



The Capacity Building Series is produced by The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat to support leadership and instructional effectiveness in Ontario schools.

*The series is posted at:
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/*

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Why teach critical literacy?

“Students today experience a constant stream of ideas and information – online, in print, and through electronic games and mass media. As they move into the junior grades, they encounter an ever-widening range of texts. They need skills to determine where to direct their attention and how to interpret messages and use them appropriately.”
(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 9)

SECRETARIAT
SPECIAL EDITION #9

Critical Literacy

A Lens for Learning

Critical literacy has gathered momentum in recent years to help prepare children for life in a Knowledge Society – what literacy scholar and educator Allan Luke refers to as a “a new basic” for navigating a text- and media-saturated world. Its proponents, once a small circle of social theorists, now represent a worldwide network of researchers, policymakers and teachers who embrace the notion that students need both basic literacy and critical literacy to come to terms with the many forms and types of text that surround them, to ask questions, to examine viewpoints (their own and others), to take a stand and to clarify the issues and relationships that are important to them and their future.

Critical literacy has a rich base in western thought and social activism and yet it does not represent one school of thought. It is as much an approach to teaching literacy as it is a set of skills, dispositions and strategies that enable us – and our students – “to challenge text and life as we know it” (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004), to become critical consumers and users of information.

Classroom Culture

Critical literacy is not something to be added to the literacy program, but a lens for learning that is an integral part of classroom practice. Below are some tips for creating a classroom culture which is conducive to a critical literacy approach. (For a more complete list, see Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009.)

Honour the cultural capital and multiliteracies of all students:

- acquire an understanding of students’ interests, backgrounds and values
- begin with and build on the unique identities and diverse community perspectives represented within the classroom and the school
- consider students’ ideas, questions, interests and experiences in shaping learning opportunities
- ensure entry points for all students when designing tasks and learning experiences that provide opportunities to think critically

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"We are constantly assaulted by language that is not just unclear, but often deliberately deceptive and manipulative. Students need tools for unmasking the true purposes of language within a particular context so they can both understand its true meaning and, as necessary, free themselves from its pernicious effects." (Temple, 2005/06, p. 3)

"Critical literacy does not necessarily involve taking a negative stance; rather, it means looking at an issue or topic in different ways, analyzing it, and hopefully being able to suggest possibilities for change and improvement." (Vasquez, 2004, p.30)

Critical literacies involve people using language to exercise power, to enhance everyday life ... and to question practices of privilege and injustice. This sounds grand, but often, perhaps usually, it may be in the more mundane and ordinary aspects of daily life that critical literacies are negotiated." (Comber, 2001, p. 173)

"Traditionally in reading, the emphasis has been on the author's power, but in critical literacy, readers who are text critics actively exert their power by questioning the author's message and its hidden implications." (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 151)

Build a safe, inclusive classroom environment that promotes risk taking and inquiry:

- model and explicitly teach norms for respectful classroom interactions
- use learning strategies that encourage active, meaningful participation of all students
- provide time and opportunity for students to refine and clarify their thinking about critical issues by encouraging accountable talk through the use of graphic organizers, jot notes, illustrations and dramatizations
- acknowledge that some issues can be sensitive for some students

Incorporate thought-provoking multimedia and multimodal texts that:

- engage students in considering alternative and diverse perspectives – perspectives they may be unaware of, those they might not agree with, those that differ between texts, or points of view that vary from the one presented by a particular author
- are drawn from popular culture (commercials, TV shows, songs, music videos etc.)
- serve as a springboard for students to reflect on those texts that support and/or challenge their own opinions and solutions and address real-world current issues
- connect with topics and issues that may stem from other areas of the curriculum

Key Concepts

The impact of new and evolving communication technologies on students' thinking and development served as the wake-up call about the need for media literacy. Five key concepts, developed for the media literacy strand in the Ontario curriculum, also help us to position critical literacy conversations within a broad curriculum context (adapted from Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, pp. 34–36).

