Is Resistance Empowerment? Using Critical Literacy with Teachers

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Current writing in literacy, as well as educational texts in general, suggests that empowerment is a desired state for learners and their teachers. While the construct of empowerment has been treated to several passes of analysis (Clarke, 1990; Ellisworth, 1989; Lewis & Simon, 1986), we have yet to understand how teachers' authority and the rules that are implicit in their classrooms interact with agendas of empowerment that are based on critical approaches to literacy. Giroux (1987) has described Graves' approach to literacy as a critical pedagogy. Yet, its application by adult teachers in their own learning contexts is less well articulated. The following is a case study of implementing a critical literacy perspective (in both course content and course processes) in a masters' level course.

We begin with a combined description of the course and the research method. Next, we describe the ways teachers in the course reacted to it. Following that is reflexive analysis of the experience by the instructor and then by the researchers. The central focus of the paper is how empowerment and critical literacy are defined and used as teaching constructs in a college course.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This project involved a group of ten teachers who were enrolled in a graduate course in the Supervision of Reading. Eight teachers
commuted to this evening class from local school districts where they taught elementary and secondary students. Two of the students were not currently teaching. All teachers were married, white, and female. In the Reading program, instruction typically took the form of lectures, research papers, and semester examinations on the roles and responsibilities of reading supervisors. This course was based on two texts that dealt with a critical analysis of literacy education (Shannon’s (1989) Broken Promises, and Willensky’s (1990) The New Literacy). The course in which the texts were used was syllabus driven at the beginning, with readings, a written response paper, and an inservice module. Class discussion and activities occurred in a circle of desks. Jim, the instructor for the course, offered a provisional syllabus and explicitly invited the teachers’ revisions.

The course also involved two participant observers, Sue and Scott. They were doctoral students in education who attended all class meetings. The two observers were enrolled in a qualitative research methods course and their observations of the reading course provided them a research context and project. In effect, this created two parallel courses operating in the same time/space. The instructor monitored his interaction with the master’s students, referred to as teachers. As the study evolved, the self-analysis and transformation of the instructor became a third, simultaneous course. Gradually, the roles of the observers shifted to that of observing participants.

The observers both recorded field notes in context to capture the events of the course. They also interviewed the students, both formally and informally. The instructor and the observers spent 1-2 hours following each of the 14 course meetings in debriefing, and interpretive re-construction (Ferguson, et al., 1992) of the evening’s events. Written narratives from these debriefings were also part of the data. In addition, Jim analyzed the written work of the students.

After the course, we analyzed the data (fieldnotes, audiotapes, teachers’ writing) for patterns using a constant comparative method. Bogdan & Biklen (1992) refer to constant comparison as a systematic approach to simultaneously collecting and reducing data. As data is accumulated, it is compared with existing categories for its relationship. Our data analysis was also based on our three-way conversations about the course. That is, we (Scott, Susan and Jim) created data as we interpreted the events of the course. In our uses of narrative vignettes, gossip, and stories, we recreated the classroom events in our talk (Clifford, 1988; Hammersley, 1992). Constructing data as a research method is problematic for some readers. Yet, from our perspective, it is consistent with postmodern accounts of education which rely on more interpretive reconstructions of lived experience (Denzin, 1994).
The major finding from our analysis was that the teachers systematically resisted the use of critical theories provided in the texts by Shannon (1989) and Willensky (1990). The remainder of this paper is devoted to describing the types of teachers' resistance and the meanings the researchers and teachers ascribed to the teachers' resistance of critical theory.

**Teachers' Ways of Resisting**

Jim's agenda in the critical literacy course was to engage teachers in the interrogation of their literacy beliefs, teaching approaches, and schools' curricula in literacy. The teachers' refusal to do so can be seen as resistance. The teachers declined to use critical literacy approaches in their own classes. Further, they did not attempt to control the current course, and they refused to talk about it. To describe the course, we offer our interpretation of the teachers' resistance.

**Accumulating a Degree**

From the point of view of the researchers, the teachers talked about their degree programs as an accumulation of courses. Taking usually one, or perhaps two, courses a semester, the teachers spoke of how many more they had to go. They talked about workload, rigor required by professors, and what course assignments were like. In interviews, the teachers reported that they expected an experience similar to those they had had previous courses. When the students finished this course, they could have one more sticker to paste into the degree plan.

