

Critical Education

Volume 2 Number 6

June 20, 2011

ISSN 1920-4125

Teaching Critical Literacy Using Cultural and Political Vignettes

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Citation: Darvin, J. (2011). Teaching critical literacy using cultural and political vignettes. *Critical Education*, 2(6). Retrieved from <http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/journal/index.php/criticaled/article/view/155>

Abstract

One way to engage students with critical, content-area literacy in secondary classrooms is by asking them to respond to what the author terms Cultural and Political Vignettes or CPVs. CPVs are cultural and/or political problems that are presented to respondents so that they can practice critical thinking and decision-making skills that they will need in both their classrooms and larger communities of practice. CPVs deal with cultural and political issues, but also with content-specific knowledge and critical problem solving. They are designed to ask respondents to reflect upon and question the values, biases, stereotypes, relationships, decision making processes, funds of knowledge and actions of both themselves and others. This article explores the use of CPVs as a pedagogical strategy to promote critical literacy in secondary classrooms. It provides examples from several content areas and discusses how and why CPVs help to engage students in critical literacy, particularly when the CPVs are in the form of situated performances.



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Introduction

One way to engage students with critical, content-area literacy in secondary classrooms is by asking them to respond to what I term Cultural and Political Vignettes or CPVs. CPVs are cultural and/or political problems that are presented to respondents so that they can practice critical thinking and decision-making skills that they need to successfully interact with people in both their classrooms and communities. CPVs deal with cultural and political issues, but also with content-specific knowledge and critical problem solving. They are designed to ask respondents to reflect upon and question the values, biases, stereotypes, relationships, decision making processes, prior knowledge and actions of both themselves and others. This article explores the use of CPVs as a pedagogical strategy to promote critical literacy in secondary classrooms. It provides examples from several content areas and discusses how and why CPVs help to engage students in critical literacy.

The CPV pedagogical strategy is one that I originally developed for graduate-level literacy education courses that I teach at a large urban university in New York City. After finding success using this strategy with my graduate literacy education students, I began to encourage them to experiment with CPVs in their own secondary classrooms. The results have been promising with regard to engaging secondary students with critical literacy in the content areas, a goal of great importance to both literacy educators and content area teachers alike.

The following CPV was submitted to me by one of my graduate students as part of an assignment in which they were asked to create CPVs for use in their secondary classrooms and provide written rationales for how and why they believed the CPVs would help to promote critical literacy. After using the CPVs in their secondary classrooms, they completed reflective papers discussing if and how the CPV helped to promote critical literacy with their students, whether they would use CPVs again in the future and if so, why. The results of this highly informal data collection and analysis were promising. All of the 55 graduate students indicated in their reflective papers that the CPV strategy was successful in helping to promote critical thinking and literacy and that they will use them again in their secondary classes. Excerpts from some of the graduate students' reflective papers are also provided.

A CPV Example in the Technology Classroom

An eighth grade Technology teacher and Literacy Specialist used a CPV as a post-reading review to assess if her students understood the complexity surrounding the pros and cons of technology. Concurrently in their Social Studies class, her students were studying the U.S. Constitution, Amendments, and Miranda Rights. In Technology class, they had just viewed the 2002 science fiction film "Minority Report," starring Tom Cruise and Colin Farrell and directed by Steven Spielberg. The film is loosely based on the Philip K. Dick (2002) novel of the same name and takes place in 2054. The film explores several themes, including whether or not people have free will, whether or not free will can alter the future and the roles that technology plays in both. The post-reading assignment read:

The government has come up with a way to prevent future crimes. They have developed technology with which they can catch violent criminals before they actually commit crimes. A special task force will be created to govern pre-

criminal acts and arrest the criminals before the acts are committed, including rapes, murders, muggings and terrorism. No trials will be held. Do you think this will make the world a better place? Is it fair? Does this new technology violate citizens' constitutional rights?

This assignment asked students to utilize their prior knowledge regarding both technology and history and to imagine possibilities that are both positive and negative. It encouraged problem-posing dialogue among students and is an excellent example of Shor's Model for Problem Posing (1992) in which "The dialogic process is self-evolving, not standardized. Developed in process, dialogue assumes the unique profile of the teachers, students, subject matter, and setting it belongs to" (p. 237). In creating this vignette, the teacher, Tenille, created a contextualized, critical literacy assignment that required students to be imaginative problem-solvers and think critically about both primary source documents and contemporary film. Finn (1999) believes that curriculum and methods are critical "when they are designed to enable students to ask critical questions: Who makes the decisions and who's left out? Who benefits and who suffers? What are the origins of unfair practices and situations? How could things be different? How could we bring about change?" (p. 184).

