

Good Schools:
Using Transformative Practices to Develop Critical Literacy
Bryce Ridgen, Celina Dumas, & David Schroder
Brandon University

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Overview of Educational Issues

Dr. A. Novak

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Using Transformative Practices to Develop Critical Literacy

Introduction

Education needs to evolve, in order to provide students with the skills required to define their own identity and reshape the power structures that govern society. The future of education in “good schools” must be based on student-centered learning, where students work with the teacher collaboratively to develop critical literacy and broaden their knowledge base. Critical literacy requires students to question the status quo and combine their life experience and prior knowledge through self reflection and discussion to come to a deeper understanding of learning goals. To teach students to be critically literate, teachers must empower students by developing partnerships with students in the learning process. To make learning authentic, teachers must utilize each student’s experience and prior knowledge as a starting point for learning. Inquiry Learning is a catalyst to promote these specific changes in education. Good schools utilize inquiry learning to provide students with the literacy skills required to allow students to change and adapt to society and promote a more just definition of equality for future generations. Education must transition from a sole reliance on textbooks as a learning resource; education must expand the definition of literacy to include the vast layers of media that today’s students will encounter over their lifetimes. Media literacy enables students to decode media that they will be confronted with, and provides them with the tools to challenge these representations rather than being passive participants in the entertainment indoctrination. When students are immersed in learning through inquiry, it is critical that assessment is effectively utilized to foster the development of critical literacy. Standardized tests and assessing the memorization of facts

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and figures is no longer in the best interest of students. Assessment must shift to more open ended types of assessment which allows students to explore topics from a variety of perspectives and determine their own conclusions. Furthermore, for assessment to support transformative practice it is important that assessment incorporates real world issues and students personal experience. This provides students with an opportunity to participate in a truly transformative process where they can apply what they are learning in the classroom and help redefine their own identity about the world around them. Society is changing, and good schools must provide students with the critical literacy, through transformative practice, to help guide those changes and have a role in shaping society in the future.

Thinking Critically

The motivation behind focusing on critical thought is to teach students how to apply their knowledge to a new situation (Peterson, 1990, p. 313), as opposed to teaching students how to memorize “periodic deposits of knowledge” (p. 306). Standardized tests are what Aronowitz (2004) referred to as the “antithesis of critical thought” (p. 107). Students should not be using rote memorization to learn from a teacher or text centered education, but should “reflect on the social nature of knowledge” and “think about why they think and act the way they do” (Peterson, 1990, p. 306). Thinking critically is centered on the student, where the student asks questions to learn, with the support of their classmates and teacher. All critical learners need to be aware of the theory of knowledge (Patel, 2003, p. 8), because it can develop their reasoning and problem solving skills to decipher a variety of problems. Students should not learn in a way that forces them to memorize facts that are expected on standardized assessments, but through praxis, where they think critically to problem solve any type of a question.

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There should be action in a classroom where students are collaboratively working, through praxis, to problem solve together in a communal learning environment. Too much time is spent where students are not the center of the learning process in practical study, whereas they should be involved in discussions generating opinions from students, which are centered on reasoning (Goodlad, 1984, as cited in Peterson, 2004, p. 306). The majority of what students will learn stems from conversations with each other, and from teaching each other what they already know. Rather than the answers being the core of the curriculum, it should focus on open-ended questions that stimulate discussions for students to critically analyze (Peterson, 2004, p. 306). In this learning environment, the teachers are there to develop conversations and assist in problem solving with their students, as opposed to dictating to them through lectures where the knowledge is not retained.

Social Development

There is boundless opportunity for the social development of each student through their connection with their teacher, and the rules that administration enforces. The students long to be heard, praised, accepted into a community, and noticed; the teacher has the power to broaden each student's future by divulging the world to them (Patel, 2003, p. 3; Peterson, 1990, p. 311; Aronowitz, 2004, p. 121). Students should be empowered with responsibility, because if they are given but few rights, they cannot be expected to develop accountability, which resembles society (Peterson, 1990, p. 310; Aronowitz, 2004, p. 108). Students will rebel if they are consistently told how to act and where to go, but if they are involved in the process of decision making and contribute to the culture of the school, they have an opportunity to shape their world. Students are living in a "culture of control" (Monahan, 2006, p. 128), where every move is on camera and

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the students feel powerless; change is needed in order for education to change its “own social reality” (Peterson, 1990, 306). This requires responsibility and mature behavior from the students, which is modeled by the teachers through their relationship with each student.

