

Critical literacy and urban youth. Pedagogies of access, dissent and liberation.

Ernest Morrell

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Critical literacy and urban youth. Pedagogies of access, dissent and liberation seeks to explore the possibilities of critical literacy for students in urban high schools and to advocate for its potential for social change. In opposition to more autonomous models of reading, critical approaches to literacy offer an ideological framework to uncover the realities behind hegemonic discourses and a standpoint from which to resist and transform social structures usually found to be oppressive. Critical literacy is therefore propelled by the promise of a more just and equitable society, but the challenging nature of the relations of power addressed in its process renders its very practice persistently problematic. But Ernest Morrell puts “love and labor” into it and, drawing on his “simultaneous engagements with theory and with young people who live and act and are acted upon by the world in real time,” (p. xi) produces a cogent yet sometimes conflicting account of his own uses of critical literacy.

The first two chapters of the book support the argument for a broader definition of the “critical” in critical literacy on the basis of Morrell’s engagements with theory. First, an attempt is made at founding critical literacy theory in the 2500 years of Western Philosophy and in the latest advancements of feminism, postmodernism and post-structuralism, to which a Freirean perspective and a passing list of recent work on critical literacy itself are added. Second, a fairly predictable array of “othered” critical traditions is guaranteed a place in the theoretical tradition. This includes anticolonial trends ranging from the academic discourses of Said, Spivak and Bhabha to more popular alternatives like the thought of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and Reggae music and culture, among others. The arrangement of both frameworks into isolated theoretical bodies, though, seems to leave the question of the “othered” quality of the latter unresolved and to render the “inclusion” of these “artists, activists and revolutionaries” (p. 57) still dubious.

Morrell’s engagement with young people results from his twelve years of experience in urban high schools and it constitutes the basis for the following four chapters of the volume. These aptly describe the process of putting critical literacy into practice in actual classroom contexts. In chapter four, popular culture is used to build a bridge to the classics in English classes. The particular choice of materials, however, may make one wonder whether “to interrogate these texts may transfer to an interrogation of *all* texts”

(p. 98. Emphasis added) or whether the subsequent students' readings will have already been acted upon by the world as seen by the teacher. A similar note of caution can be added to the experience presented in the fifth chapter. With assignments expecting them to tackle the material conditions of urban schooling, students are most likely to find "a language to describe their oppression as oppression" (p. 118). Yet, the description of students' becoming powerful scholars and competent creators of Critical Textual Production (CTP) is one of the milestones of Morrell's work. In the next two chapters critical media literacy and cyberactivism are put forward as valid options to engage adolescents in the analysis of the word and in their own action upon the world.

Finally, Morrell revisits theory as he embarks on an inquiry about the relationship between critical literacy, personal development and social practice. First, he articulates the thoughts of Foucault and Sartre to suggest writing as care for the self, which, he claims, "offers the opportunity for students to use writing to question and clarify perceptions, values, attitudes towards the world in a space that is safe, yet inherently pedagogical" (p. 182). Then, he reports on critical pedagogy projects like the Cuban Literacy Campaign of the 1960s and their potential for social transformation to conclude with suggestions for change in subject matter areas in urban education. These final chapters constitute either bare reports of past experiences or embryonic proposals for future action, and, in consequence, their potential for actual enactment in the urban classroom happens to be still slightly vague.

Critical literacy and urban youth. Pedagogies of access, dissent and liberation may help critical educators envision the latent prospects of critical literacy in real classroom settings. Left behind, however, seems to be the conflicting nature of the two issues at stake in the text: critical literacy and urban youth. In opposition to most of the recent work on the practice that reports it as truly challenging, critical literacy here keeps students always "motivated and engaged" (p. 112) and producing "candid and emotional" responses (p. 117). Further, age seldom works as a complicated category producing critical identities, and hence adolescents are optimistically othered as they are mostly depicted as "at once vulnerable and invincible," living a "particularly emotional time," and with an "ultra-sensitive experience of the world" (p. 179). Thus Morrell seems to cast for him the role of the enlightened teacher acknowledging the "the brilliance of urban high schools students who have been all but abandoned by our society" (Nieto, p. ix) and, from this standpoint, to be offering us a rather "teacher-proof" version of an approach to literacy which, context-bound and laden with tensions and ambiguities, should never become either universal or unproblematic.

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