

PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

CONNECTIONS: ADOLESCENT LITERACY

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN CRITICAL LITERACY

With critical literacy, learners are active participants in understanding meaning and message. Critical literacy invites students to move beyond passively accepting the text's message to question, examine, or dispute the power relations that exist between readers and authors. It moves learners to reflection, transformation, and action (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

CRITICAL LITERACY MEANS...

- recognizing that texts contain certain perspectives and biases
- recognizing that point of view influences how a text is interpreted and understood
- determining whose voices are present or absent
- evaluating multiple perspectives for bias, reliability, fairness and validity
- analyzing how language is used
- taking a stance and engage in a response in the interest of equity, fairness and social justice
- using technology to seek divergent perspectives, interact with authentic audiences, and express ideas

“Once they become aware of how texts manipulate them, adolescent students can become critical consumers and producers of text who challenge dominant meanings and realize that there is more than one way to read texts and their world. This is hard work, but it is work that could lead to a more fair and just world.”

*Moje, Young, Reardon
& Moore, 2000*

WHY TEACH IT?

As adolescents experience a barrage of ideas and information from a variety of sources, including social media, online, and in print, critical literacy provides the tools to determine how to engage in, interpret, use and act on this information appropriately. *The Ontario Curriculum, The Arts* document points out, “With the constant stream of information and the changing realities of contemporary culture, technology and society, by being critically literate, adolescents are able to determine what information is reliable... They learn to use the information gathered to form a personal stance and to take creative risks and become active participants in bringing about change” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Critical literacy provides opportunities to tap into the interests and needs of adolescent learners. Critical literacy is a springboard for students to exercise their broadened awareness of the world around them. They are drawn to opportunities for perspective-taking, for questioning the status quo, and for seeking solutions to challenges related to inequity and social justice (Steinberg, 2008).

In addition, adolescents’ need for autonomy, to be heard, to make a difference and to have a sense of accomplishment can be addressed through critical literacy (Irvin, Meltzer, Mickler, Phillips & Dean, 2009).

Teaching for critical literacy empowers students to be active thinkers, to look at the world from multiple perspectives and to develop questioning habits that encourage them to think and act on their decisions. Critical literacy can be applied across subject areas, modes of expression, texts and new technologies.

For example, students can take a critical stance in mathematics (e.g., Is the way the data is presented in the graph biased?), and in civics (e.g., Who benefits and who is disadvantaged by this decision?).

“In science, students who are critically literate are able, for example, to read or view reports from a variety of sources on a common issue. They are able to assess how fairly the facts have been reported, what biases might be contained in each report and why that might be, how the content of the report was determined and by whom, and what might have been left out of the report and why. These students would then be equipped to produce their own interpretation of the issue.”

*The Ontario Curriculum,
Grade 9 and 10, Science, 2008*

Watch as Jeffery Wilhelm works with students to explore whose voices are present and missing in their study of an historical event. The series, *Discovering Voice*, is available at:

<http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/discovering/deepening.shtml>



HOW TO TEACH IT

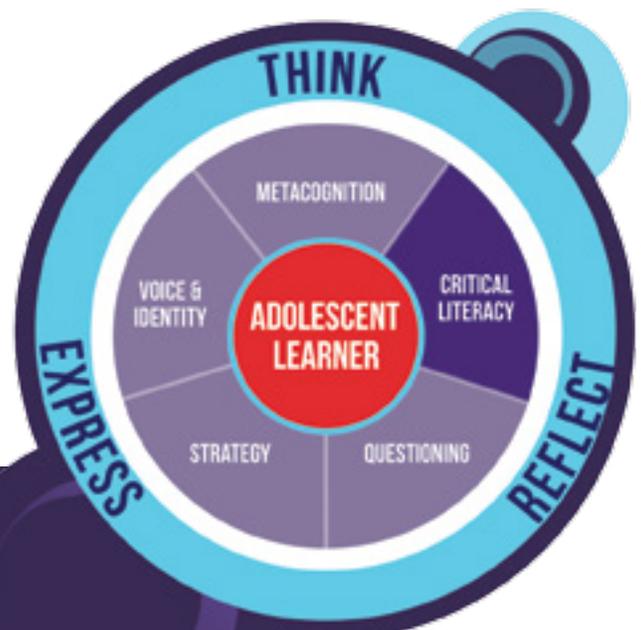
When teaching for critical literacy, teachers are facilitators and activators of learning. Creating the conditions for the kind of inquiry and stance-taking necessary for critical literacy (e.g., by explicitly teaching respectful interactions and norms) allows students to bring their various perspectives, values and voices to discussions. Fostering an openness and sensitivity supports teens to challenge and question previously held assumptions and beliefs, including their own. This safe environment also encourages students to act in ways that address imbalances of power and that promote fairness, including in their own classroom.