In conversation, however, the teachers said that the current course was different from previous courses. Some of the teachers said that this course was the only course in which they were required to give their opinions and reactions to readings. They were disturbed that after all the classes they had taken, why this course required something different from the others. The teachers' views of the course as a sticker on a record card, influenced their engagement with the course. Restructuring the course and analyzing the processes of the course were seen as unnecessary effort. When invited to resubmit written work that the instructor had returned for teachers' personal reflection, one student commented that she had already "wasted enough time doing things the wrong way." Instead, the teachers prompted the instructor to clarify his requirements for their work. They wanted specification of how their work should look, how it would be evaluated, and how evaluation related to grades for the course. Students' specifications for task clarity seemed to preclude their willingness to take more directive roles in recreating the course content and structure, including issues of evaluation and distribution of grades. Of course, specification also seems
reasonable when one considers the instructor's need to evaluate students' work for the course.

Comfortable with Content

The required texts for this reading course were Willensky's (1990) *The New Literacy* and Shannon's (1989) *Broken Promises*. Both texts offer critical analysis of the literacy instruction and its management provided by school contexts. In weekly reaction papers and in learning projects, the teachers demonstrated their understanding of critical analyses of literacy practices. The teachers supported the notion of engaging students in reading and writing that was seen as real, significant, and purposeful by the readers and writers. Reading and writing "in the real" (Willensky, 1990) meant that materials used by the students needed to be intrinsically meaningful, and had pragmatic relationships to outside realities. The teachers also expressed a preference for child centered learning over curriculum driven schooling. To the researchers, the teachers seemed to understand the concept of new literacy and appeared fluent in their discussions and writings about the premises and merits of a critical approach to reading and writing as classroom pedagogy.

Teachers also took a critical stance when examining the differences between the university definitions of literacy practice and those used in the schools. One teacher said that the use of basal reading series was considered passé at the university and that university instructors encouraged our students to be critical of teachers who continued to use the managed instruction found in basal reading series. She also told a story of how, in a different class, she too had joked about her teaching colleagues' use of basal readers. Working with those same peers the next day, she realized that it was her professional friends she had been criticizing. She admitted to feeling torn between fellow teachers and her university learning. The teachers consistently spoke of the difference between university training and classroom practice.

Stopping Halfway Across a Chasm

The teachers did not talk about their own teaching and classrooms in the same critical theory terms they used to discuss their readings. A separation between the critical theory of the course and the practice of the teachers remained a consistent feature of the course. We understood this separation in three different ways. First, the teachers had rather well specified expectations for the current course based on their experiences in previous coursework. This is the *sticker*. They considered the syllabus that they received as a static statement for the course.
Despite the fact that the instructor encouraged them to modify the course and the syllabus, and that they were provided with examples of possible changes, the teachers chose not to do so. In fact, they privileged the syllabus as an absolute representation for the course. The syllabus, then, defined the content and the requirements for the course.

A second way to understand the separation between the teachers’ responses to readings and their responses to their own teaching is the need we all have for personal comfort. We saw the teachers drawing personal boundaries around their self-construed roles as teachers. Once circumscribed, they were more able to articulate what lay outside the circle than what was contained within. It was equally clear that what was outside was described and objectified, but not taken in, as the following example shows. One middle school teacher invited her students to write about why they were having so much difficulty working together in groups. In our class, when she read their compositions, she admitted to being very uncomfortable in responding to the real issues and feelings in her students’ writing. She was aware that this kind of real writing about real issues for purposes was what our course in critical literacy was about. Her students had written poignant vignettes which were focused on the confusion they felt about liking and disliking each other and themselves. When the teacher shared the pieces of writing in class, several of the teachers were moved to comment on the power of the writing. "I’m not a psychologist,” the teacher told us. "I can’t comment on them.” Writing “in the real” (Willinsky, 1990), and the response it demands from the teacher were outside the circle this teacher allowed herself as a professional role.

A third way we understood the separation of practice and theory was rooted in the social construction of appropriate in educational contexts. In this university class and in the teachers’ stories about their own classrooms, a sense of appropriateness was used as a gauge for what was permissible discourse. As a group we were hard pressed when we tried to move beyond our discomfort, to the naming of the source of discomfort in ourselves. Subjects such as racism, sex roles, and dirty words, used to represent the subjects (e.g., shit, damn) were generally not approved of as discussion topics, though they did occur. We learned this two different ways. First, as curriculum for kids, these topics and words were not appropriate. Second, as students and teacher in our university class, these topics were awkward, made us all fidgety, and embarrassed. Also, any topic that suggested conflict seemed outside the domain that was acceptable discourse for teachers. One high school teacher told us that her students were mature and had outgrown racism. Therefore, there was not need to bring it up.
Being nice, in the Shadow of the Ax

Teachers explained the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors as a way of keeping themselves out of trouble. They saw the dividing line as personal protection against external sanctions which they labeled the ax. The danger of the ax was made real in several stories and examples that the teachers shared. One teacher said she did not want to have parents come to school and accuse her of stepping out of bounds. Another teacher said she wouldn’t talk about sex in class because most parents would not be happy about it. The teachers spoke of their fear of parents’ critique of their work and the reproaches that may lead to a principal’s involvement. Parents, they suggested, would sue teachers for what they considered inappropriate teacher behavior.