In her reflective paper about the class discussion that followed the students' written responses to the CPV, Tenille wrote:

A serious debate took place during the discussion of this CPV. The class was basically divided in half, and the students had strong feelings on both sides. One of the most interesting things was that the longer the discussion went on, the more students changed their original opinions and switched sides. They also kept going back to the things they were learning in Social Studies class about the Constitution and in my class about technology, trying to support their arguments with textual evidence. As a homework assignment, I asked the students to write about whether hearing the opinions of the others class members impacted their thinking and to explain how and why. This activity revealed the complexity of issues surrounding technology and asked my students to really consider the course content on a very deep level.

This excerpt from Tenille's reflective paper indicates that she found the CPV to be a successful pedagogical practice for teaching her students about an aspect of her technology curriculum that is complex and clearly asks students to engage in higher-level thinking. The higher-level thinking skills that the students utilized included: synthesizing prior knowledge from more than one content area, considering a complex problem from more than one perspective, utilizing their imaginations in order to envision a futuristic world in which technology is used in new ways, writing their responses so that they could be articulated to others, defending their positions verbally during a class debate, and reflecting upon their responses after hearing the opinions of others. This CPV and the discussion that followed helped to promote critical literacy as it is defined by McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) in their *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* article "Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding Reader Response."

CPVs and Critical Literacy

McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) developed four Principles of Critical Literacy that underpin their beliefs about critical literacy and are helpful in creating an understanding of what critical literacy is and how it functions. These four Principles state that:

1. Critical Literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation and action.
2. Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity.
3. Techniques that promote critical literacy are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used.
4. Examining multiple perspectives is an important aspect of critical literacy. (pp. 54-55)

These principles, created by the authors with regard to reader response, are also in alignment with CPV activities and can help to provide theoretical support for how CPVs can be used to bolster critical literacy in content area classrooms. When asking students to react and respond to content-specific situations and problems, either in writing or in the form of situated performances, they are encouraged to focus on issues of power and examine situations from multiple viewpoints and perspectives. CPVs ask students to use their prior knowledge with regard to particular content areas in ways that go deeper than simply answering recall or comprehension questions. Using CPVs in secondary classrooms is a pedagogical strategy that inherently promotes critical literacy because by their very design, as stated in the third of McLaughlin and DeVoogd's Principles, they are dynamic and can be adapted to the contexts in which they are used.

In the technology example following the Introduction, for instance, students were asked to focus on a problem and its complexity, while concomitantly examining several viewpoints concerning the government, technology, US citizens' constitutional rights and freedoms. They needed to combine knowledge from both their Social Studies and Technology courses and do so in such a way that promoted reflection, transformation and action. Following their written responses to the CPV, the students were occupied with conversations that encouraged them to think, imagine and problem-solve across disciplines.

Additionally, CPVs promote critical literacy and critical thinking because they encourage students to become less reliant upon a single print text and to synthesize information from various sources in order to inform their decision-making processes, and to juxtapose texts with conflicting meanings (Morgan, 1997), aspects of critical literacy that are of extreme importance. CPV activities and situated performances advance the use of various texts and varied language experiences (Hansen, 2009) and help students challenge the information presented in textbooks (Patterson & Speed, 2007). CPVs ask students to interact with content-specific situations that engage them with the cognitive aspects of the material, but also with their feelings and reactions (Barton & Levstik, 2003).

CPVs can clearly be associated with Shor's (1992) classic definition of critical literacy:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beyond surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse. (p. 129)

Shor goes on to discuss that the core of critical literacy is about thinking in-depth, questioning official knowledge and existing authority, evaluating traditional relationships, seeking understanding about the root causes of events, and imagining how to act in order to change the conditions reflected (1992), all of which relate directly to CPVs.

Finally, Freire's (1970) groundbreaking book about critical literacy and education, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provides several pillars of the theoretical framework that support the use of CPVs as a pedagogical strategy. These include his concepts of *conscientizacao*, the transformation of the student-teacher power relationship, his problem-posing method, the power of dialogue to "name the world" and his emphasis on transformative action to name a few.