The process of social development can be greatly assisted through education in every classroom. Freire (1970) argued for a “pedagogical process of dialogue, reflection, dramatization, and interaction, whereby students move towards being *subjects* capable of understanding the world and their social context, and ultimately engaging in activity based on this new understanding” (as cited in Peterson, 1990, p. 311). In this process, students are learning from each other, they are active in their learning, and are becoming world citizens. The amount of influence that music and popular culture has on students is immeasurable (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 108), which teachers need to take advantage of, and immerse into their politics of education (p. 121). It is the responsibility of the teacher to engage students in their lessons, and this can be aided greatly if they are learning from each other about subjects they are interested in. Incorporating music and popular culture, while maintaining respect for each culture, is vital in the learning process for students in this generation.

World Citizens

In order to assist students in becoming world citizens, the teacher must “bring the world into the classroom” (Peterson, 1990, p. 309), and bring the classroom into the world. This is done through international field trips which celebrate sports, arts, or literacy; field trips to the ocean to discover the amount of pollution in the water, or walking down to the local library to learn more about a Russian author. Classrooms should be democratized where they consist of class discussions, voting, class problem solving as a collection of learners; these experiences

“democratize and humanize the educational setting” (p. 317), with students leading the discussions. The classroom should be a window to the world (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 121), where students learn to read the world, in order to learn to change the world. Teachers assist in this development by “modeling social responsibility and critical engagement in community and global issues” (Peterson, 1990, p. 306), and by bringing these issues into the classroom on a daily basis.

Organic Environment

Students will learn the most if they are learning about topics or concepts that they can relate to in some form of experience. Ashton-Warner’s (1965) use of “organic vocabulary” involved teaching about interests significant to the learner, which would greatly increase the student’s motivation (as cited in Peterson, 1990, p. 307). “Children’s learning should be centered in their own experience, language, and culture” (Peterson, 1990, p. 307), because there is a connection being made between what they know, and what they are learning. This allows the learning to be centered on the learner, which is more natural for the student. If students are writing about their lives, learning vocabulary words based on their experiences, and learning mathematics based on their interests, they are allowing themselves a far greater chance at success. Peterson offered his students a chance at having their work published, and noticed “never have I seen students think so much about a piece of writing than when they know it is to be published” (p. 308). If there is belief placed in student success by the teacher, there are no boundaries as to the potential success each student may achieve.

Students are proud and passionate to write about what they know, and it makes the learning process more stimulating for all involved. Through empowering students, teachers

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“create an environment which is both stimulating and flexible” (Peterson, 1990, p. 312) and creates a comfortable learning environment in the classroom. The curriculum is often so large, that teachers attempt to cover every outcome without generating a lot of depth on any one topic. Focusing on one topic in depth is where the most success takes places (p. 310), through breaking down learning to one word, one idea, and one concept at a time. It is more valuable to learn one topic in depth, as opposed to just scratching the surface of multiple topics.

The Role of Inquiry Learning

Inquiry learning is shifting the pedagogy in schools across Manitoba. Many schools are adopting inquiry techniques in place of standard teaching practices in order to allow for a student-centered approach to teaching and learning. Inquiry learning requires that the teacher designs challenging situations that allow students to inquire and discover concepts and ideas, rather than simply supplying the knowledge for students to memorize (Freire, 1970, p. 56). This shift allows students to be able to form their own perspective from which to view the world. This new found perspective allows students to take ownership over their knowledge. When students are empowered by knowledge they have gained they are authentically motivated to use their understanding to advance or improve society. To be a good school in today’s education system students must learn critical literacy skills, to teach these skills schools and school divisions must incorporate some level of inquiry learning into classroom instruction.

The goal of inquiry learning is to promote students to observe objectively, analyse information and combine it with their own experiences and understandings, and most importantly question all forms of information that they are presented with (Barell, 2007, p. 7). The process of inquiry learning provides students with an opportunity to explore a multitude of

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perspectives on a given topic (McLaren, 1989, p. 80). By providing students with inquiry learning opportunities in classrooms, teachers are giving students a platform to ask effective questions to challenge the status quo, and redefine their own identity. By asking probing questions, students are better equipped to be critically literate in terms of all forms of literacy from text to a multitude of media. When students have the skills to ask appropriate questions, and become critically literate in a media rich society, ultimately students can take action to promote change and redefine equality.

Subheading?