Principals, in turn, were seen as the ax wielders. The teachers suggested that they would lose their jobs. Or less overtly, teachers could be reassigned by their principals to a portable classroom in the back lot of the school. The principal might increase the frequency and duration of observations in classrooms, or eliminate merit increases to salary. The principals were seen as capable of harassment. The instructor and the teachers could not provide an example of when the ax had come down. But it was real for each of us.

The Myth of the Ax

The teachers provided a clear picture of how imminent and precarious the ax was in their lives as teachers, but they were unable to produce known experiences in which teachers had been fired, moved, more closely supervised, or lost merit increase as a result of inappropriate teaching content or behavior. They could not produce an actual incident where parents had come to school to do battle. Yet, they all made teaching decisions within a comfort zone circumscribed by the blade of a mythological ax.

Once we started to talk about the physical reality of the ax and its mythical status, teachers suggested that principals also contributed to the social construction of the ax as a way to control task and shape teachers’ behavior. One teacher mentioned that during her evaluation with her principal, the principal opened his desk drawer, pulled out a bell shaped curve and pointed to her rank in a distribution of teachers’ grade allocations. The teacher told her story to show her surprise, her fear, and her naïveté that such information was kept and used. The information and its use by the principal in ways that threatened the teacher sharpened the ax for her.
We used the myth of the ax and the rituals that bring it to life to provide boundaries for appropriate conduct. The teachers in this class, all of us, had great respect for these boundaries and resisted opportunities for critical examination of their effects.

The Instructor’s Part

Jim’s own words best describe what he saw happening throughout the course. It is ironic that this study focuses so heavily on my teaching. At the onset, I suspect I planned to snare my students objects in a web, and study them in a critical context. Yet, the feedback from the two observers projected the teachers into a larger context, capturing me as I sought to capture the students. So the study became real for me. Most of what I learned was framed in noticeable inconsistencies and conflicts that became apparent. These are some of the many things I learned.

Social relationships are the things that we build upon in class. I monitored my relationships and its quality with each of the ten students. I also monitored who was connected at any given time in class.

Feelings are difficult for me. While I recognize that emotional states and their articulation are the base for my teaching, I find it difficult to talk with and through them. Yet, I expected my students to identify and use their own emotions in their learning in the class, and in their own classes. This discrepancy of what I want from teachers (as students) and what I can’t do myself was very surprising to me. I had previously worked with reader response to literature. It seemed a logical teaching approach for a whole language classroom. But the logic is not without issues.

Learner-centered literacy is problematic for all teachers. In postmodern teaching, we are cultivating diversity of ideas, opinions, and interpretations. When teaching centers on students, then we forsake interpretive authority. Yet I remain troubled by Gilbert’s (1988) critique of uncontested student response; that individualizing response to literature tends to favor male-centered ways of knowing and experiencing literature. Left uninterrogated, the students’ racist, sexist, and classist interpretations can become teacher sanctioned learning. For me, the bottom line and my teaching focus for the master’s students became awareness of our responsibility for moral and ethical interpretations of literature, and how the teachers’ moral stance shaped their emotional lives in their classrooms. If certain literary themes are not OK for kids, why not? What are some options? The final surprise was students’ consistent refusal to interrogate their personal beliefs.
While I encouraged diversity of opinion and interpretation, I found it difficult to accept conflict in the course. Again, Willensky's portrayal of multiple interpretations suggests that as teachers of literacy, we adopt a multiperspectival approach, encourage diversity, and use perceived difference as a teaching occasion. In our class, I often saw difference as a challenge to me. I tended to respond defensively and counter attack.

Related to my avoidance of conflict is a be nice attitude that permeated the class. In several instances my needs for harmony preempted discussion based on differences. I got embarrassed when sex and profanity became part of the classroom discourse. I continue to believe that using controversial topics simply for their disruptive effect may create additional tensions in the class, and that the tension itself isn't especially productive for learning. But, my squelching of such talk is often based more on my discomfort than on any theoretical critique of its productivity as a learning context.

My perceptions or constructions of my student/teachers propelled me to an embarrassed response when condoms, intercourse, and sexuality became part of the course. Conflict and negative emotions also moved me to suppress discussion. Yet, these same topics in other social situations provide me laughter, arousal, and excitement. How is it that my conceptions of teacher culture make me embarrassed? I continue to work on this potentially sexist and paternalistic representation of teachers.

