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Critical Service Literacy: An Exercise in Marginal Composition

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Abstract

This essay seeks to further the framework of critical theory—and in particular, critical literacy—by tethering the liberating, activist impulses of its founders to the more praxis-oriented notion of service-learning. In keeping with Dewey’s call for experiential education, I argue that a pragmatic, pedagogical means of fostering a Freirean sense of “raised consciousness” in students rests in a mutually beneficial relationship between students and community. As opposed to merely community service or charity work, I ground service-learning in previous literature that insists upon service-learners’ function as both recipient and provider of the services rendered. It is this form of service-learning from which I argue students cultivate an organic lens through which they can more critically engage with and ultimately “read” their surrounding worlds.

Keywords: Critical theory, service-learning, composition, community, critical literacy

Critical Service Literacy: An Exercise in Marginal Composition

The idea of schools engaging with community is nothing new. Nor is the discrepancy over the most efficient means and overarching purpose of establishing such engagement. Over a century ago, John Dewey's (1938) pragmatic approach to education sought to marry the concerns of a given community to the curriculum of its embedded schools. As contemporary teachers, perhaps the most vital tenet of our social contract relies on the necessity to do just that: engage with and immerse our students into the greater community, echoing not only the pedagogical aims of Dewey, but also the myriad critical literates who have since come, gone, and remain composing from the margins. Whether this particular breed of critical literacy manifests as a heightened sense of social imagination, organic discourse communities, social semiotics, raised consciousness, or assorted individual schemas, one axiom has consistently underscored the social justice initiative: schools existing in isolation stand at odds with the philosophical and literal functions of community. Thus, in order to foster the growth of critically literate citizens, it behooves schools to accept their inherent relationships with the communities in which they reside, as well as their pedagogical obligation to question, trouble, and deconstruct those relationships.

In his seminal work, *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey posits that "amid all uncertainties, there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and experience" (p. 25). Dewey grounds his theory in the notion that, while "experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other" (p. 25), the former should serve as both the means and goal of the latter. In other words, Dewey stipulates that in order to truly educate, teachers must offer real-world experiences to augment student learning, which, itself, should manifest as its own continuous experience.

In Dewey's world, students would ideally learn as an extension of their own innate curiosity and involvement with the external world. His emphasis on experiential education offers perhaps the greatest singular influence on the contemporary service-learning initiative. As Deans (1999) notes, "Education, for Dewey, is a form of growth through *active experimentation* and *reflective thought*" (p. 16). Of Dewey, Deans suggests that "his writings are preoccupied with...collapsing the dualisms that separate the self from society" (p. 17). Thus, for Deans, Dewey's writings serve to locate the school not only as the physical and conceptual center of a community, but perhaps more significantly, as a place whose primary aim should be to help students become, as Dewey himself would say, "good citizens, in the broadest sense."

While attempting to determine just how this democratic citizenship should manifest, particularly within a school setting, we cannot overlook the significant contributions of one such scholar whose work paved a foundation from which the discourse of modern service-learning has sprung. Furco's (1996) groundbreaking essay distinguishes service-learning from other similar forms of experiential learning including volunteerism, community service, field education, and internships. According to Furco, what distinguishes service-learning from these other forms of experiential learning rests in the nature of the service's respective focus and beneficiary. He positions service-learning along a continuum of service/learning and recipient/provider, wherein volunteerism and community service tend to be more service/recipient oriented, and internships and field education to be more learning/provider oriented. In other words, for Furco, service-learning is categorized by the degree to which students function as both the recipient and provider of the service from which they also learn.

Cushman's (1996) work echoes Furco's call for mutually beneficial community engagement by expanding upon Dewey's concern that schools ought not occupy a separate space

from the community. Writing specifically about the university's relationship with the corresponding community, Cushman's work offers a plea for a "deeper consideration of the civic purpose of our positions in the academy, of what we do with our knowledge, for whom, and by what means" (p. 12). Noting that activism begins with a commitment to "break down the sociological barriers between universities and communities" (p. 12), Cushman couches the rhetorician—the writer—as the primary agent of social change.

Cushman's work argues that traditional academic emphases have done a tremendous disservice to both students and the community by failing to recognize not only the inherent need for active participation in these communities, but also the potential for a mutually beneficial dynamic of reciprocity between scholars, students, and society. She notes that this participation must function according to a bilateral exchange of knowledges, services, and skills, and cannot exist without a perpetual system of humble reciprocity. "Activism," writes Cushman, "can't be altruistic because we have to be in a position to participate in our communities" (p. 19). For Cushman, activism functions according to the dueling notions of access and reciprocity. In Cushman's experience, "effective activism established an interdependency" whereby both parties experience mutual benefit upon allowing access to one another. And, of course, with this access comes participant agency, the proverbial keystone of critical service-learning.