Conscientizacao, for example, can be translated to mean "critical consciousness" and refers to "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 17). In the technology example, the students' *conscientizacao* was raised as they began to consider and question the contradictions between one's constitutional rights and the implementation of technology that would save lives, while clearly impeding citizens' constitutional freedoms. The student-teacher power relationship is also transformed while using CPVs because by their very nature, CPVs eradicate the banking concept of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970, p. 53). When using CPVs as a pedagogical tool the "teacher student contradiction" is reconciled so that all members of the class are both teachers *and* students. This can be further accomplished if the teacher responds to the CPV at the same time as the students and does not share her response until the class discussion is well underway. The teacher also may choose to change her thinking as a result of hearing other class members' responses and should indicate to the class if she has done so. This will help the students to see that the teacher is raising her *conscientizacao* by engaging in dialogue and reciprocal problem-posing with her students.

As Freire points out, "Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information" (p. 60). When using CPVs, students are no longer passive listeners and become "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 62). CPVs are an excellent way to engage participants in problem-posing that will engage them in meaningful dialogue and ultimately transformation and action. Freire (1970) writes:

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems related to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting

comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated.
(p. 62)

The technology CPV helped the students to take course material that they might normally see as unrelated to their everyday lives and experiences and relate it directly to themselves and their changing world. They were able to see how technology and citizens' rights, two things that they would not necessarily connect on their own, could positively and negatively impact society. In the future, when they are asked to consider other issues related to technology, it is likely that they will be more critical and look at the possible impact that the new technology may have on citizens' rights and freedoms. As an extension activity, the teacher could ask students to write about or discuss actions that could be taken to educate others about the possible dangers of technology that impacts citizens' rights and freedoms. A current example of this could be the full-body scanners that have been recently been installed in airports in attempt to stop terrorism. These scanners are controversial because they are virtual "strip-searches" and invade people's privacy. Students could form a technology-awareness club that would promote awareness in their school about issues such as these, thus enabling them to help educate others and take meaningful action.

CPVs are dynamic and can be created for any discipline. They can be used as pre-reading, during reading, or post-reading activities, and can be responded to in writing, verbally, or in the form of situated performances. One aspect of CPVs that remains constant, however, is that they *always* require their respondents to do the kind of in-depth thinking, questioning, and evaluating that McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), Shor (1992) and Freire (1970) discuss in their work on critical literacy and education.

Using CPVs to Develop Critical Literacy in Secondary Content-Areas Classrooms

At the beginning of the school year, CPVs can be presented to students in a written format and students can respond to them in writing and then share and discuss their responses with partners, small groups, or the whole class. For example, early in the school year, a teacher of ninth grade introductory theater arts, Lawrence, wanted his students to understand the concept of an ensemble. He desired his students to appreciate the importance of showing ensemble spirit in a production and to comprehend that the ensemble is the backbone of any production. Without it, the production tends to fail. He also wanted his students to question their own perceptions of tolerance and understand the need to accept all ensemble members in a production. He gave them the following CPV:

Congratulations! You have just joined the cast of the musical *Evita* that will be performed at our school in December. After attending a few rehearsals, you begin to notice that many of the older theater students do not treat another cast member well. This member of the ensemble is black and speaks African American Vernacular English, rather than Standard English. When she speaks, they giggle and make nasty comments. You even hear another cast member say, "Wow that girl is stupid. She doesn't even know how to speak." How would you handle the situation? What could you say and/or do?

This CPV asked theater students to internalize the concept of the ensemble in ways that they likely would not have done if they had simply taken notes about it or discussed it in class. This teacher later asked the students to create situated performances of the CPV and asked them to role-play dialogues in groups to problem-solve the situation. He expressed to me privately that at the school where he teaches, the percentage of white students in the theatre program is rather high, and he wanted to help sensitize the white majority to the linguistic differences of several members of the class and, in a sense, do some preventative work to avoid linguistic prejudice and discrimination.

He used this CPV as a teaching tool to begin a dialogue about linguistic differences, while also addressing a theater concept that is essential to the students' future successes in the theater program. As McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) point out, "There is no list of methods that work the same way in all contexts all the time" (p. 55). Lawrence adapted the CPV method to make it applicable and meaningful in the particular context of his classroom and school. He reflected on both his instructional goals and the cultural and political nuances of his school and created an approach to critical literacy that was both multifaceted and situated.

