

## CHAPTER 1

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# *Redefining Literacy*

### **A Text-Saturated World**

In this chapter we explore varying definitions of literacy, comparing how reading, text, and literacy have come to include different components both in schooling and in society at large. One of the key components that have necessitated revisiting more traditional definitions of literacy is the increase of digital texts in everyday life. Even though print-based texts can be considered multimodal, by varying format and genre, the multitudes of texts produced digitally have pushed new definitions to the forefront of literacy research and practice.

Reflect on your day's activities. Try to recall every instance in which you were interacting with text, written, spoken, or visual. In other words, try to quantify the moments in your day spent conveying or constructing meaning through text.

**A**s you were thinking about the various literacy events that comprise your day, you may or may not have been surprised by the fact that text (spoken, written, visual, printed, electronic) permeates most aspects of our lives. Even when we are engaged in activities that have other than cognitive goals, such as exercising, we often find ourselves dealing with text, such as listening to a portable radio or watching TV. In essence, we are constantly engaged in making meaning from **semiotic**, or signifying, systems, including words, images, and sounds. A semiotic is any type of sign or symbol used to represent an entity. So, anything from letters put together to form a word to corporate logos are semiotics. As consumers and producers of texts, we rely upon these

semiotics as a foundation to making meaning. These meaning-making processes help us to read both the word and the world (Freire, 1970). Because of the exponential growth of mass-mediated and textually driven conduits such as the Internet, we are constantly bombarded by text. And while this simple observation seems to drive home the point that the information age is in full swing, reading and literacy education in the United States often falls short of contending with the far-reaching implications of this expanded definition and confluence of text.

Historically, literacy pedagogy in the United States has followed two strong trends. First, it has focused on the early years of literacy development, implicitly and explicitly conveying the shortsighted notion that learning to read skills and processes are the most pivotal aspects of literacy pedagogy. Second, literacy pedagogy has also tended to vacillate between poles of epistemological grounding, lurching from paradigm to paradigm. Simply put, the field of literacy, like many fields in education, swings from one paradigm to another oppositionally posed paradigm. Quintessentially and overly simplistically depicted through the juxtaposition of synthetic phonics-based instruction versus holistic whole language approaches, this vacillation has resulted in the artificial and detrimental segmentation of concurrently complex and codependent literacy skills, processes, and practices. Throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations, presidential federal policies guiding funding opportunities to support reading instruction in the United States have been written and implemented to have all students reading by the end of third grade. Undergirding this policy is a narrow definition of reading that focuses strongly on oral reading fluency and automaticity of word calling (Stevens, 2001). This approach to literacy, one that is first limited to decoding and then further focused on oral reading fluency, reflects a dated concept of learning and denies an e-business globalized economy, one largely mediated through semiotics and textual exchanges (Luke & Luke, 2001). Becoming skilled at decoding the text, while irrefutably essential for any reader to become fluent, is sorely insufficient when not married with other demands necessary for negotiating today's text-saturated world. The assumption that fast decoding will free attention resources for comprehension denies the necessarily complex and concurrent use of these resources. Such an approach also falls short of negotiating the highly complex and deliberately explicit attention required for dynamic comprehension at factual, affective, and critical levels. For example, being a fluent decoder of text would not, in any way, help a novice user of Internet search engines quickly and strategically move through hundreds of search results, sorting the sources, validity of information, and possible connecting texts. While certainly an essential component to this literacy practice, it is far from being the exclusive or even most important skill.

In fact, strides in literacy research in the past 20 to 30 years should now help educators to better understand not only why some children struggle to succeed with school-sanctioned literacies but also what types of literacy skills, processes, and practices should be included as part of our curricula and pedagogy. One significant finding has been the **intertextual** nature of reading the world through words, including the processes of writing and oral communication. In other words, we construct meaning from the printed word based on our understanding of the world, and these meanings are intertwined among multiples sources of text: books, CDs, conversations, movies, Web sites, video games, pamphlets, TV shows, magazines, and so on (New London Group, 1999).

Another key advance from the 20th century is the debunking of the myth that students spend their elementary years learning to read and then reading to learn in their secondary years. Substantive evidence, found significantly within the field of content area literacy, supports the premise that learning to read is a complex array of skills and processes, modified by the reader to meet the particular content and purpose of a literacy task (e.g., Bean, 2001). This topic is also treated cogently in the International Reading Association's Adolescent Literacy Position Statement (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999).

