

Teaching for Social Justice: Critical Literacy Projects

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Our concern for a strong pedagogical approach to education grew from what we learned both in and out of the classroom in our work with Latino and English Language Learners (ELL). These students are entering our secondary classrooms with inadequate academic skills and little academic interest. Their chances of graduating from high school are 50% (Schemo, 2003). The research of Balfanz and Legters (2004), Haney, Madaus, Abrams, Wheelock, Mico, and Gruia (2004), Johnson (IDRA, 2004), and Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) highlights this discrepancy and provide a solid backdrop for the necessity of a pedagogy that engages students in the learning process and catapults them into grade level work and academic rigor. We chose Freire's (1993) problem-posing education because it uses the cultural interests and needs of the students to foster the development of critical consciousness. This pedagogy not only accelerates skill development (Freire taught illiterate peasants to read in 6 months), but also helps students develop into responsible citizens who can advocate for equality in their social, political, and economic lives.

The first section of this paper will contrast banking education with problem-posing education to show the characteristic advantages of the latter approach. The second section offers an example of a critical literacy project initiated by Whitford and developed by Radigan that moves through a problem-posing process. The paper concludes with a suggestion for a problem-posing exercise. This paper was written to encourage educators to adopt or continue the development of critical literacy projects that expand the minds and lives of our students in their growth toward becoming democratic citizens.

Banking Education v. Problem-Posing Education

We turned to Freire's problem-posing education and a critical literacy approach in our teaching because we found that "generative," thematic units grounded in a call for social justice both narrowed the achievement gap for our reluctant

learners and facilitated an understanding of the contradictions in their social, political, and economic lives that engender inequity. Banking education is the lecture/worksheet/testing model so common in high school classrooms. Problem-posing education demands more from the teacher and the students with its controversial content and its dialogical approach. Teachers learn about the interests, culture, and needs of their students and then tailor units of instruction to those needs. The materials and strategies used should foster discussion in the classroom with exposure to multiple viewpoints and a constructivist approach of both teacher and student to learning. The table below presents the contrasting characteristics of these two pedagogical approaches.

Table 1. Freire’s Analysis of Educational Approaches

Banking Education	Problem-Posing Education
monological	dialogical
communiqués	communication
object of educational process	subjects of educational process
narration	cognition
receptacle, depository	praxis and conscientization
marginal - voiceless	“inside” society- voiced
unconsciousness	critical consciousness
fatalism	transformation
living “in” the world	living “with” the world
spectator	re-creator
disguises inequity	works for social justice

We have seen students move from passive “receptacles” to critically conscious students. The students learned to see things from multiple viewpoints, “*by trying to put ourselves into their sides, like the way they think.*” They also realized the importance of social, political, and economic issues in their lives and the value of taking action to improve the conditions to which they had become accustomed. As one young student explained,

We didn’t know they were cutting back the health for the older people and the children. They (the elderly) don’t have the money. They need that help. I will take a stand and protest against it to state legislators.

Students not only became the agents of their lives in learning, but they also began to develop social capital that encouraged them to navigate through the societal system that seems to limit their advancement.

A Critical Literacy Project

For two years, Radigan would go to observe students in Whitford’s Legislative Project as they made presentations on issues that crossed the English/Social Studies curriculum. The problem-posing topics were close to the lives of these

minority, urban students: immigration, dropouts, Medicare for the elderly, health care for Children, police profiling, and volunteering for the armed services. After the dropout presentation, the principal invited Radigan and her undergraduate students to join with two junior English class to “really dig into the dropout problem” and determine its causes.

“Why do kids drop out of school?”

“Most kids who drop out are lazy. They don’t care.”

These were the initial responses of students in to the reason kids drop out from school. However, when these students began to investigate the lives of dropouts, their own lives, and the policies in their school, they realized that they were leading exclusionary lives that forced them to find power in activities that were not sanctioned by their school life. The policies of the state and school district were excluding an understanding of the lives these students lead. They had attendance problems because they interpreted for their Spanish-only parents at doctor’s offices and in stores, because they work evenings after school to support family members. They were removed from school or penalized financially for gang fights. Gang membership defined many students’ identity in their neighborhoods. This identity was excluded from the life of the school.

The junior students went through five stages for this problem-posing process. In stage one, the high school students reviewed current dropout literature in small groups. In the second stage, the students moved into the field to interview students, student leavers, parents, teachers, and administrators. In the third stage, the students developed presentations and individual papers in new small groups based on themes found in the interviews and in the school district’s research on dropouts. In the fourth stage, a core group of interested students from the large group met after school to develop the final presentation. In the final stage, the students presented their findings to the district superintendent and the mayor’s wife in a city-wide dropout conference. A documentary of their work was made by a local television station and was shown on evening television. A charter school for returning students was added to the high school with school district approval.

A Problem-Posing Exercise

Even though we do not believe that problem-posing can be reduced to a set of steps, we offer this exercise as an example of one way to begin or continue to make critical pedagogy a part of your teaching.

- Use an ill-structured problem (no simple solution) that is of interest and/or importance to your students, i.e., **Describe the immigration policy the United States should adopt.** (The topic can be drawn from literature readings, nonfiction readings, and pictures. History has many interpretations. Health and the environment lend important topics for

science and health classes. Math problems in economics and family life are valuable as are construction and building.

- Form small groups to read articles from multiple viewpoints.
 - Can be drawn from literature reading, nonfiction reading, and picture
 - Can be drawn from history
 - Can be a health issue connected with science or physical education
 - Can involve math problems with the issues of minimum wage and life expenses for a person or family
- Interview family and community members. (Develop an interview protocol and practice w/ 1-3 main questions, i.e., “Describe your experience as an immigrant.” OR “Describe your experience with immigrants you know.”)
- Construct a T chart with point/counterpoint arguments on large paper. Example: open immigration v. closed immigration. (With large project determine major themes drawn from articles and interviews.)
- Synthesize opinions of group participants Discuss what policy or approach should be advocated. Ask: “What can you do to facilitate change for social justice?”

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