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Reading, Writing, and Learning with Students in Echo Park

“To be literate is *not* to be free, it is to be present and active in the struggle for reclaiming one’s voice, history and feature.”
Giroux¹

Introduction

Literacy, as Lehtonen points out, is a loaded concept on which the West projects its hopes and fears (2005). Literacy is seen as the “remedy” for improving society; thus, the lack of literacy is seen as the moment of degradation of Western society (Lehtonen 2005). While literacy and print have historically functioned as vital tools for social progress by giving a voice to disenfranchised people, “for Gramsci, literacy was a double-edge sword; it could be wielded for the purposes of self and social empowerment or for the perpetuation of relations of oppression and domination” (Giroux 2). Literacy, that is critical literacy,² is to use language as “the ‘real stuff’ of culture (Giroux 8). Critical literacy is the understanding that language acts to describe who, what, where we are, and our relationships to others. There is a distinction between thinking of literacy as a set of attainable “skills” rather than literacy is a “constitutive process,” one that is constantly forming and changing to reflect current cultural and societal issues (Kendrick and McKay). In this essay I demonstrate how 826LA in Echo Park, a non-profit organization that promotes literacy in a low-income community in Los Angeles, makes critical literacy happen. 826LA in Echo Park serves as an example of how a literacy program can encourage a community to think differently about the world.

826LA in Echo Park Makes Critical Literacy Happen

As an 826LA/CSULA Curriculum Fellow I worked closely on Barnacle’s Bookworms, a reading program hosted every Saturday morning, where students who struggle with reading at school come to read one-on-one with a volunteer. I worked alongside students to learn what they think about reading and writing about books. I became acquainted with their reading preferences and individual personality traits that affect their reading performance. My first-hand experience with the students and scholarly research helped me develop and implement new ideas to the Barnacle’s Bookworms’ curriculum, which I will address in greater detail in the last section of this essay.

¹ See Giroux’s Introduction to Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo’s *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, page 11. Italics by Giroux.

² Critical literacy is derived from the concepts of Gramsci, Giroux, Macedo and Freire. Critical literacy is the social action of questioning the world by the word, hence the title of their book, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*.

As an 826LA/CSULA Curriculum Fellow I had the opportunity to observe a community of parents, staff, interns, and volunteers whose common goal is to help students succeed academically and in life. 826LA puts into practice Giroux's conception of a critical literacy program where literacy, pedagogy, and politics work together, allowing the people to participate in and "around new and more emancipatory visions of community"(6). Everyone at 826LA is an active and participating member. Parents are essential community members because they bring their children on a daily basis to afterschool tutoring and reading workshops like Barnacle's Bookworms. In fact, some of the students attend more than one workshop per week. 826LA is a place where staff and volunteers come eager and ready to interact with the students and provide help with the mechanics of writing and reading. They also encourage conversations about the texts and point out the connections or lack thereof to the student's world. Barnacle's Bookworms encourages students to talk and share with others their ideas about what they learned from their reading. Bomer and Bomer argue that when students talk about what they read they also learn different perspectives and new ideas that perhaps they have never thought about before (49). 826LA works diligently to expand the students' knowledge and confidence in their writing and reading abilities.

The hallmark of an "effective reading program" is often associated with the teaching and learning of the technical skills necessary for reading (Afferbach et al. 441).³ At times the emphasis on technical skills is mistakenly thought of as practicing critical literacy, but as Haddix and Rojas point out this "side steps" what critical literacy should *really* do, which is to critically analyze and raise questions about the text's relationship to culture and society (112). For example, these "effective reading programs" may focus on reading comprehension as the ability to construct coherent mental representations of the text (Kendeou et al. 10), but they do not connect the text with the student's life. Barnacle's Bookworms' curriculum is designed to promote the exercise of phonetic, cognitive, and vocabulary skills so that the student can build a better relationship with reading. Even when a student is struggling the goal is to keep him or her enthusiastic about reading.

A way Barnacle's Bookworms keeps students interested and enthused is by offering students the opportunity to individually choose a book of their liking. Students are more willing to read and enjoy a book they have not been assigned. The freedom of choice that students experience also allows for Barnacle's Bookworms to feel less like a classroom setting and more like a reading club. Moreover, Barnacle's Bookrooms' curriculum does not rely solely on literature textbooks, which opens up the possibility of reading something outside what is state/school mandated. This is a great aspect of Barnacle's Bookworms. As Haddix and Rojas point out, literature textbooks, although they offer readings that present issues of class, gender or economics, tend to reflect the values and skills that the state or school deem appropriate (122).⁴ Opening up the possibility to read outside the mandated texts is a way by which Barnacle's Bookworms encourages and exposes students to conversations about different cultural, social, gender, and power issues students may not experience at school.