CPVs as Situated Performances

Later in the school year, groups of students can be presented with CPVs, either teacher or student created, and asked to engage in situated performances. At this stage, students are asked to problem-solve without being given the time to carefully consider and write down their responses first. Dramatic exercises, such as situated performances, advance critical literacy by helping students "access conceptual information, understand dense readings, review vocabulary and tackle controversial issues" (Orzulak, 2006, p. 79). Situated performance is connected to research on dramatic role-play, but differs in several important ways that make it more suitable for critical analysis and reflection. According to Finders and Rose (1999) situated performances are role-taking activities with the following characteristics:

1. Learners actively participate by assuming specific subject positions (as opposed to merely observing others' actions or imagining their own actions);
2. The social, cultural, institutional and interpersonal contexts for the actions and situational constraints are foregrounded; and
3. The performed actions, motives, and circumstances are subjected to critical reflection and revision. (p. 208)

In situated performance activities, students are selected to play roles in the CPV and respond to the situation as it occurs. The other students are encouraged to support the actors engaged in the performance, not to criticize and point out all the things that they may believe the actors are doing "incorrectly". One way to begin situated performances of the CPVs is to provide the CPV to the student actors, give them a few minutes of brainstorming time, and then ask them to demonstrate a brief dialogue that illustrates how they might positively react to that particular

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situation. Another way is simply begin the dialogue without brainstorming and see how the student actors respond.

This process of asking students to be immersed in situated performances is particularly powerful with regard to retention because as Willingham (2003) explains, “Cognitive science has shown that what ends up in a learner’s memory is not simply the material presented – it is the product of what the learner thought about when he or she encountered the material” (p. 37).

An important difference between situated performance and many other forms of dramatic role play is that immediately following the situated performances, the student actors are asked to dialogue about what they were thinking and feeling during the performance and how those thoughts and feelings may have impacted their decision-making processes. This meta-cognitive feature is unique in that it asks participants to consider a myriad of factors that may have influenced their thinking and actions with regard to the situation being addressed.

Audience members can participate in situated performances of CPVs in several ways. Instructors can ask audience members to respond to the actors during the performances themselves by briefly stopping the dialogue and soliciting comments or asking students to write their comments, anonymously if desired, on cards which can be shared with the actors or the entire class during or after the performance. Another variation is to ask another group of student actors to “challenge” the first by responding to the same CPV in a different manner and then asking the class to compare and contrast the ways in which both groups responded to the same CPV.

An example of a CPV where students engaged in situated performances was developed in preparation for a debate in a senior-level US Government class. It was aimed at college-bound high school students who were in the process of filing for financial aid for college. A twelfth grade History teacher, Shane, broke his students up into small groups and gave each group the following CPV. He instructed them to discuss the CPV first, then to write their ideas down. He then asked groups to present their solutions to the CPVs as situated performances and a whole class debate. The CPV that he provided to his students was:

You are friends with several students in your class who have become interested in politics and have questions and concerns about some of the rules laid out in the New York City School Chancellor’s Regulations. Everyone, including you, believes that these regulations are unfair. These students plan to peacefully protest in an act of non-violent civil disobedience at City Hall. Your friends have told you that they don’t plan on leaving without getting answers to their questions, even if it means being arrested by the police. An arrest on your record could potentially harm your chances of receiving financial aid for college next year, and without it, you would be unable to attend college. Do you protest with your friends and fight for what you believe to be right, knowing that doing so could result in you getting into serious trouble? Do you choose not to join your friends and let them protest without you? How do you decide what is right in this situation?

This CPV clearly “focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 54). The respondents are asked to critically evaluate a situation that asks them to weigh the pros and cons of standing up for something that

they believe and to consider the ramifications of their actions. In responding to this CPV in the forms of situated performance and debate, the students must articulate their positions verbally, allowing them to practice their oral communication skills and to notice and comment upon both the verbal and body language of the participants. Because Shane chose to create a CPV that “focuses on a problem and its complexity” and “examines multiple perspectives” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, pp. 54-55), he asked his students to engage in what critical educators term *problematizing*. Doing so requires “seeking alternative explanations as a way of more fully acknowledging and understanding the complexity of the situation” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 55). As part of his reflection, Shane wrote:

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching US Government is getting students to understand how things like laws, ethics and civil rights can actually affect their lives. They often see the course material as boring, and as a history teacher, I am always looking for ways to make the material more relevant. Asking the students to respond to this CPV provided a motivational tool at the beginning of the class to spur the verbal debate. It was a way to start a serious dialogue and get them thinking about something that could possibly occur in their lives. The CPV did something that the textbook could not. It helped them to ask important questions and evaluate the course material more critically.