However, arguably the single most salient point that can be drawn from the qualitative research agendas of the latter 20th century and thus far in the 21st century is the highly contextual and relative nature of reading and literacy. Landmark studies such as Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) *Ways With Words* brought home the elegantly simple concept that different communities embrace the negotiation of text in compelling but often wholly different ways. Understanding language and literacy as social practices has helped recent generations of researchers and teachers understand their students as competent meaning makers and has compelled them to find ways to make connections between particular, contextually understood literate practices (e.g., Lewis, 2002; Michaels, 1981; Moje, 2000). Other scholars, such as James Paul Gee, have pointed to the highly contextual nature of discourses, the ways of being, doing, and acting, according to particular situations and participants. At the same time, the electronic age has resulted in a veritable explosion of texts, many of which are conveyed in multiple groups through the media. Mastering the basic skills of decoding falls well short of the demands beckoned through these times. To that end, being a proficient reader can no longer be equated with being able to rapidly decode words in a classroom setting.

Paradoxically, concurrent with this emphasis on code-based definitions of reading, schoolwide programs that rely on repeated readings of decodable text, choral responses, and timed oral reading exercises have grown in popularity. While these trends are alarming for a number of reasons, one of the most basic areas of concern is how reading is defined in these policies.

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If reading is defined as an ability to decode text, a skill that can be acquired by the end of third grade, it follows that this performance objective is a rather teleological process based on mastery and rote skill—one in which students gain input from text without engaging in critical stances. Such a unitary definition of reading, easily quantified through a precise list of cumulative skills, strategies, and behaviors, has long been critiqued for leading to a deficit view of children and their meaning-making abilities. However, this type of restricted definition also places students, especially those who struggle with school-sanctioned literacies, at a particular disadvantage in a world that is increasingly driven by digital technologies, media saturation, and worldwide marketplaces that rely upon economies of attention (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1999). Such a definition of reading also erroneously sequences the parallel functions that proficient readers use concurrently to create meaning and critique texts.

It is our contention that we can no longer regard reading as a rudimentary sequence of skills. While the basic skills of decoding, comprehension, and appropriate use of texts have the same essential nature that they have always held, today's hypermediated world demands that we expand our definition of basic skills in reading to include interrelated processes that fit better under the term *literacy*. Also necessary is a revision of our view of what a proficient reader does. While proficient readers certainly are able to orally decode at a fluent rate, they also must be able to comprehend, use text pragmatically, and actively question texts that they encounter.

In particular, the goals of **critical literacy**, being able to tease out various agendas, purposes, and interests represented in texts, are necessary for all of our students, not simply defined as higher-order thinking skills and reserved for those students whom we deem proficient at decoding, and only then if time allows. Instead, aspects of critical literacy must become part and parcel of the definition of comprehension. In essence, by including critical literacy as part of several processes included in literacy, teachers, students, and teacher educators can begin to redraft their literacy instruction to more closely match the highly sophisticated demands of today's world.

### GENEALOGY OF THE CRITICAL: PAULO FREIRE

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As interest in critical literacy has grown over the past few decades, to varying effects, in different parts of the world, a relevant and appropriately critical question is, Whose theories and perspectives are informing critical literacy? As with other large theoretical frameworks available to support our thinking about learning and cognition, **critical theory** has several historical trajectories, situated meanings, and manifestations.

When critical literacy is conceptualized as the active and often resistant engagement with texts, it is derived from and genealogically linked to the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian philosopher, activist, and educator. Freire, through his work with adult literacy campaigns and efforts in Brazil, brought to bear education as a site for emancipation, empowerment, and social justice. Born and raised in low socioeconomic conditions, Freire earned recognition, acclaim, and even controversial attention for the emancipatory literacy education he conducted with adults in poverty-stricken areas of Brazil. He worked with adults to counter forces that kept them intellectually, culturally, and politically disempowered, and he did it through literacy education. Freire's 1987 book with Donaldo Macedo cast a view of literacy as cultural politics. That is, literacy training should not only provide reading, writing, and numeracy, but it should be considered "a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (p. 187). Literacy should at all times be analyzed according to whether it serves to "reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promote democratic and emancipatory change" (p. viii). Literacy as cultural politics is also related in Freire's work in emancipatory theory and critical theory of society. Hence, emancipatory literacy "becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices" (p. 159).

This view of literacy as a tool, process, and product that serves to empower those traditionally held outside of powerful positions, both informal and formal, is what informs the exploration of critical literacy in this book. We subscribe to a view that all texts are representations and that the practice of literacy is potentially a tool for empowerment or disempowerment. In helping students to become literate subjects of the state, we view the ability to critique texts as equally essential as the ability to decode them.