In order to develop students that are transformative, teachers must provide an opportunity for students to ask questions in order to thoroughly examine information. By asking relevant questions, students are critically thinking about the information that they are being presented with in order to identify and solve life based problems (Barell, 2007, p. 5). The main goal of inquiry learning is being able to formulate relevant questions about a given topic (Barell, 2007, p. x). Being able to ask effective questions is a vital skill that must be learned in order for students to become critically literate.

The subsequent phase of inquiry learner requires students take new information that they have uncovered and synthesize that new information with their prior knowledge and experiences. This will enable students to redefine their understanding of a given concept or topic. The goal of inquiry learning should be to allow students to redefine their understanding and ultimately their own personal identity, rather than simply accepting the dominant views that are being presented to them. This allows students to engage in a transformation of their own ideas, as well as their perception of society as a whole (McLaren, 1989, p. 62). By allowing students to explore these

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deeper power structures, students can now effectively participate in dialectical thinking, which will enable them to evaluate and redefine class, race, and political structures (p. 63).

When students are questioning information and critically evaluating it, they are developing the skills required to be critically literate. Critical literacy is not simply reading to understand material. It is much more expansive. It encompasses evaluating and decoding a variety of media that are utilized in all aspects of society, which includes television programming, pictures, the internet, and cinema (Baker, 2010, p. 133). The goal of inquiry learning is to provide students an opportunity to view these media through a “different lens” (Baker, 2010, p. 145). Media has played a significant role “in shaping our perceptions of the world” (Leistyna & Alper, 2006, p. 501). The representations of race, class, and society in general that have been presented, have maintained the power structures that suit the interests of the dominant class, or more specifically corporate America (p. 518). In order to change society’s perspectives of the power structures within society, we must teach students to be media literate. Media literacy is inquiry based “consistent with reflective teaching and critical thinking” (Baker, 2010, p. 145). When teachers empower students by giving them the tools to be media literate, they “create critical thinkers and viewers who have the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to understand, analyze, and create media messages, as well as to comprehend their purposes and audiences” (p. 143). As technology advances, the avenues of media that are directed towards society increase, which makes critical media literacy crucial in changing or adapting society perceptions of race and class. In order to redefine equality in society, it is clear that critical media literacy must play an important role in redefining society (Leistyna & Alper, 2006, p. 518).

Subheading?

When students learn to be critical thinkers, they are empowered and motivated to take action and redefine society. The ultimate goal of inquiry based learning is to provide students with situations that create a “transformational experience, one that changes your life (Barell, 2007, p. ix). When students participate in the inquiry process, they are using questions to drive reflection, discussion, and ultimately action. This process is described by critical theorists as praxis. When students are taking part in an authentic praxis activity, they are empowered to critically analyze, problem solve, and take action (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009, p. 6). Dialectical thinking also identifies the need for students to take action. Dialectical thinking attempts to identify contradictions or problems in society and attempts to change them (McLaren, 1989, p. 62). Inquiry learning promotes critical literacy, which attempts to transform equality, which should be a clear goal of a good school (Shore, 1999, p. 282). Inquiry learning is a transformative practice that requires a shift in educational pedagogy to promote students to question or challenge the information they are presented with, and take action to change the world around them (Giroux, 2005, p. 439).

The process of inquiry learning requires students to question “received knowledge and immediate experience with the goal of challenging inequality and developing an activist citizenry” (Shor, 1999, p. 290). Education has an opportunity to advance society, providing students with the skills to become critical thinkers. By incorporating inquiry learning into curriculum and the classroom, students can redefine their own perceptions of race, class, politics, and all structures of power that govern society. This transformative process will enable students to take action and ultimately redefine society.

Using Assessment to Promote Transformative Practice

Assessment is an important tool that is used to evaluate students. The practice of assessment enables educators to evaluate their teaching and measure their success of their students. The tool would be used to measure the quality of education, “yet assessment – which constrains or enables our own ability to account for the value of what and how we teach – is critical to education as a means for change” (Willink & Jacobs, 2004, p. 145). School is perceived as a place for learning, but ultimately “hold students accountable for passing standardized tests and for a definite quantity of school knowledge” (Aronowitz, 2004, p.107).

Standardized testing has been the form of assessment used by society, but it is losing its usefulness. The outcomes are often undesired results for the learners. Educators believe that assessment needs to be assessed and changed. The type of assessment used will depend on the type of education facility. Assessment differs for primary grades and senior grades. The abilities of students in each grade are often assessed, but these abilities are based on the curriculum provided to schools.