The CPV activities that Shane’s students engaged in were in alignment with Freire’s concept of problem-posing education because the questions and issues in the CPV are open-ended and do not have correct responses that can be taught to the students by the teacher. It is only through problem-posing, dialogue and reflection that they can come to their own solutions and decide the best courses of action for themselves as individuals.

Read and Revisit: Pairing CPVs with Texts to Engage Students in Critical Literacy

Finally, another way to employ CPVs is using Read and Revisit, whereby students respond to a CPV, either in writing or in the form of a situated performance, and then are asked to read a text or texts in which fundamental themes relate directly to the problem being considered in the CPV. After reading, discussing and deconstructing the text(s), students are asked to revisit their earlier responses, written or performed, and decide whether or not they want to modify them as a result of having completed the readings. If the students choose to keep their original responses or simply add additional thinking or information to them, they are asked to explain why and to provide textual support in the form of quotations to supply evidence as to why they are keeping their original responses the same.

One of the greatest assets of the Read and Revisit CPV strategy as a pedagogical tool is that it allows a teacher to see the progression of students’ thoughts over time and to see what impact, if any, the course texts have on the students’ thinking. Also, it allows the students’ problem-posing to help shape the curriculum, another vital tenet of critical literacy. The teacher is able to better identify students’ questions and areas of confusion and attempt to address them in subsequent classes. It is a form of assessment that is formative, rather than summative, and can help shape and inform future instruction.

An example of a CPV that would have lent itself nicely to the Read and Revisit CPV strategy was developed by an eighth grade teacher of Social Studies, Susan, and was used with students when she was doing a unit on the U.S. Civil War. The topic of the lesson was the Fugitive Slave Act. The CPV that was presented to students enabled them to imagine the difficult choices that both black and white people had to face during this shameful time in American history. The CPV said:

Imagine that you are a white Northerner and a runaway slave from the South knocks on your door in the middle of the night. He asks you to hide him. You are aware of the Fugitive Slave Act, and you know that if a police officer knocks on your door and finds the runaway slave, you will be held responsible and your consequence will be jail time and a harsh fine. You have your own family with two children. What would you do?

In responding to this CPV, the students were asked to envision the consequences of their imagined actions and the impact that those actions might have on others. This kind of problem-solving is useful on many levels because it prepares students for situations that they will have in the future when they will be forced to make difficult decisions. Students can practice the skills they need in reality when they have safe spaces that allow them the opportunity to fail without consequences in which to practice (Rosoff, 2007).

At the conclusion of the Civil War Unit, after the students had read primary source and secondary source documents about the Civil War and fugitive slaves, they could have been asked to revisit this CPV to see if their responses changed as a result of their new content-area knowledge. Their teacher could have used this CPV as an assessment to see how the students had changed their thinking, if at all, and could have used the revisited CPVs to see if there were gaps in the students' content-area knowledge or things that she needed to re-teach or address in a different way in this unit.

One of the greatest aspects of CPVs as a pedagogical tool in secondary content-area classrooms is the sheer versatility with which they can be used. In addition to the variations that I have already described, CPVs can be utilized as motivational tools or ways to activate prior knowledge at the beginning of a lesson and, as in the previous example, as forms of assessment in the middle or conclusion of a lesson or unit. As McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004) assert, "Techniques that promote critical literacy are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used" (p. 54). It is up to the teacher and students to create CPVs that are appropriate for the contexts in which they are being used.

CPVs that Can Promote Critical Literacy across Various Disciplines:

In addition to the content area CPV examples that have already been provided, teachers can use CPVs with students to address more general themes with students across various disciplines. A seventh and eight grade teacher of special education, Mike, who works primarily with emotionally disturbed teenagers, wrote:

Many of the students in my classes have poor interaction skills with others. These students do things that are just down right rude and obnoxious to each other and

due to their disabilities, do not always understand how to do the right thing in many situations. I believe that by helping them to realize the importance of being kind to others, it may help these students to better understand that there are benefits to being a kind person.