## DEFINING CRITICAL LITERACY

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Freebody and Luke (1990) define critical literacy as one of four processes that readers should employ when encountering text. Along with the more familiar practices of code breaker (coding competence), meaning maker (semantic competence), and text user (pragmatic competence), we need to consider the practices of reader as text critic. While each of these four processes marks an area of what it means to be literate, and each has, to varying degrees, been part of literacy pedagogy and curriculum, far less attention has been paid to the fourth process, being a text critic. This fourth dimension forces us to explicitly discuss the ways in which text is mediated as a tool of institutional shaping of discourses and social practices. This positioning is quite different from the

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traditional stance that text occupies in American educational and political discourse. Typically, texts, namely print-based books, are glorified as gateways to other worlds, keepers of stores of knowledge, and inanimate confidants and friends. In this way, texts are innocuous sources of information and wisdom. And while we can all think of certain texts that have performed those functions for us, to treat reading education in this sole manner belies the highly dialogic nature of classrooms, in which interactions shape knowledge, power, and discourse (Fairclough, 1989). Narrowly defined views of reading also deny the pervasive role that text, both print and visual, plays in shaping our identities, resources, and opportunities (Luke & Freebody, 1999). All four processes, as named by Luke and Freebody, work in conjunction, but the role of critically analyzing and transforming texts is one that is rarely sanctioned in school settings. Helping students to assume critical stances toward texts means supporting them in questioning the voices behind texts, who is represented and who is not, and what positions texts are assuming.

It is important to note that when we are talking about critical literacy, we make a distinction between its philosophical orientation and that of **critical reading**. Critical reading, arising from the liberal-humanist philosophical tradition, emphasizes such skill-based tasks as distinguishing fact from opinion and, at a more advanced level, recognizing propaganda in texts (Cervetti, Damico, & Pardeles, 2001). At that more advanced level, critical reading begins to edge in the direction of critical literacy, but it is still rooted in a Rationalist view of the world (Cervetti et al., 2001). That is, critical reading rests on the fundamental view expressed by Descartes and others that “knowledge of the world can be attained through reason, that this knowledge is universal and deductive in character, and that everything is fundamentally explainable by this universal system” (Cervetti et al., 2001, p. 4). In essence, meaning resides in texts to be deduced through careful, thoughtful exegesis.

In contrast, critical literacy views text meaning making as a process of construction with a particularly critical eye toward elements of the particular historical, social, and political contexts that permeate and foreground any text. Because critical literacy has its roots in critical pedagogy and therefore in Freirian and neo-Marxist approaches to social theory (Burbules & Berk, 1999), questions about power, privilege, and oppression are paramount. Thus, the reader is always looking behind the text to identify its hidden agendas, power groups with an interest in its message, and a recognition that all texts are ideological (Cervetti et al., 2001). When readers take this stance, they develop a critical consciousness, fostering a search for justice and equity by reading the meanings behind the text. Questions about whose version of history is sanctioned, whose energy policy is supported by a text, or how the reader or

characters in a novel are positioned by an author all fall within the realm of critical literacy. Indeed, these questions go well beyond a techno-rational critical reading stance. In essence, engaging in critical reading is a search for a verifiable reading, whereas critical literacy is the endeavor to work within multiple plausible interpretations of a text.

In an era of mass consumerism and fast capitalism (New London Group, 1999), critical literacy offers a balance point to counter hegemonic forces and simple solutions to complex issues. Most important, it places students and teachers in a questioning frame of mind that moves beyond didactic, factual learning. In fact, some researchers have found that it is with exactly those most marginalized students that critical pedagogy is able to be taken up readily and passionately (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Projects such as UCLA's youth participatory action research projects demonstrate how posing questions of representation and power are easily taken up by those who have experiential knowledge as outsiders to cultural, political, and economic capital.

Several studies have begun to surface in the United States in the past few years that explore potential uses of critical literacy in classrooms (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Lewis & Fabos, 2000; Stevens, 2001; Tobin, 2000; Young, 2000). Typically, these studies have drawn from popular culture texts to engage students' interests in exploring critical literacy roles. For example, Margaret Hagood (Alvermann et al., 1999) explored children's discussions as they explained why they shaped their self-created superheroes in certain ways and what visual images they used to depict traits such as gender, power, and personality. In another classroom, students shared examples of popular culture and explored questions of who was represented, who was not represented, what aspects of American society were reflected in the popular culture, and who stood to benefit or be hurt by the images (Stevens, 2001).