- 1. All texts are constructions.** What is written is the product of many decisions and determining factors. Much of our view of reality is based on messages that have been constructed in this way, with the author's attitudes, interpretations and conclusions already built into the text.
- 2. All texts contain belief and value messages.** Whether oral, print or visual media, texts contain messages which reflect the biases and opinions of their authors/creators; whether intentionally manipulative or not, this means that no text can be neutral or value free.
- 3. Each person interprets messages differently.** Demographic factors such as age, culture, gender and socio-economic status as well as prior experience and knowledge play a role in how we interpret a message.
- 4. Texts serve different interests.** Most media messages are created for profit or to persuade, but all texts are produced intentionally for a purpose. These interests can be commercial, ideological or political.
- 5. Each medium develops its own "language" in order to position readers/viewers in certain ways.** Whether TV program, website or novel, each medium creates meaning differently and each has distinctive techniques, conventions and aesthetics.

Four Resources Model

Ontario's expert panel report, *Literacy for Learning* (2004) drew on Peter Freebody and Allan Luke's "Four Resources Model" to emphasize the importance of the critical literacy concepts identified above – namely, that all text is constructed for a purpose and that reading is not a passive act but an interaction between the text and a reader who looks for meaning, asks questions and challenges assumptions. The model can be used to guide activities for children of all ages, as young as Kindergarten (Vasquez, 2004), and to structure work with any type of text – from cartoons to folktales to political speeches to advertisements. Critical literacy strategies need to be taught explicitly, but they should not be taught sequentially or in isolation from one another.

Readers of this monograph will recognize how the expectations of the *Ontario Language Curriculum* capture the following practices of the four resources model:

- 1. Code breaking.** Students need to be able to identify letters in the alphabet and sounds in words, decipher spelling and grammar conventions such as sentence structure and text organization, and use graphics and other visuals to break the “code” of text. Code breaking is equivalent to basic or functional literacy.
- 2. Making meaning.** Rather than approaching text passively, students need to be encouraged to be a “text participant” – to use their own prior knowledge and experience when reading to interpret what the author is saying and to anticipate where he or she might be going next. They need to learn how to “deconstruct” text, to unmask an author’s purpose and intent, to form interpretations in light of their own knowledge and point of view, and to examine and then find the most effective ways to convey their thinking.
- 3. Using text.** Students need to be introduced to different text forms and how these have different uses which shape the language, structure and organization chosen by the author. Critical literacy teaches students to ask, “What do I do with this text? What will other people do with it? How could it have been written or produced in a different way? It encourages students to become critical consumers of text who understand that meaning is tied not only to the author’s purpose but also to the context in which a text is read and interpreted.
- 4. Analyzing text.** Critical literacy teaches that no text is neutral, that students need to ask, “What is this text trying to convince me of and why?” and “Whose interests does it serve?”. Students need to be encouraged to analyze the author’s motive/intent, to consider fairness, accuracy and reliability and to recognize their own power as readers. They need to be encouraged to evaluate what is said and how it is said in order to uncover and challenge assumptions and ideas about the world, to respond when they disagree and to take social action, even in small ways when they encounter texts that disadvantage certain groups. They need to understand that texts can be changed to recognize or include missing voices and alternative perspectives.

Some Critical Literacy Strategies

Three key strategies that specifically promote a critical perspective are:

- 1. Problem posing.** Just as texts position us to think of ourselves in a certain way, so that we feel compelled to buy a product or identify with a character in a film, we as readers or viewers can problematize texts. Also called “problem posing,” problematizing provides teachers with a way to consciously and intentionally nurture a critical perspective. Problem posing requires that we ask students questions such as the following:
 - How might others understand this text differently?
 - How has the message of the text been constructed or crafted?
 - Who is the intended audience?
 - How has this text coloured your view of reality?
 - What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented or have been omitted?
 - Who created this text and why?
 - Who benefits if this “message” is accepted? Who may be disadvantaged?
 - What techniques and stylistic elements have been used and why?
- 2. Juxtaposing.** The intent of this strategy is to have students come to an understanding of point of view. Two texts on a similar topic (e.g., editorials) are set side by side so that students can compare author’s bias, perspective and intent as well as strategies used to influence the reader/viewer (adapted from McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 47).
- 3. Switching.** This is an effective strategy for getting students to consider the impact of alternative perspectives and to identify which voices are present and which voices are missing from a text. Some examples of switching are gender switch (students replace key characters with characters of the other gender), setting switch (students set the story in a different time or place or switch the social class of characters), and emotion switch (students have characters exhibit a different emotional tone) (adapted from McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004. p.51).

