

Equity and access through literacy development and instruction: The use of critical text to transform student writing and identity within a research seminar

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ABSTRACT: Building on the work developed by Morrell (2003) on critical textual production, this paper provides a glimpse into a critical text produced by a student during a summer research seminar at a West Coast University. This paper highlights the process of critical textual production, the writing that resulted from this method and how a critical literacy framework provided a way for students to create high-quality writing and subvert mainstream discourses in pursuit of illuminating the racial and social inequalities in their schools.

KEYWORDS: Urban education, writing, critical literacy, textual production.

INTRODUCTION

My first thought as I saw all of my students typing undistracted on their laptops was, “Why does everyone seem to be so involved writing in their journals?” In my experience, journal writing at the beginning of many classes has always been viewed with disdain and utter terror as students try to come up with ideas for their journal. However, within this particular space, something was strangely different. My students had plenty to say and the motivation behind their words was clearly in the interest of knowing, realising and understanding that they had a voice and that it would be heard.

As a writing instructor for a research seminar that educated students on understanding and challenging the pervasive racial and social class inequalities in education, I saw democracy in action. This seminar for urban youth and their teachers allowed them to study educational access and equity within the context of their schools and communities. It developed strategies for engaging high-school students from high-poverty communities in research about the learning opportunities and conditions they face within their communities and schools. It also introduced students and teachers to the sociology of education and educational research methods. Students not only learned about the systematic inequalities within their schools and communities, but were actively involved in helping to change these conditions.

My role as a writing instructor was to take students through a series of writing exercises that would help them develop, create and complete a critical text. As the instructor, I led students in a series of exercises (journaling, pre-writing and writing) that resulted in students producing *critical texts* (Morrell, 2003) that formed the core of a special issue of an online journal.

Building on the work developed by Morrell (2003) on the *critical textual production* within an urban research seminar, this paper provides a glimpse into the critical text that a student produced for this seminar. While Morrell’s (2003) piece on the critical textual production highlights the process, this paper presents the writing that resulted from this and demonstrates how a critical literacy framework provided a way for a

student to create high quality writing and subvert mainstream discourses in pursuit of illuminating the racial and social inequalities within his school and community.

CRITICAL LITERACY AND TEXT PRODUCTION

This research seminar examined the productive aspects of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. More specifically, it provided specific examples of these practices and how it transformed students, not just socially and politically, but academically as composers of critical texts.

A critical literacy framework within this venue became a vehicle for students to push the definition of literacy beyond the traditional decoding and encoding of words but into what Jongsma (1991) sees as a way for students to “understand their history and culture and...connections to current social structures” (p. 6). Critical literacy for this seminar was not just about a pedagogy of social transformation. I was also concerned with how a critical literacy perspective impacted my student’s ability to interact and create text. The writing for this seminar considered two key critical literacy perspectives developed by Shor (1987). First is the notion that critical literacy be used in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development. This kind of literacy, according to Shor, connects the political and the personal, the public and the private (p. 2). It was important for students within this seminar to understand this concept in order to “rethink” their previous constructions of knowledge.

Second is Shor’s idea that critical literacy should be understood as a process of reading and writing in order to become conscious of experiences that have been historically constructed within specific power relations (p. 3). Shor believed that critical literacy impacts a student’s ability to interact and create text. Thus, the literacy aspect of this seminar also considered how a students’ use of language could be seen as social action.

Overall a critical literacy framework for this seminar considered new positions from which students could see and interact with the world through text. It sought to discover how a student’s ability to read and write about their worlds not only changed them socially but academically.

AUTHORITATIVE AND INTERNALLY PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE

It was also necessary to understand the authoritative and personally persuasive discourse of the students within this research seminar. According to Pirie (1997), traditional academic writing begins with the issue of “authority”. According to Pirie, students are instructed to write in ways that are often times impersonal. These instructional habits have created a discourse among students that often equates to the thoughts and feelings of mainstream ideas rather than what is truly reflected in the daily lives of students. In particular with urban students, mainstream and sub-mainstream structures are often taught with little acknowledgement of how these structures actually produce social reproduction and inequalities in their lives. According to Meyer (1993), students produce an “illusion of mastery”. This illusion creates students with little or no voice, because they feel their situations do not hold a privileged position and that they therefore have nothing to say. Mikhail Bakhtin, a

Soviet philosopher, has explained this struggle as a dialogical relationship between an authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. According to Bakhtin (1981), language is always in flux. He states, “The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language” (p. 293).