While this handful of studies sheds light on the great potential for critical literacy practices to create space for children's complex interpretations of media texts, few studies have explored this potentiality with texts more typically sanctioned in school settings. In fact, authors like Hagood (Alvermann et al., 1999) have drawn cautionary lines about the very real and often actualized danger of infringement upon students' **fandoms** from adultist perspectives. In addition to this caution, we also aver that a dominant association with critical literacy and popular culture texts implicitly promotes school-sanctioned texts as bias-free or not in need of critical inquiry. This very practice undermines one of the basic tenets of critical theory—that power, privilege, and oppression are inherent characteristics in all socially mediated contexts. In other words, all texts have biases, from the vibrant, polished videos on MTV, to the seemingly more innocent textbooks that are familiar to primary and secondary classrooms.

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In the next section, we explore a classroom scenario in which the same types of questions are posed to a school-sanctioned text. This fictional scenario is based on the authors' experiences with a few science teachers who have used critical literacy activities in their classrooms.

### MRS. CUTTER'S CLASS

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As the students filter into Mrs. Cutter's fifth-grade classroom, they notice the large, unwieldy science textbooks on their desks. A few students groan as they suspect another session of round-robin reading, as they are accustomed to this common practice when working with textbooks. While this textbook, *Scott Foresman Science* (Cooney et al., 2000), features the bright colors, bold headings, and graphics suggested by content area literacy researchers (e.g., Alvermann & Phelps, 1998), the students do not seem to be any more enraptured by its content. To set the stage for today's lesson and topic, Mrs. Cutter asks students to spend a few minutes freewriting about the recent energy crises that have been occupying the nation's headlines. During a whole class sharing session, several students offer what they recall of the news items.

Jeremy offers, "The news shows are all talking like we're going to run out soon."

Kirsten adds, "I heard from my cousin in California that her lights went out last week. They do it to save electricity for later."

After a few more students share some of their thoughts, Mrs. Cutter asks them to open their books to pages B134 and B135, which contain information about how electricity is siphoned to consumers. She asks Justin to read aloud the first paragraph. He reads the following section:

Different sources of energy can be used to turn a generator's drive shaft and produce electricity. Notice in each of the pictures below that the generator's drive shaft attaches to a turbine. Like a pinwheel that spins when air rushes past it, each turbine below spins as steam or water moves through it. This spins the drive shaft. The drive shaft turns a magnet inside a coil of wire in the generator. Electricity is produced. (p. B134)

After Justin has finished reading, Mrs. Cutter asks Jacwelin to read the next paragraph:

A few power plants use tides or waves as their energy source. Modern windmills, such as those to the right, use wind energy to spin built-in



generators. Altogether, generators produce almost all the electricity people use. Some devices produce electricity without a generator. Batteries change chemical energy directly into electrical energy. Special solar panels change light energy directly into electrical energy. (p. B135)

Mrs. Cutter then asks students to use the reading to answer the following questions that she displays using the overhead projector: (a) Who runs the power plants? (b) Who receives the electricity? (c) Is the electricity distributed in equal quantities? (d) How much does the electricity cost? and (e) What are all the possible alternative sources of energy?

After the students struggle with the questions for a few moments, Eric raises his hand and tells Mrs. Cutter that it doesn't seem like the answers to the questions can be found in the book.

"Great point, Eric. I knew that when I gave you guys the questions. Do you think that these are still good questions to pursue?" Mrs. Cutter asks. She leads the students in a discussion of the gap between the book's representation of electricity production and consumption and the realities of the current energy crisis. Mrs. Cutter then gives them the assignment for the day: to research how the information about electricity and energy should be written and to rewrite the passages in the textbook. Students work individually, in pairs, and small groups and use the textbook, trade books, and current periodicals on the Internet to investigate issues related to electricity.

At one point during the day, one group of students approaches Mrs. Cutter to ask if they can change the focus of their project to nuclear energy. When Mrs. Cutter inquires about the need to switch, the students point out the textbook's authors only devoted three to four paragraphs to nuclear energy, whereas other energy sources received three to four pages' worth of explanation and diagrams. Mrs. Cutter compliments the group on their critical reading of the text and encourages them in their newly defined project.

By the end of the day, most students are ready to share their writings. Before sharing their paragraph, Justin and his peers explain that they tried to rewrite the sentences so that the reader could tell who were the active agents. For example, the sentence that read "Electricity is produced" has been changed to "Public and private companies produce electricity and sell it to people for a profit."

