



"Those of us who attempt to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening our own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. We will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of our own obsessions, our aggressivity, our ego-centered ambitions, our delusions about ends and means."

-- Thomas Merton

CRITICAL LITERACY

The table below illustrates the difference between two perspectives on language: one that says that language *describes* reality (positivism) and another that says that language *creates* reality (post-positivism). It simplifies and breaks down these perspectives to show the differences between traditional reading, critical reading and critical literacy. The OSDE project focuses on critical literacy as a complement to critical reading. Critical reading refers to the skills needed to evaluate a text or a perspective in terms of legitimacy and intentionality, whereas critical literacy refers to the skills needed to understand how our parameters of evaluation are culturally constructed and the implications of these constructions.

The following table illustrates the differences between traditional reading, critical reading and critical literacy:

Traditional Reading	Critical Reading	Critical Literacy
<p><i>Types of questions:</i> Does the text represent the truth? Is it fact or opinion? Is it biased or neutral? Is it well written/clear? Who is the author and what level of authority/legitimacy does he/she represent? What does the author say?</p>	<p><i>Types of questions:</i> What is the context? To whom is the text addressed? What is the intention of the author? What is the position of the author (his/her political agenda)? What is the author trying to say and how is he/she trying to convince/manipulate the reader? What claims are not substantiated? Why has the text been written in this way)</p>	<p><i>Types of questions:</i> What are the assumptions behind the statements? How does the author understand reality? What is shaping his/her understanding? Who decides (what is real, can be known or needs to be done) in whose name and for whose benefit? What are the implications of his/her claims (past/present/future: social, environmental, economic, etc...)? What are the sanctioned ignorances (blind spots) and contradictions?</p>
<p><i>Focus:</i> content and authority and legitimacy of the speaker and the text.</p>	<p><i>Focus:</i> context, intentions, style of communication</p>	<p><i>Focus:</i> assumptions, knowledge production, power, representation and implications</p>
<p><i>Aim:</i> to develop an understanding of the content To establish the truth-value of the text</p>	<p><i>Aim:</i> to develop critical reflection (ability to perceive intentions and reasons)</p>	<p><i>Aim:</i> to develop reflexivity (ability to perceive how assumptions are constructed)</p>
<p><i>Language:</i> is fixed, transparent and gives us access to reality</p>	<p><i>Language:</i> is fixed and translates reality</p>	<p><i>Language:</i> is ideological and constructs reality</p>
<p><i>Reality:</i> Exists and is easily accessed through sensory perceptions and objective thinking</p>	<p><i>Reality:</i> Exists and is accessible, but it is often translated into false representations</p>	<p><i>Reality:</i> Exists, but is inaccessible (in absolute terms) – we have only partial interpretations constructed in language</p>
<p><i>Knowledge:</i> Universal, cumulative, linear, right versus wrong, fact versus opinion, neutral versus biased</p>	<p><i>Knowledge:</i> False versus true interpretation of reality</p>	<p><i>Knowledge:</i> Always partial, context dependent (contingent), complex and dynamic</p>

Adapted and expanded from: Gina CERVETTI, Michael J. PARDALES, James S. DAMICO, A Tale of Differences: Comparing the Traditions, Perspectives, and Educational Goals of Critical Reading and Critical Literacy, www.readingonline.com, 2001

The key is to address:

Who constructs the texts [or perspectives/discourses/ideologies] whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; whose interests are served by such representations and such readings; and when such texts and readings are inequitable in their effects, how these could be constructed otherwise.ⁱ

When approaching a text/discourse/ideology, the questions below become the focus of critical engagementⁱⁱ:

- How are the meanings assigned to a certain figure or events in a perspective?
- How does it attempt to get readers to accept its constructs?
- Whose interests are served by the dissemination of this perspective? Whose interests are not served?
- What view of the world is put forth by the ideas in this perspective? What views are not?
- What are other possible constructions of the world?

Thus, critical engagement in the project is understood as the ability to trace the origins and implications of perspectives and assumptions. One of the implications for educational practice is that it changes our role as 'teachers', as Scholes (1985) points out:

Our job is *not* to produce 'readings' for our students, but to give them the tools for producing their own (...) Our job is *not* to intimidate our students with our own superior textual production; it is to show them the codes upon which all textual production depends and to encourage their own textual practice.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this context 'reading refers to 'reading the world' and 'textual practice' refers to 'producing knowledge/meaning'. Freire (1985) also points in the same direction:

When we try to be neutral we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domesticating. Thus, we have to recognise ourselves as politicians. It does not mean that we have the right to impose on students our political choice (...) our task is not to impose our dreams on them, but to challenge them to have their own dreams, to define their choices, not just to uncritically assume them.^{iv}

OSDE project website: www.osdemethodology.org.uk
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ⁱ Source: Morgan, W. (1997). *Critical literacy in the classroom: The art of the possible*. New York: Routledge.

ⁱⁱ Source: Cervetti, G., Pardales, M., Damico, J.(2001) *A Tale of Differences: Comparing the Traditions, Perspectives, and Educational Goals of Critical Reading and Critical Literacy*, www.readingonline.org last accessed 17/09/2005

ⁱⁱⁱ Source: Scholes, R., (1985)*Textual power : literary theory and the teaching of English*, New Haven, Conn. ; London : Yale university press

^{iv} Source: Freire, P. (1985) *Reading the world and reading the word: an interview with Paulo Freire*.*Language Arts* 62 (1).