freebody's question, "What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed for this text?" one student suggested that you had to understand that in the United States, and probably in other places, schools and colleges hold reunions. These reunions can be enjoyable as people reconnect with classmates who have not been seen in many years. But the reunions may also be a source of tension and anxiety, if the participants fear the implicit stock-taking that may go on.

Second, the students recognized that women worry about their appearance as they approach middle age. Third, some of the students were aware that Botox is a radical form of treatment for the normal appearance of aging, in which poisons are injected into the face to kill the muscles associated with wrinkles.

So they agreed that a possible reading of the text runs something like, "Hey: maybe you're about to go to a college reunion and see people who knew you when you were younger. But you're getting older. See? The skin on your face is wrinkled. That should worry you. You've been denying it up to now, but you've reached the time of life in which you'd better start taking some serious measures to cover up the effects of aging on your body. Otherwise, you will be compared to other women who have already been using these anti-aging devices, and next to them, you will look old and ugly. You will be miserable every time you find yourself in the company of past acquaintances."

Pragmatic practices: In response to the questions, “What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives?” my students took an odd stance, since nearly all were in their late teens or early twenties. They did not feel directly threatened by the advertisement, as an older reader might, although they were well aware of the incessant drumbeat of advertising intended to make women feel insecure about their bodies. But they still expressed anger at the thought that a drug company would deliberately sow anxiety among women to sell its products.

One of the students had a part time job working for the alumni office of our college, and her job was to help arrange reunions of alumni. She told us how vigorously and creatively the staff labors to make reunions joyful events, and how frustrated it made her to think that some alumnae might be kept away—or worse, be forced to inject poison into their faces!—because of anxiety over their appearance.

Nearly all of the students made it clear that their choice was to reject the message of the advertisement, and to feel outrage toward the commercial interests that manufacture people’s fears about their bodies and then exploit those fears for profit. But not all. A couple of students thought the majority were going too far. “It’s just an advertisement,” one said. “Take it or leave it.”

Critical practices: In response to Luke and Freebody’s question, “What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both read and write this naively and unproblematically?” the students agreed that a middle-aged woman who had not been taught to read critically might be made to suffer anxiety from reading this text. But gradually the students began to worry, too, about the morals of the kind of person who could *write* advertising copy like this. This concern hit close to home, since a good many of these students planned careers in business, some of them perhaps in advertising. Is it possible to succeed in a business career without victimizing the public, as the creators of this advertisement had done?

The interests behind the advertisement were clear enough, and in a short time the students were able to enumerate the voices that were not heard: like those

who would emphasize that relationships go beyond appearances, and those who protest the tendency in capitalist society to emphasize people's surface features as opposed to their personalities, capabilities and values.

By the conclusion of this forty five minute discussion, one student remarked, "That was amazing. We see advertisements like these all the time, but we just glance at them and turn the page. After what we just talked about, I wonder how much of the advertisement's message was getting through to us, even in the brief time we looked at it?"

Conclusion

Critical thinking requires that we state our claims clearly, that we support our claims with reasons—and also that our claims and their support be open to scrutiny and challenge from people who hold different views. Critical thinking means that we carefully entertain arguments with which we are inclined to disagree, and appraise the quality of their reasons and the force of the logic with which the reasons are marshaled toward a conclusion. Those practices are essential for students to be able to use.

But as the example of the Botox advertisement illustrates, very often the messages we meet in the popular media don't make arguments clearly and fairly, even as they seek to persuade. Students need other tools to deal with such messages. Those of us who promote critical thinking in our classrooms will find insights and tools in the critical literacy movement that we can and should use.

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