Teachers help students develop their critical literacy skills by:

- providing access to a variety of texts, including electronic, print, visual, and graphical, to analyze and evaluate their meaning, value and perspectives (Mclaughlin & DeVogd, 2004)
- modeling the use of critical questions (Mclaughlin & DeVogd, 2004)
- using relevant texts and topics that allow students to take on various positions (e.g., attitudes toward teens, gender representations, issues related to power)
- providing opportunities for perspective-taking, such as through role-play and writer-in-role (Wilhelm, 2002)
- modeling questions to evaluate embedded perspectives in texts for validity, reliability and credibility (Burke, 2001)
- exploring opportunities for taking action and promoting social justice (Fisher & Frey, 2008).

The Four Resources model (Luke & Freebody, 1990, 1999) provides a framework for understanding texts more fully. It outlines the roles of code user, meaning maker, text user, and text analyzer. Although critical literacy is most aligned with text analyzer, students use the other roles in order to inform their critical stance. For example, when examining a website, students take the role of text analyzer and may ask, “Why is this particular photo included on the webpage, and what version of reality does it present?”

In order to fully address the critical literacy question, students need to access the other roles: as a code user (e.g., *What are the features and organization of a website? What is the size and position of the photograph?*), as a meaning maker (e.g., *What message does the website present? How does the photograph make me feel?*), and as a text user (e.g., *Who would use this website? Why would they use it?*). The roles are not intended to be sequential or developmental; that is, teachers should not begin with code user in isolation and work toward text analyzer. In fact, when students participate as text analyzers, they are often more authentically and purposefully engaged in the other areas of understanding.



Students need to “use critical literacy and numeracy skills to think more deeply about the texts they read (situations and problems) and the texts they create (interpretations and solutions).”

School Effectiveness Framework, 2011

CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers can empower students in becoming more critically aware by posing critical literacy questions about a text to prompt thinking related to issues of language and power.

Questions Related to a Text

Who created/produced the text? How do I know?

What does the author want me to know, think or feel? Why do I think this?

What assumptions does the author make about my beliefs, values and knowledge? What tells me this?

What view of the world does the text present? Why do I think this?

How does language work to influence my thinking?

What voices, points of view and perspectives are missing? How significant is their omission?

What information does the author leave out? How significant is it?

Who is most likely to benefit from this text?

Why was this text produced?

Is this text consistent with what I already know? Do I need to seek another source of information?

Is the text fair? Why or why not?

Questions to Prompt Action in Response to a Text

How can I find out about other perspectives on the topic?

How have my attitudes, opinions, feelings, or actions changed with respect to this topic? Why?

How will I treat others differently as a result of having critically analyzed this topic?

What action might I need to take to address a concern?

What could I do to change a rule, a procedure or an attitude that is unjust?

How can I use literacy to support those who are treated unfairly?

How can I use literacy to make a difference in the world?

adapted from Literacy Cards, Literacy GAINS, 2008

“[N]o textbook reflects all of the possible viewpoints that privilege some voices and silence others. Rather than trying to hide this reality, it can be used to motivate adolescents, who are at a prime age for questioning authority, to read their textbooks with a critical eye. For example, students can be encouraged to look at whose voices are silenced... Engagement in critical literacies empowers students to read textbooks with an eye to information that might help them make real-life decisions as citizens and consumers.”

Sheridan-Thomas, 2008

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