Another group has constructed a list of pros and cons of using windmills as a power source. They cite the role of climate and the dominance of generators as obstacles to increased use of alternative sources of producing electricity.

At the end of the sharing session, Mrs. Cutter asks the students if they like their versions better than the textbook's. Most students nod to indicate that they like the revised versions better. Mrs. Cutter then asks the students if these versions

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could appear in a textbook. The students are not quite as collectively sure about this question. Some of the students maintain that the versions could be used, while others state that textbooks should stick to the facts. Mrs. Cutter asks the students to consider whether any of their versions used anything other than facts.

“No,” Chelsea clarifies, “it’s just that you could tell what we thought.”

“And you couldn’t tell what the textbook authors thought from their writing?” Mrs. Cutter asks.

“No, I don’t think so,” Chelsea concludes.

“Maybe they just think that electricity is given equally to everyone,” suggests Justin.

“Maybe,” Mrs. Cutter says. “Is that the opinion that they’d like you to form?”

The class continues to discuss the intentions of the textbook’s authors.

The preceding scenario highlights a possible situation in which students read for a purpose, construct meaning, and also assume critical stances toward a seemingly innocuous text. Conducting lessons that foster critical literacy requires that teachers explicitly confront their own beliefs and assumptions about the role of activities, discourse, and power within classrooms. Teachers must also be prepared to provide space for students to express the complex ways in which we respond to texts (Tobin, 2000). To assume that students are innocent dupes at the mercy of print and media texts is to also effectively silence their voices. The issues raised by critical literacy as a component of literacy pedagogy are complex, to say the least. They are also, however, apropos in today’s fast-paced, text-saturated, media-driven worlds.

### **PROBLEMATIZING CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS OF CRITICAL LITERACY**

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In this scenario, Mrs. Cutter provides guidance by acting as a sort of mediator between the text and her students as they construct comprehension and assume critical stances. This role is a common classroom application of critical literacy (Gilbert, 1993), as is providing multiple texts and using questions to raise issues of power and agency. However, this role is far from simplistic. As many authors have discussed, teachers who employ critical literacy questions and discussions with their students must wrestle with the complexities of opening the possibilities to alternative readings and meanings (e.g., Comber, 1993; Gilbert, 1993). Teachers may find themselves replacing the hegemonic positioning of traditional readings with their preferred reading. For example, would a feminist teacher be open to a student’s masculine reading of a popular

culture advertisement? On what bases could teachers decide that the construction of their critical comprehension was critical enough? In this sense, there is room for critical literacy to be interrogated by the rationalist principles of critical reading and thinking.

Another key aspect of critical literacy in the classroom is the question of which texts to use. As Gilbert (1993) posed, “How, for instance, can students learn about the social context of language, unless they are able to experience the impact of actual language practices in contexts that are of interest and concern to them?” (p. 76). Questions such as these underscore the need for critical literacy practices to be reformulated and adapted according to specific contexts, purposes, and participants. And while the endeavor of using critical literacy in the classroom is not without complication, it is also clear that its very complexities are the reasons why it should be pursued. Texts are used for various purposes and to varying degrees of success in today’s fast, text-saturated economy. It is no longer appropriate for classroom discussions of text to assume that all literacy forms are innocuous and equal in their use of power and agency. In a democratic society, it is imperative that we critique texts with the rigor that will empower our students to be proficient, purposeful, and savvy consumers and producers of text.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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For teachers who are embarking on the use of critical literacy in the classroom, a logical segue is through questioning, one of the most powerful scaffolding and modeling tools teachers can employ in the classroom. As a starting point to building critical literacy into comprehension activities, consider the examples below of these types of questions and inquiry points. Choose a text and address your reading of this text with these questions. With other participants, you might discuss the various interpretations and their plausibility:

- Who/what is represented in this text?
- Who/what is absent or not represented?
- What is the author trying to accomplish with this text?
- For whom was this text written?
- Who stands to benefit/be hurt from this text?
- How is language used in specific ways to convey ideas in this text?
- How do other texts/authors represent this idea?
- How could this text be rewritten to convey a different idea/representation?

## KEY TERMS FROM THIS CHAPTER

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*Critical literacy*: active questioning of the stance found within, behind, and among texts. Critical literacy is an emancipatory endeavor, supporting students to ask regular questions about representation, benefit, marginalization, and interests.

*Critical theory*: a broad epistemic framework that can be found in many fields in the social sciences and humanities. Generally, these arenas share in common a critique of dominance, a commitment to emancipation, and the use of critique and reflection as means to empowerment.

## RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

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