For me it was an interesting experience of being mentored. I was critiqued by the student researchers who were taking coursework with me. I learned to listen to their views of class. From them, I learned about defensiveness, about an asexuality that permeates nice teacher culture, and about how we all participate together in masking and muting topics that cause discomfort because they are construed as inappropriate.

Overturning our applecart:
Self-critique

An important aspect of our struggle to bring our research knowledge to text has been our own constant overturning and disrupting of the very knowledge we created. As subjects of our own research processes, we enjoyed centering ourselves as knowledge-makers, a move that is characteristic of postmodern or critical research (Anderson, 1989; Resaldo, 1989). In this section we demonstrate the deconstructive tenor
in our relation to our devaluation of the teachers in the master’s degree program as non-critical educators.

We have described the instructor’s university teaching emphasis on critical theory as set of philosophical preunderstandings that he used as an approach to teaching and as an evaluation of his students’ learning. While the teachers seemed to comprehend the theory, they did not use a critical stance in their descriptions of their public school work. Nor did they use a critical approach to their participation in Jim’s course. Consequently, we depict this group of women falling short of the intellectual and political standards set for the course. And in failing short of our implicit benchmark, they are portrayed as less than. By our estimation, they were poor critical theorists. We further implied that they were unable to make a conceptual link between the pragmatics of nurturing in a world of children and the abstraction of higher education.

Our depiction is problematic. It privileges the university and its priorities on abstract thought over the daily, socially-based understandings of teachers in their public school work. Further, suggesting that little or no abstract analysis occurs on public school sites is itself elitist. While we distanced the course from other top-down university courses in both its rhetoric and its readings, the instructor and the observers retained a stance of valuing university-type knowledge over public school knowledge. There is irony here. The instructor created a university course that presupposed teachers should approach their own learning from an empowered position that breaks down the hegemony of being taught down to. Then in our understanding of that course, the researchers impose the same hegemony.

This critique can be enriched by adding the issue of gender to the mix. We viewed ourselves as supportive of feminist perspectives on education and social analysis. Yet, our construction of gender roles and expectations without our research trio tilted our interpretations of the group of ten women teachers, and devalued their participation in sexist ways. Within our research trio, Jim and Scot both admired Sue for her outspoken and abrasive style of thinking and interaction. We agreed that Sue’s style contested the common professional norms of appropriate female behavior and discourse for elementary teachers. Her provocative words and arguments from a radical child advocacy stance often left the teachers wide-eyed and red-faced. Gradually, Jim and Scot constructed Sue as the ideal feminist, a radicalized benchmark for the teachers. The relatively mild mannered teachers seemed to fall short (again), this time in contrast to our construction of the super feminist.
In our constructions of difference-based social realities, the three of us othered the teachers. We pushed them to the margins of our critical context based on a diagnosis of lacking in critical fibre. We had theorized ourselves into the very predicament we so passionately wanted the teachers to confront in their own educational work. We understand that this is what we did. We do not understand how teaching with an agenda (of any sort) can avoid this paradox of empowerment.

Learning is Engagement

In our discussions, we found that we counted as learning those occasions where the participants were engaged in the context. These occasions were characterized by a sense of with-it-ness. In engaged situations, the context focus was on issues that the participants agreed were important. The interaction was typically permeated with affect. Lyons (1983) suggests that within such an engagement epistemology, knowledge creates the intimate connections between persons. Students and teachers may work on cognitive and skills-based academic tasks. Yet, they meet also on a shared affective and morally constructed plane. One can view the construction of relationship as an alternate teaching reality that occurs in the context of academic space. We felt that such a view provided for social engagement and with it a moral, ethical dimension.

From a literacy content perspective, engagement was a primary component of the new literacy philosophy of the course. In reading texts as a classroom practice, it is the interpretation of the meanings, at all levels and from multiple perspectives that is the valued outcome of pedagogy (Willensky, 1990). Similarly, in writing, it is the use of students' innermost beliefs as an occasion for literacy that is the dynamo that drives the writing process (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1983). It is clear that teachers' empathic response and connectedness with students' emotional lives take on important roles in the new literacy.

Teachers' involvement in the personal lives of their students is problematic. Gilbert (1988) and Long (1987) remind us that textual and social interpretations, however well they are intentioned, may reproduce the hegemonies that they potentially serve to deconstruct. We thought this was especially possible in elementary classrooms where students live with a single adult for a great deal of time. If implicit cultural valuing (or even explicit) is not unpacked when that occurs as part of the stories or as part of the interpretations, then social inequalities such as classism, racism, and heterosexism go unexamined and are
essentially reproduced as part of the story interpretation. In the current power relationships of classrooms, teachers own some of the responsibility for reproducing these social inequities.

References