Another reason why the students enjoy reading at Barnacle's Bookworms is because they are not subject to read that which is "appropriate" for their reading level. Students are very aware of their reading level and this often influences their reading choices. Some students that fall below the state reading level feel inadequate about reading books designated for students with a higher reading

³ What I refer to as "skills" is the technical side of reading, which is, phonetics, vocabulary, and reading comprehension as discussed in Afferback, Cho, Kim, Crassas, Doyle's essay.

⁴ Furthermore, Haddix and Rojas reference Applebee's findings: "'Although the practice of using textbooks for pedagogical purposes varies from teacher to teacher, studies show that a majority of public school teachers depend solely on textbooks (versus individual texts) as their main source for teaching literature, and many rate textbooks anthologies as at least adequate in terms of their teaching suggestions and strategies (Applebee 1993)'"(112).

level. Other students take the challenge to read a book beyond their reading level, but it does not happen often. The self-consciousness students exhibit about their reading level is alarming because it can ultimately harm their development as readers. The importance they place on their reading level may be due to the school's curriculum "biased toward strategy" (Afferbach et al., 440). As mentioned earlier, critical literacy for some educational institutions is thought of only as an acquisition of reading skills. This is a problem because as Afferbach et al. argues, the emphasis on reading strategy "narrows the conceptualization of reading and reading development" (440). For Giroux, critical literacy is the process conveying that knowledge is not centralized in a few experts, rather "the production of knowledge [is] ... a relational act" (15). Knowledge then, is an active and fluid exchange of ideas about culture, society, history, gender, etcetera and their relationship with the text. Therefore, while Barnacle's Bookworms takes into consideration the reading level of every student, the curriculum is not designed to uphold fixed standards of reading levels. The goal is to encourage students to read and to think of reading as a fun and productive activity. With this approach, the students improve their reading capacity and reading level.

Another aspect of Barnacle's Bookworms that makes critical literacy happen is the implementation of writing prompts. Students are encouraged to write what they think or feel about their reading. Sometimes the prompt suggests writing an alternate ending, character or setting. These writing prompts are fun for students and they serve as an excellent mode of non-verbal conversation about the text. The writing prompts are tangible representations of the relationship between the text, the students' imagination, and their knowledge of the world. This approach to reading and writing is in accord with Freire's vision of critical literacy as an active project "in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with their wider society" (Giroux 6). When the students read, write, and converse about the text they are learning that there is always a different perspective to a story, that everyone has a story to tell, and that every idea is valuable. The curriculum at Barnacle's Bookworms promotes diversity and encourages students to see themselves as active producers of new stories that best represent who they are and the world as they see it.

It must be pointed out that I am not discounting the services and efficacy of the state/federal school curricula. In fact, students at 826LA need the public school system to learn the skills to write and read which prepare them for other subjects at school. Without public schools, low-income students like the ones at 826LA and myself, would not have the opportunity to obtain an education that can improve our quality of life. Public school is a right to us all and very much needed in our world. 826LA enhances and adds diversity to the students' public school education. 826LA helps build better readers by actively making critical literacy happen in every one of their workshops. I agree with Afferbach et al., that a successful reader needs to learn more than the technical side of reading; they also need to be "motivated and engaged" (440) by parents and teachers, and reading programs/curricula. Furthermore, good readers also need to change their "epistemic beliefs"; students have to learn that books and writers reflect and convey different purposes, different perspectives, and that not everything printed portrays truth (Afferbach et al. 440). By making critical literacy happen, 826LA's Barnacle's Bookworms helps students become independent readers⁵ who "can plan and build reading agendas without help from an authority" (Bomer and Bomer 66). Equally important, 826LA helps students develop "self-efficacy"; that is when a student wants to be challenged and is excited to tackle a reading challenge (Afferbach et al. 440). Through friendly approaches to reading and

⁵ Bomer and Bomer point out that an "independent reader" is a "misnomer" because being an independent does not mean a "solitary or individualistic" reader (66).

writing, and with hard work and dedication from every student, staff, and volunteer, 826LA makes critical literacy happen in Echo Park, California.

