

Critical Thinking: Foundational for Digital Literacies and Democracy

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This is the first of four columns in volume 56 of *JAAL* addressing digital literacies and popular culture. Different authors will present topics relating to themes of what has been called new literacies, highlighting the sociological nature of literacy in the 21st century. The columns will explore critical perspectives on teaching and learning new literacies, with attention to intersections of race, class, gender, and linguistic diversity.

A healthy and vibrant democracy requires an engaged citizenry who think critically, take positions on complicated issues, and work collaboratively to solve problems. These qualities parallel demands for 21st-century literacies that deal with the sociological nature of reading and writing multimodally in an increasingly globally connected world. Schools are public spaces that are wonderfully situated to lead efforts in developing engaged citizens ready to meet the demands of 21st-century literacies. What if our students not only had high test scores and high graduation rates but also exhibited a strong sense of community and deep commitment to work for civic good? I believe we would feel proud, and we would point to the successful system that has developed courageous, hopeful, democratically minded thinkers.

However, that was not the reaction among members of the school district of Tucson, Arizona, to its acclaimed Mexican American studies program. Instead of commending teachers and students

involved in this highly successful venture, district officials banned the curriculum and removed all associated textbooks. They may have stopped short of burning the books, but let's make no mistake: removing the texts from classrooms and prohibiting teachers from using them are serious acts (Biggers, 2012; Herreras, 2012). According to the district, the curriculum and its books promote the overthrow of the government. What are these subversive books that were being used by teachers to incite such upheaval? I wish I could list them all here, because it would read like a literacy teacher's fantasy. These are just a few of the authors represented: Tomás Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, James Baldwin, William Shakespeare, Howard Zinn, and Paulo Freire (for a complete list of the banned books, go to www.librotraficante.com). High school kids were reading and discussing these very books! They were making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. Why would school district officials feel so threatened by these books and call them un-American? Could it be related to race? It was a Mexican American studies program that was targeted. Classes on Chicano literature and history were stripped from the curriculum.

In the field of literacy education, we often talk about culturally responsive pedagogy with multicultural curriculum that draws on the funds of knowledge of our communities. Literacy instruction that is culturally and linguistically affirming can help with engagement and motivation and may bridge school objectives and out-of-school literacies (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). In the case of the Tucson ethnic studies program, we have a beautiful example of a culturally responsive curriculum producing engaged students, readers, and critical thinkers, individuals who were prepared to be



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active participants in a great democracy. (For more information about the curriculum, the students, and the struggle to defend the program, see Dr. Roberto Rodriguez's blog at www.drcintli.blogspot.com.) This struggle is not over, and I feel sure that censorship will not prevail; however, it does highlight some key issues of our times. One of these relates to the role of schools in creating active participants in a democracy. Active democratic participation requires critical thinking in literacy terms: this means reading the world (Freire, 1970). What does it look like instructionally to develop such thinkers?

Perhaps a look at 21st-century literacies holds some possibilities in the pursuit of answers. Some advocates of digital literacies point to the communicative potential of the Internet and new technology that has become increasingly accessible and provides users with the power to publish multimodal texts to worldwide audiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). These technological tools can be empowering because they allow ordinary, often marginalized, people to become producers of culture (Kellner & Share, 2009). We presently have many examples from around the globe of people, especially young people, using digital tools to publish texts that challenge the status quo and push back against powerful monopolies on representations of our world. As we are seeing in these global examples, digital literacies have proved integral to the organization, support, and maintenance of democratic movements, as was the case with the revolution in Egypt and Occupy Wall Street in the United States.

Maybe it should come as no surprise that U.S. schools have been slow to incorporate multimodal literacies into official curriculum (Choudhury & Share, 2012), for schools have been called purveyors of status quo that reproduce social inequities (Apple, 1990). Attempts to reform curriculum and pedagogy in ways that threaten our social hierarchy are often met with severe repression, as seen in Tucson. Technology education that commonly occurs in schools tends to emphasize technical skills, such

as how to use computers and software to produce traditional school products (e.g., keyboarding, word processing, and even digital video production in some cases). Although the skills are important, they cannot stand alone. Less attention has been paid to critical literacies associated with multimodal production and consumption (Kellner & Share, 2009). A focus on such critical digital literacies is sorely needed on a wide scale if we wish to develop critical thinkers who will be engaged participants in our democracy.

The Challenge

Putting literacy education, and specifically digital literacies, to the service of democracy is a tall order. However, many examples exist of educators incorporating new literacies to engage students in reading and writing the world. Teachers and researchers such as Donna Alvermann, Barbara Comber, Margaret Hagood, Glynda Hull, Jason Irizarry, Cynthia Lewis, Carmen Luke, Ernest Morrell, Theresa Rogers, Julian Sefton-Green, Vivian Vasquez, and many others provide insights into work with students of all ages who are critically analyzing and producing multimodal texts. Such work can help equip students with tools (not just technical skills) for critiquing and creating culture and for voicing diverse and divergent perspectives to large audiences. In these times characterized by seemingly limitless volumes of information, our charge as literacy educators must include equipping students to critically read multimodal texts and to understand and gain experience in the production of new(er) media.