Readers Taking a Stance

Curriculum prompts and examples:

1.5 Making Inferences/Interpreting Texts

- Why do you think the author has not stated these ideas directly? (p.111)

1.6 Extending Understanding

- What knowledge or experience do you have that affects the way you interpret the author’s message? (p.142)

1.7 Analyzing Texts

- How do phrases such as I think... I feel... indicate an opinion rather than strictly factual information? (p. 51)

1.8 Responding to and Evaluating Texts

- Comment on the ways in which the characters represent the diversity of society. (p.89)

1.9 Point of View

- What do you think the author wants the reader to think? (p.54)

(Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006b)

Critical Literacy

Video and Print Resources

<http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/november29.shtml>

Video and print resources exploring what critical literacy is, why it is essential and what it might look like in an elementary classroom. Video segments feature David Booth, Allan Luke, Annette Woods and Jim Burke.

Available in French – Fall 2009

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There are many instructional approaches available to help support critical literacy in the classroom. A few of these are listed below:

- **Media Stations.** Invite your students to bring in samples of everyday text (CD covers, video games, music videos, magazines, food packaging/ads, etc.) and set up a media station for each with “table talk” questions to get the discussion started (e.g., What is appealing to you about this CD cover? Do you think “bad press” makes a singer more popular? What techniques do designers use to grab your attention? etc.).
- **Think aloud.** This strategy encourages teachers and students to make their thinking explicit so that others in the class can join the discussion. What is the author’s thinking? What are the underlying assumptions? How do we know? How can we weigh opinions against facts?
- **Questioning the author.** When responding to question prompts from the teacher (e.g., “What does the author mean here?” and “Whose voice is absent?”), students use an organizer divided into four columns that are labelled: “The question ...” / “The author says...” / “I say ...” / “So?” (adapted from Ministry of Education 2006a, pp., 144–145)
- **Four corners.** This collaborative activity encourages students to consider different points of view by engaging them in dialogue with not only those who have the same opinion but those who have differing viewpoints. The classroom is labelled with four points of view (e. g., Strongly Agree/Agree/Disagree/

Strongly Disagree). Students are asked a question and then move to the corner that best reflects their opinion. Once there, students provide a reason for their choice. A variation would have students jot their reason onto the corner chart before speaking (adapted from Ministry of Education 2006a, p. 129).

- **Six Hats.** Based on Edward Debono’s identification of different thinking styles and selecting a metaphorical hat to represent each (e.g., white hat for factual approach, black hat for critical approach, blue hat for metacognitive approach and so on), this exercise can be used to structure group discussion that generates rich understanding of how point of view is constructed and how meaning is interpreted. (For a full range of instructional strategies to ensure effective group work, see Rolheiser & Bennett, 2001).

Ongoing Professional Learning

Green (2001) reminds us that teachers need to develop their own understanding of language if they are to help students question and understand how language works and how texts are used for particular purposes. Or as McLaughlin and DeVood (2004, p. 33) say, “before we can teach our students to become critically literate, we must become critically literate ourselves.” This does not happen overnight but is a process of ongoing professional learning that “involves learning, understanding, and changing over time.”

Resources and Related Reading

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Some websites

CRITICAL THINKING INTERNATIONAL (CTI). Promotes active learning and critical thinking in formal and non-formal educational settings, in all disciplines and at all levels, primary school through university and adult education. <http://wwwfp.education.tas.gov.au/english/critlit.htm>

READING ONLINE. Electronic journal of the International Reading Association offering hundreds of articles on a range of topics in reading education. www.readingonline.org

CLIP PODCAST. On-demand internet broadcast of critical literacy as it is produced and talked about in different spaces and places. <http://www.clippodcast.com/>

EDU GAINS. Storehouse of classroom-ready, research-based teaching and professional learning resources for mathematics, literacy, ELL and differentiated instruction, for Grades 7–12. www.edugains.ca

ONTARIO EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE BANK. Provides elementary and secondary teachers with resources to engage their students in learning, as well as an opportunity to share teaching resources with colleagues across Ontario. <http://resources.elearningontario.ca/>