As Bakhtin explains, there is always an authoritative discourse that demands allegiance and operates within a variety of social context, such as traditional classroom essays that are often based on an antiquated set of standards that leave the student with a formulaic idea of writing. Additionally, the authoritative discourse is static. Knowledge is dispensed in a style that eludes the knower but dictates in some ways the knower’s frames of reference and the discursive practices that sustain them (Britzman, 2003). With most academic writing, it is perceived that knowledge is given and received not created by the student (somewhat similar to Freire’s banking model (Freire, 1970). The authoritative discourse takes away the need for students to create a personal and subjective text that speaks to who they are and how they read the world.

Consequently, the internally persuasive discourse pulls one away from this norm. This discourse admits a variety of contradictory social discourses that occur. Students can realise that there is no institutional privilege and that there are discourses that can operate in opposition to socially sanctioned views and normative meanings (Bahktin, 1981, p 6.). According to Bahktin (1981), “this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean” (p 10). Hence, the internally persuasive discourse becomes a tool in not just creating some illusion of authority, but it helps students to construct who they are and what they bring to their academic writing. Consequently, this internally persuasive discourse is the site for departure rather than a place for arrival. It is a discourse of becoming (1981, p. 21).

Through writing, students were able to create “a discourse of becoming”, thereby freeing themselves of the discursive practices that have become prevalent in many classrooms. This discourse also provided a means for students to produce high quality writing as well as a more sophisticated and authentic critical text. A challenge of this seminar was that a majority of my students came from schools and communities that were racially, ethnically or socio-economically oppressed. I believed that as a part of this group, their discourse and writing had been given to them by the authoritative discourse of their schools and society. However, what the students’ writing revealed is that they can change an authoritative discourse to one that is internally persuasive.

THE CRITICAL TEXTUAL PRODUCTION AND THE EMERGING WRITER

According to Morrell (2003), the perception of critical textual production enables students, particularly urban students, to make sense of and frame responses to the challenges that they face in schools and society. It creates a vehicle in which students are able to express their thoughts and feelings through writing. Morrell (2003) states,

Critical pedagogists have not necessarily focused on the critical consumption of dominant texts. The *Critical Textual Production* moves from a model of consumption to production. Moving from a model of consumption to production in critical literacy instruction necessarily requires a synthesis or at least a meaningful dialogue between

the discourses of critical pedagogy and rhetoric and composition as writing instructors consider how is it that we teach students to construct texts that serve as counter-narratives to these dominant texts that they have gained the ability to deconstruct (p.6).

While Freire and Macedo (1987) explore practical implications for literacy, there are some schools that have a very different ideology about literacy development. Today's standards and frameworks produced by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) call for texts that demonstrate the ability to write clear and grammatically correct sentences, paragraphs and compositions, without much consideration to how writing can affect or change a student's thoughts and feelings about themselves and society. However, the critical textual production, which coincides with Freire's implications for conceptions of literacy, asks students to write about the process of becoming critical researchers, their struggles for social justice, and their strategies for gaining access to a quality education. It also reflects the ideas of action and social justice that are promoted by critical literacy theorists (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Comber, 2001; Janks, 2001; Giroux, 1994; Vasquez, 2001), who have argued for literacy practices that are informed actions against oppression and promote social justice.

The critical textual production moves us beyond the simplicity of traditional text. It asks students to be producers and creators of their worlds through text. Students begin to realise that their voice can be heard through writing. Morrell (2003) sees the *critical textual production* as:

...critical texts that allow students a different, more enabling language to make sense of their own experiences. They also generate different relationships, not to those experiences, but to the structures in which they occurred. They are also critical text because they are shared with others, either others in similar situations such as students and parents, or others, such as teachers, researchers and policymakers, who are in positions to transform these realities (p. 14).