To do this, teachers need not be experts in technology. In fact, willingness to learn from students may provide opportunities to highlight and honor out-of-school literacies of students (Hagood, 2012). For example, I recently observed a high school classroom in which students were creating digital poetry based on social issues they determined significant and important enough to publicize (Gainer & Lapp, 2010). One student in the class had extensive knowledge of computer animation and acted as advisor to the classroom teacher and other students when they had questions and needed assistance on their own projects. In this case, and in other cases where teachers are tapping digital technologies to promote critical literacy, teachers guide students' attention, discussions, and analysis and create space for collaborative projects in which students employ

critical thinking in the production of multimodal texts that can speak to mainstream representations that often marginalize, censor, or overlook diverse perspectives.

Examples of Out-of-School Literacies That Can Engage Learners in School

One need only turn on the television or read a newspaper to find material for focused study that can lead to conversations that engage students in high-level critical digital literacies projects. Again, I argue that emphasis should be on critical thinking through analysis, discussion, and production of texts. A perfect place to start is with an examination of current events.

The past two years have been particularly rife with examples of new literacies being employed by people struggling for democracy. In fact, the surge in widespread protest movements around the world led *Time* magazine to honor “the protester” as 2011’s person of the year. These movements from different regions have been compared with those that occurred in 1968, another year that saw global protests by young people challenging institutionalized violence committed by those in power. Although the media has changed significantly since the 1960s, it was media with multimodal texts that contributed to the sparks that ignited and spread democratic movements.

It could be argued that the new media of the 21st century—which is similar to the way new media of the 1960s played a large role in the development and sustainability of protests throughout the world—has even more to offer. Tools such as smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, and the like have provided average citizens with the means of production and wide-scale reach in terms of publication (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Perhaps more than ever before, literacy—multimodal literacy—is being put to the service of democratic ideals and social change.

In the last two years, largely thanks to new media, we have seen the emergence of movements fighting for political and economic reform in the form of Occupy Wall Street and other similar iterations. We have seen the explosion of multiple uprisings in the Middle East, where people are demanding justice and political reform, often at the expense of their lives. Groups such as Anonymous and WikiLeaks have shaken up powerful governments and corporations through computer hacking and the public sharing of confidential information. All these examples and

many others have been initiated and spread using the tools of 21st-century literacies.

Teaching is not telling, and incorporating critical digital literacies into classroom practice does not mean directing students to support widespread protest movements. Teaching students to use critical thinking to analyze and discuss ways that new literacies support democratic movements throughout the world, and then applying this knowledge to their own writing of digital texts, is to teach the principles of democracy. Doing so is not ideologically neutral; however, neither is it leftwing or rightwing or an attempt to indoctrinate students into a single “correct” way of thinking.

Take, for example, WikiLeaks, an organization that publishes private, secret, and classified media. Recently, the work of the organization has created such a stir that its founder and director, Julian Assange, has become a household name. To many in the United States, Assange is considered dangerous and a criminal for publishing sensitive government material. Less publicized in the U.S. media is that WikiLeaks was recently awarded a Walkley Award for excellence in journalism. The Walkley—Australia’s most prestigious award for journalism—is the equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize. Judges for the Walkleys praised WikiLeaks for leading a global publishing coup that achieved justice by revealing inconvenient truths and forcing transparency (Meade, 2011). So, is WikiLeaks a friend or a foe? Does WikiLeaks fall into a tradition of muckraking or investigative journalism, which is sometimes controversial but necessary for a healthy democracy? Does WikiLeaks go too far with its approach to the sharing of information? Why is the information so sensitive, and for whom? In other words, who is served by keeping certain information secret? Is anyone served by sharing the information? Grappling with questions such as these is at the heart of a critical literacy curriculum. The rise of 21st-century literacies offers great possibilities for teachers to engage students in critical thinking based on digital texts. Such thinking is the foundation of a healthy democracy.

I began this column with an example from Tucson that highlighted the attack on Mexican American studies and the banning of the use of traditional print-based texts that promoted cultural affirmation, critical literacy, and increased academic achievement among students engaged in the program. I believe that the dangers the Tucson school board felt had nothing to do with what was written in any of the books that were removed from classrooms. The danger parallels the threat felt by those in power

throughout the world when faced with protests by organized individuals demanding justice. Organized people are dangerous to oppressive institutions, and critical digital literacies offer a powerful tool to unify large groups around democratic causes. As I write this column, a bus of *libro-trafficantes* is headed to Tucson (learn more about them by visiting www.librotrahicante.com). In their bus they carry old-fashioned books to distribute to young people who have been denied by their school system the right to honor their own history, art, culture, and language. By the time you read this piece, the bus will have arrived, and the story may have been covered in mainstream media and, perhaps, even caused a buzz on the Internet. You may not have been physically on that bus, just like you might not have been physically present in democratic movements in other parts of the world, but digital literacies provide space for us to acknowledge, support, and join in solidarity with democracy in action.

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