Towards Transformative Practice

Transformative practice in assessment requires that educators and schools have assessment that is meaningful and relevant to the learner. Society is always changing, and therefore, the expectations of the education system change. Transformative practice allows for educators to modify their teaching practices to meet the needs of today’s learner. Educators believe “the changing expectations reflect corresponding social, political, and economic changes” (Ungerleider, 2004, p. 18). School curriculum is constantly changing to advance with changes in society. Transformative practice requires change in assessment and the most critical

change must be “to abolish high-stakes tests that dominate the curriculum and subordinate teachers to the role of drillmasters and subject students to stringent controls” (Aronowitz, 2004, p. 120). The classroom is where students learn about the real world through daily curriculum objectives. It is through the assessment of real world objectives that will allow for transformation to occur in schools.

Students will be more engaged and ultimately more successful on assessments if they are given the options regarding the type of assessment that is utilized to measure their understanding (Rust, 2002, p. 145). Having the option to choose from a variety of assessments will allow for a self motivation and determination. Self motivation would allow for the learner to see the relevance and importance of the task (p. 151). To ensure students are motivated, assessment pieces should be linked to “real-world tasks” (p. 150). These tasks can include a variety of forms but they must show that learning is taking place, these can include writing reports, independent project work, group work and problem based learning. To prepare students for assessment, educators must also prepare themselves. Transformative assessment practices require that all assessment procedures and expectations are clearly outlined in order to ensure that all students are adequately prepared to meet the target learning outcomes.

Transformative Assessment

Assessment that supports transformative practice can be described as “a shift from one set of goals to another” (McWhinny & Markos, p. 22). Learning outcomes must change in order for transformative learning to be successful. Therefore it is only logical that the way schools use assessment must also change to support transformative learning. When designing transformative assessments it is important that teachers “promote reflective learning in setting relatively free of

social and political restraints” (p. 21). Educators who are capable of changing their teaching practice to include new and innovative forms of assessment will be more successful with society’s changing needs.

Transformative assessment practices require commitment from educators to develop effective assessment strategies to enhance student learning. Commitment is important, “educators committed to transformation benefit from engaging assessment because of its powerful influences on students, teaching and learning, and on educational institutions” (Willink & Jacobs, 2012, p. 146). Committed teachers will compare old assessment practices and see where these assessment practices failed the learner and where they were successful in advancing student understanding. Being open minded to new assessment practices will allow teachers to ensure that the assessment will be relevant and meaningful for the students writing it.

Educators are key players in the role of transforming assessment. These educators are progressive teachers that develop and build the students’ interests (Peterson, 2004, p. 305). The Freirian teacher does more than a progressive teacher; Freirian approach bases its teaching on the experience of the students. The teaching approach allows educators to respect and teach using the student’s personal life and personal experiences (p. 306). The characteristics of a Freirian teacher would benefit students as learners because the experience would allow for the transformation in learning. Educators must allow for real world experience to assist the student in transformative learning practice. Real world experience will allow for educators to transform traditional assessment practice to one that is progressive and therefore transforming. Transformative assessment relates concepts back to personal experience and allows the learner to meet curriculum outcomes set out by the educator.

Conclusion

As society evolves, the next generation of students must be provided with the skills to help create or form their own individual identity. By transforming their own identities, through critical literacy, students will have the skills to be active participants in redefining the structures that regulate society. “Good schools” will rise to this challenge and focus on student-centered learning where teachers facilitate students in developing the critical literacy skills required to question the status quo. Seeking answers to students’ questions must be the center of the curriculum, using the student’s experiences and interests in the world to enhance the learning process cooperatively. Students will develop critically literacy through praxis, with the support of their classmates and teacher assisting them throughout the process, but not dictating to them. It is the teacher’s responsibility to facilitate discussion and inquiry, which enables students to learn through the reflection. Students need to be brought outside the classroom walls in order to become a critically learning world citizen, and the world must be brought into the classroom to assist the learning process to connect learning goals to the student’s lives and experiences. Inquiry is a critical tool in education that enables teachers to foster critical literacy through transformative practice. For today’s students, critical literacy must encompass more than simply reading for understanding. If students are going to define their own identity and shape society the future teachers must not ignore the importance of teaching students to become media literate. When education shifts to inquiry learning, assessment must also shift to support the critical literacy skills that “good schools” are trying to develop. To be supportive of critical literacy, assessment must be open ended to allow inquiry, and it must be real world base so the skills that students are developing are applicable in everyday life. For society to advance in a positive

direction, “good schools” must provide students with the critical literacy skills required to challenge the dominant views that are often presented in society. Transformative practices will enable schools to adapt their pedagogy, and support the critical literacy of all students.

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