The critical textual production process

In *Writing the Word and the World: Critical Literacy as Textual Production*, Morrell outlines the process for which the textual production is based (Morrell, 2003, p. 13). The writing generated for this project was developed by the following student activities:

1. *Journal writing*: Students write daily for thirty minutes about a particular issue related to critical research and urban schools.
2. *Production of critical texts*: Students will develop a text based on selected topics. Topics will be in the form of a critical memoir on their educational experience, on being a critical researcher, a personal letter to an author, an artist, ancestor or other activist who has influenced their journey as a critical researcher, or an issues piece in which they write a brief essay to a policymaker or an elected official in which they use personal experience and theory to discuss an issue related to equity and access.
3. *Final texts*: Students will combine their journal entries and the textual production topics in order to create their final text.

As a writing instructor for this seminar, I took the students through this process. Each day the students would respond to a journal topic related to critical research or urban schools. The topics chosen for these journals could be generated from personal experience, something they had encountered while doing research on schools or from a particular reading they had done. Students responded in their journals to writing prompts like the following:

Recall an experience you've had with a teacher that you remember vividly. The memory can be vivid either because it is especially positive, painful, or unique. In as much detail as possible re-tell this narrative and explain what makes it so for you (Morrell, 2003, p. 12).

Students produced a total of seven journal entries based on a variety of writing prompts. Using these journal entries students produced a critical text based on the following four options that Morrell (2003) discusses in his article on the critical textual production. The options were as follows:

1. *A critical memoir*: Write a critical memoir that recounts a portion of your educational experience. Explain the event in as much detail as possible. Use theory to make sense of the event. Use your knowledge of critical research to discuss what could have been done differently.
2. *On being a critical researcher*: Talk about your journey as a critical researcher. What have you learned? What advice would you offer to others (students, teachers, parents, community activists) who may be considering such an enterprise?
3. *A personal letter*: Write a personal letter to an author, an artist, ancestor or other activist who has influenced your journey as a critical researcher. Explain to this person (or people) how they have shaped your image of yourself as a critical researcher.
4. *An issue piece*: Write a brief essay to policymaker or an elected official, in which you combine experience and theory to discuss an issue related to equity and access. This topic doesn't have to relate to your group's research project.

THE CRITICAL TEXT

Given that the idea behind the critical text is to “allow students a different more enabling language to make sense of their own experiences,” (Morrell, 2003, p. 6), we started each seminar with the students writing about a particular writing prompt that considered either their role in research or within urban education. For example, a summer, seminar student, Carlos Hernandez, responded to our very first writing prompt on “recalling an experience you've had with a teacher that you remember vividly” with the following:

My teacher, “Mrs. D” had a meeting with my older brother, Gilberto, regarding my education. Gilberto is currently in his 3rd year of medical school at UCLA and because of this my brother graciously offered to speak to the school about his journey into medical school and other experiences. “Mrs. D” then told him that he should not waste his time because the students will amount to no more than hairdressers and

mechanics. Although I was somewhat shocked to hear these comments, I did not understand the severity of the situation. All I knew revolved around the environment in St. Emydius. The only people I knew and whom I interacted with were Latinos. I was not expected to achieve much. These low expectations and negative perceptions of these youth are what streamline minorities into correctional institutions... (Journal Entry #1)

What strikes me as powerful about Carlos' journal response is that, with his very first writing piece, I was able to observe how he struggles with the authoritative discourse of his teacher "Mrs. D" and the internally persuasive discourse of his brother, a third year medical student at UCLA, who wants to speak to the students that Mrs. D describes as only wanting to become "mechanics and hairdressers". Not only does this particular journal entry highlight the very pervasive discourse of some teachers within urban areas; it also demonstrates the need for a critical literacy framework that will enable Carlos to analyze the social dynamics that are happening within this brief journal entry.