Contributions to Barnacle's Bookworm's Curriculum

Reading Short Stories

I agree that one of the essential aspects of the Barnacle's Bookworms' curriculum is the freedom students have to choose their own reading material. However, this also has its drawbacks because students who are self-conscious about their reading abilities and even those who are not tend to read the same book or same types of books over and over again. This limits their exposure to other types of books, genres, themes, and vocabulary. Trying to not infringe too much on the student's freedom to select their own reading, I thought it was beneficial to select short stories that are suitable for all age groups and assign them as "group reading" (i.e. volunteer reads to the student or both of them read together). Group reading gives students the opportunity to experience different texts and to be challenged. My goal with this exercise was three-fold; first, expose students to a different and, for some, challenging reading; second, engage in and encourage a conversation about the text that eventually everyone could share; third, observe their group reaction to the story and to the new exercise.

Every Saturday I would distribute a story to each student to read together with the volunteer. Along with the story I handed a few discussion questions that I borrowed from Bomer and Bomer's "*Some Questions for Critical Reading*" (52). I selected certain questions that I thought could initiate a conversation about the text beyond plot and more about culture, society, race, power relations or gender. For example, one of the questions asked the students, "Who has 'power' in your text? How does that power get shown?" (Bomer and Bomer 52). I did not want to make the questions mandatory so I told volunteers these were suggestions and to feel free to ask the question(s) they thought could be most conducive for conversation. Once the student was done reading the short story they were free to select a book of their choice.

Some students demonstrated resistance to certain stories, but most students reacted favorably to this exercise. One volunteer reported that a student was excited and happy after reading the short story because he read words he had never encountered before. I was glad to learn that with a little encouragement and motivation he read something outside his comfort zone.

Collecting Writing Responses and Giving Feed Back

In the past the students would write responses relating to their reading or any given prompt and these were archived in their assignment folder. I proposed to collect the student's writing exercises and to offer positive and constructive feedback instead of just filing them. I told the students that I am not grading, but that I am curious about their work. I related my curiosity according to the writing prompt, so when they read a story about a group of animals that formed a band the writing prompt asked, "If you had a band what musical instrument would you play? What would you name your band? And Why?" I told them that I was collecting their writing prompt because "I couldn't wait to read all the band names and decide who I would watch perform first."

By providing positive feedback and commentary on their work, I am hoping they will be encouraged to write more and with more detail than usual. For the younger students in Kindergarten to

second grade, instead of responding to a writing prompt, I encouraged them to draw a picture about a favorite scene or character in the book and to write one sentence if possible.

I wanted students to know we are listening to what they have to say and that their writing has a purpose. On my comments I thanked them for taking the opportunity to tell me what they thought about the reading and for taking the opportunity to talk about difficult topics. For example, after the students read a story about Jackie Robinson breaking the racial barrier in professional baseball, many students wrote empathizing with Robinson's struggle with racism. Other students noted that today things are different in sports and many of their favorite athletes are African-American. Without them knowing it the students at Barnacle's Bookworms participated in a conversation about the relationships the text has with the world.

Future Goals

The five-month fellowship made it challenging to implement all the new reading exercises I researched. One of my goals is to make students active participants in the Barnacle's Bookworms' library. Bomer and Bomer suggests that giving a hands-on experience with the books available in the library gives students the ability to notice new books and the opportunity to actively participate in the organization of the books they read (66).

Another goal is to establish reading groups consisting of four to five students and volunteers where everyone can discuss the reading in conversation. I am aware of the challenges and limitations, but I think that group reading would encourage further discussion about the text. Group reading and discussion is an excellent opportunity for students to begin drawing connections to other books they have read in the past. They can begin sharing with each other the reasons why they like a book, thus encouraging their peers to read new books. Bomer and Bomer point out that "Connecting ideas to other books is an important and powerful reading tool. Ideas build on one another to create worlds of meaning in reader's minds"(47). There will be students who will not want to contribute to the conversation, but my goal is to expose them to a group discussion that can lead them to formulate their own ideas about the text and their peers' responses. Perhaps with time these students will feel more comfortable to share their opinions out loud.

Final Thoughts and Thanks

Working with 826LA in Echo Park as a CSULA Fellow has been an incredibly rewarding experience. My time as a fellow opened my eyes to the difficulties students in low-income communities face everyday at school. Every student has a story to tell and they all have taught me something new about the world. I want to thank Professor Bidham Roy for presenting this opportunity to give back to a low-income, majority Hispanic community like the one I grew up in. I also want to thank every single student, parent, staff member, volunteer, and intern at 826LA that made me feel welcomed and an essential part of their community. I especially want to thank Pedro Estrada and Mariesa Arrañaga Kubasek for their guidance and for always having a smile on their faces. I could not have done this without you.

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