In light of this, he provided his students with the following CPV:

You and your friends are riding the subway and you notice an elderly lady who you don't know having difficulty getting up to exit the train. What would you do? Would you assist her? Why or why not?

Although this CPV seems relatively simple on the surface, it is more complex than one may realize at first glance, particularly for students who suffer from emotional challenges. This CPV spurred a lively discussion among Mike's urban students about issues such as talking to strangers, helping others, peer pressure, and perceptions of the elderly to name a few. It asked his students to take positions and to back up those positions with reasoning and explain their decision-making processes, skills that are imperative for adolescents to develop, particularly those who have difficulty with interpersonal relationships and communication skills. This CPV afforded the students an opportunity to consider a real world problem, and also allowed the teacher a window into his students' thought processes.

Another example of a CPV that was used to help develop a skill that is necessary across all content areas was created by a high school English teacher, David, who wanted to improve his students' discussion skills, a goal of all content-area teachers. He had students working in literature circles and noticed that sometimes students from one racial or gender group tended to dominate the discussion. He used the following CPV to sensitize his students to this problem and help them get more out of their literature circle discussions:

You are in a class of 14 girls and 17 boys. You notice that during the class discussion, the boys in the class tend to dominate. While the girls listen attentively, they rarely share their ideas. The teacher asks students who haven't shared to contribute to the discussion, but generally, this invitation is ignored. What suggestions would you give to the teacher and other students to get more students involved in the discussion?

Going back to Shor's (1992) definition of critical literacy, this CPV asked students to evaluate the root causes and personal consequences of the boys dominating the class discussions and not providing support and encouragement for the girls to share their thoughts and ideas. This CPV also contains Paulo Freire's (1970) notion, later adopted by all critical literacy proponents, including Shor (1992) and McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), that critical literacy should ultimately result in change, once people come to understand the causes of inequalities. By asking the student respondents for suggestions as to how to get more students involved in the class discussions, David sought to develop his students' critical awareness of the subtle oppression that was occurring during the class discussions and empower them to practice a form of active citizenship in his classroom to help right the silencing of the female students' voices and transform their literature circles into more equitable forums of communication.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why some content-area teachers are skeptical about integrating literacy practices and pedagogical strategies into their secondary classrooms. These include, but are not limited to, feeling that literacy integration is too time-consuming (O'Brien & Stewart, 1990), that doing so is not efficient for the demands they face as suppliers of content (Moje, 2008), that literacy strategies place an unfair burden of teaching reading on them when they should be teaching content (Readance, Bean, & Baldwin, 1989), that reading is its own content and should be limited to literacy and English classes, and that they are ill-equipped to teach literacy in the first place (Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann & Dishner, 1985). All of these issues are brought up frequently in a master's-level, "Literacy in the Content Areas" course that I teach at a large, diverse, urban college in New York City.

What content-area teachers all tend to agree on, however, is the need to teach secondary students critical thinking and imaginative problem-solving skills that can be utilized and applied within and across disciplines. As I see it, this is the key point of entry where critical literacy instruction, illustrated by literacy activities such as the CPVs and accompanying situated performances outlined in this article, and the teaching of content-area knowledge can be seamlessly integrated and thus valued by secondary teachers and students alike. Osburg (2003) writes:

Well-conceived assignments of an analytic nature are imaginative in the best sense. They create a logical, ordered vision of whatever is being analyzed... Imagination, coupled with knowledge, is the key. And the interaction between these processes is complex, circular, recursive. In order to better help students read, speak, listen and live, we must better understand the relationship between knowledge and imagination. (p. 58)

In my view, content-specific CPV assignments, such as those previously exemplified in this article, combine imaginative analysis with content-area understanding in the truest sense. The complex, circular, recursive processes to which Osburg refers are, in fact, the same habits of mind associated with powerful, critical literacy and the complex, higher-level thinking skills that are touted as being essential to secondary students' educational growth and experience. It is my sincere desire that secondary teachers from all content-areas will experiment with CPVs, particularly in the form of situated performances, in their classrooms and combine critical literacy and content-area instruction in ways that support their students in becoming more active participants in their own learning and ultimately, in a more questioning and democratic society.

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Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

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