Over five weeks, Carlos was exposed to social theories and research that I believe enabled him to dismantle a lot of these discursive practices. Carlos' final two journal entries responded to prompts on identity and transformation respectively. He writes:

My identity has been constant metamorphosis for the past few years. That is something that I have learned. My identity will never be stabilised and stationary because the environment around me will never be stabilised and stationary. I will be involved in things that will change my perception of who I am. I will meet people who will change the perception of who I am. The friends who I had may no longer be my friends, but no matter the endeavour I choose to pursue new friends and colleagues will be made. (Journal Entry #6)

For journal entry number seven he writes:

It would be difficult to explain the effect this course has had on me. It would range from the increase of knowledge regarding education to the gratitude I feel for New Roads. When I first came into this class I did not know much about the concerns the educational system is faced with everyday. Although I may have been conscious of how problematic the system was, I never understood the severity. Now that I am here and now that I have read several articles from the reader, I have realised how detrimental the school system is to children. I went through it myself at St. Emydius. I knew what it was like to possibly fall through the cracks but I never reflected upon how it could affect others. That is something crucial that I have missed but now discovered. (Journal Entry #7)

Carlos' final two journal entries demonstrated what Bahktin sees as a transformation from an authoritative discourse to one that is internally persuasive. Over the course of five weeks, Carlos had been exposed to many social theories. Each day the students had a reader that provided them with a critical understanding of urban education. For example, students read excerpts from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) on Freire's notion of the "banking model" of education. Students also read and discussed social theories such as social reproduction, habitus and cultural capital. I believe by studying these theories and theorist, Carlos was able to understand his social world. In the very first journal entry, Carlos seemed to grapple with what his teacher Mrs. D had said about him and his classmates. However, by the end of the seminar, Carlos states, "my identity will never be stabilised and stationary because the environment around me

will never be stabilised and stationary.” I believe that this demonstrated how Carlos was able to articulate in writing Bahktin’s notion of contradictory social discourses. Carlos realised that he could create a discourse that could “never be stabilised or stationary”. I believe that in knowing this concept, he created a counter-narrative to his teacher “Mrs. D”. His writing reflected how his identity is based on an ever-changing environment. But most importantly, his journal entries reflected a “point of departure” and not one of “arrival” (Bahktin, 1981). His writing demonstrated how his journey of self-discovery both politically and socially is one that has just begun. His refusal of stasis is also a refusal of being pigeon-holed and to be a part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. He sees that he must become a part of people and ideas that will change how he sees himself. Through his writing we see Carlos’ evolution. This evolution is one in which his whole world is deconstructed in order to assist him in understanding who he is. He embodies Bahktin’s notion of how his internally persuasive discourse has allowed him to discover new ways of being and operating in the world.

The whole idea of the critical textual production is for students to take the ideas and concepts they have written about in their journals and produce a final text. For this, Carlos chose to explore what it meant for him to be a critical researcher. He states:

Right before our eyes certain injustices are occurring. The deprivation of opportunity plagues the impoverished streets of our nation. The figureheads of our society have predetermined the lives and destinies of urban youth so that social reproduction persists. While social reproduction is in full swing in urban America, critical thought, creativity, respect, and power flourish in the gold plated streets of suburban America. It is these discrepancies in the school systems that bring about criticism. The fact is that the working class, underprivileged students are taught differently than the upper class, privileged students. For this reason, a critical mindset should be adopted so that our children have complete control in the decisions they make for their lives. Their desires and dreams should not be marred by the fact that they live in a historically impoverished area. The social reproduction that currently exists is the basis of our roles in society. Our lives are preordained. Unless schools encourage critical thought and reflection, students of poor communities will never have control of their own lives. The point is not to trade one dictator for another. The goal is to have both suburban and urban America fuse to create the diverse America that the outside world observes. The hope is that every student, regardless of socio-economic background, can have equal access to our nation's resources. Ultimately, the cycle of social reproduction must be broken and degraded.

Carlos’ writing expresses all three ideas discussed in this paper. First, I believe that a critical literacy framework allowed him to read, write and make sense of his world. While Carlos had some understanding of the injustices within his school and community, he states, “I knew what it was like to possibly fall through the cracks but I never reflected upon how it could affect others.” Carlos invariably understands how structural inequalities affect him and his community. What makes Carlos’ journal entry and writing a study in critical literacy is the whole notion of praxis. While we see from his journal entries that he wants change for himself, he also articulates the need for other students to understand what he now understands about social inequalities within society. A critical literacy framework allowed Carlos to actively reflect on this experience. We see how he makes sense of this in his final text. Carlos often talks about how schools should encourage critical thought and reflection in order for students to gain control of their lives. This notion is consistent with

Bakhtin's idea of a discourse that encourages the writer to consider how they think and feel about themselves and the world but also how to create the world they would like to see. Within his journal entry, Carlos often discusses goals for society such as, "to have both suburban and urban America fuse", or "every student, regardless of socio-economic background, can have equal access to our nation's resources". In keeping with a critical literacy framework, Carlos argues for equality, justice and change in his writing.

Carlos achieves the goal of the critical textual production. It is my belief that Carlos was able to construct a text that served as a counter-narrative (Morrell, 2003). The nuanced way in which Carlos developed his final text provided insight into how the textual production enabled him to make sense of his world. First, Carlos has an understanding of social reproduction theory and how it has "predetermined" the lives of many students. As witnessed in his statement, "the figureheads of our society have predetermined the lives and destinies of urban youth," Carlos' writing provides a clear analysis of how social reproduction has affected society but, more importantly, urban youth. His writing demonstrates how high-school students can analyse and synthesise a theory such as social reproduction in order to understand how this particular idea operates within his world. Second, he produced a text that could be considered as a counter-narrative. According to Morrell (2003), the critical textual production:

...produces texts that not only name and delimit the workings of power, but serve as the manifestation of an alternate reality or a not-yet-realised present that only enters into the imagination when students interact with new and authentically liberating words that are created by writers. (p. 6)

Carlos clearly achieved this through his writing. While this article only gives a glimpse of Carlos' final text, the above excerpt presents how Carlos was able to reflect, articulate and produce a powerful piece of writing that helped him to "understand the power of language through the production of a critical text" (Morrell, 2003, p. 7).

Finally, it is important to highlight another goal of the critical textual production, which is to "produce a high quality text". It is clear that with this particular genre of writing, students are still able to produce high-quality writing. While the importance of the textual production was to help students critically reflect on their worlds, it was also a way for students to develop their writing through a formal writing process. The production of this particular text required pre-writing, drafting and revision. Many writing instructors have argued that this particular genre is often muddled with anecdotal stories and colloquial language. However, Carlos proves that this particular genre can produce writing that fosters the personal, while still promoting the stylistic elements of high quality writing.

CONCLUSION

This theory of praxis holds important implications for literacy practices in urban schools. First, a critical textual production could radically alter how teachers think about writing in urban schools. The critical textual production moved beyond the idea of writing down thoughts and feelings, but into the realisation of the "power of the

pen”. Carlos’ writing demonstrated how a student was able to use writing in order to transform his world not only academically, but also socially in the following ways:

- *Understanding social theory:* Carlos, in understanding social theories such as social reproduction and cultural capital, began to understand how the world has worked against him, which ultimately allowed him to see himself differently.
- *Critical literacy as a framework for writing:* A critical literacy perspective framed the writing process. Carlos produced a text based on key critical literacy aspects such as developing a different path for self and social development, as well as becoming conscious of these experiences and weighing them against specific power dynamics.
- *Producing a critical text:* The critical text produced by Carlos introduced a new genre of writing that asked students to consider new ways of framing responses to the injustices that were happening within their communities and schools, while still incorporating all the necessary elements of quality writing. Overall, this critical text enabled Carlos to create a powerful piece of writing in which he was able to express his thoughts and feelings.

While the critical textual production can give students, researchers and teachers the opportunity to understand the practices and pedagogies that help students produce quality academic writing, more importantly, the critical textual production demonstrates how this process within a critical literacy framework can help students understand the value of constructing text that work to merge language, access and power in the interest of a more just society.

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