From Service-Learning to Critical Literacy

Perhaps the most integral component to both service-learning and critical literacy theory rests in the notion of participant agency. In their studies on engaging social imagination through wordless book reading, Lysaker and Miller (2013) "made the assumption that an open text would make it more feasible for the reader to engage with the voices of the text and promote a rich reader-text transaction" (p. 6). Their research married the process of "understanding text to the

process of understanding people” (p. 5). Through their work, they discovered that removing the words from picture books and having children relay stories based solely off their interpretations of the illustrations invited the reader’s social imagination as a means to form a sense of appreciation for alterity.

This research, as well as previous studies which suggest “that children’s understanding of stories provides them with important information about other people” (Lysaker & Miller, 2013, p. 23), echoes the social-semiotic notions that signs (texts) do not have given meanings, but “instead have the *potential* to represent and generate meanings” (Siegel & Rowe, 2011, p. 203). This potential derives from a particular positioning with regard to the community. Here again we see implications of the agent’s role in the external world. Passivity cannot produce social change. Nor can active participation exist solely in a classroom. Rather, critical activism manifested through service-learning and facilitated through a critical literacy lens offers perhaps the sole means to enact real social change.

In fact, Lysaker and Miller’s (2013) wordless books could serve as microcosms for the greater external world. The authors invoke Bruner (1986) in commenting on the cultivation of children’s “landscape of consciousness,” an enlightening notion given its geographic and topographic implications. We cannot dismiss the parallels between wordless books as a “mediational tool” and their role as metaphor for the community. After all, what is a community if not an illustrative compilation of various characters whose stories remain open to the interpretation of assorted readers, each occupying their respective positions therein while also wielding various degrees of power and agency? And do these communal characters not, like those contained within the pages of the books used in the study, operate according to ambiguous, oftentimes silent expressions? In his sociocognitive work on situated linguistic practices, Gee

(2001) argues that “any human language is not one general thing, but composed of a great variety of different styles, registers, or social languages” (p. 717). He categorizes these social languages according to the various discourses in which they are embedded. For Gee, a discourse encompasses

Ways of combining and coordinating words, deeds, thoughts, values, bodies, objects, tools, and technologies, and other people (at the appropriate times and places) so as to enact and recognize specific socially situated identities and activities. (p. 721)

Gee’s (2012) critique of schools in particular relies on Freire and Macedo’s (1987) argument that language is complex only when it is detached from the world to which it refers. “Children acquire complex language all the time outside of school,” notes Gee, “[b]ut because of a lack of situated meaning, they just can’t in school.”

Gee’s (2012) call to tether the world to the text illustrates the potential of service learning to foster critical adolescent literacy. “When you immerse a kid in experience and marry the world to the text,” argues Gee, “acquiring language, no matter how difficult, is easy.” He continues to describe how sheer exposure to texts—or the futile insistence that in order to teach texts, we simply offer more texts—only exacerbates the allergy that students develop to learning in the conventional classroom. Gee’s “situated meanings” seem to naturally correlate to various conceptions of service learning. Immersion in the world, in other words, is by definition conducive to the practice of service learning, which, according to Gee, would simplify the process by which students master the language of any given register or “variety.”

Gee (2012) bluntly asserts that “it’s stupid to read first, and not be in the world first.” Still, one wonders why there has to be a “first” at all. Why can’t kids be reading *in* the world?

Why can't curriculum exist within the world and not before it or as a tangential extension? Or as a detached entity called "school"? Why can't curriculum—reading, writing, learning, assessment—actually *be* the world? Why does Gee's "immersion in images, actions, activities" need to occur as a precursor to language acquisition?

Luke's (2003) work further challenges the linear, unilateral conception of literacy development by exposing the dark underbelly of an educational paradigm in which language selection/direction derives from the privileged prerogatives of those in power. Luke recognizes the unnerving presence of dominant linguistic and cultural structures and insists that the chief aim of schools should instead be to welcome traditionally marginalized or entirely discarded voices into the classroom. Luke argues:

At the same time, any educational system with democratic and egalitarian aspirations that go beyond the language/culture stratified production of literate workers must visibly enable multiple pathways and equitable access to the languages, texts, and discourses of power in these emergent semiotic economies and globalized cultures, where biographical lifelines through communities, workplaces, and civic institutions are taking risky, different patterns that governments and social scientists are struggling to document and understand. (p. 137)

As with Gee (2001, 2012), Luke employs the concept of discourse as a means to accentuate the hierarchical structures of various discursive spaces, as well as to highlight the privileging of these spaces by the powerful elite. Luke's inclusion of semiotics refers, essentially, to the study of signs, and, as Siegel and Rowe (2011) note, "how acts and artifacts come to be interpreted as signs" (p. 203). With regard to critical literacy, no power structures, systems of oppression, or

liberating pedagogy *necessarily* function as signs in themselves. A semiotic perspective on community, rather, would seek to address the *potential* for community artifacts to become signs. This investigation into how respective signs work and operate within a community, or, as Siegel and Rowe posit, “how texts mean,” offers a semiotic lens through which schools could potentially view critical literacy and service-learning. To use Chandler’s (2002) term, a community in itself isn’t one homogenous sign, but rather “an assemblage of signs” (p. 2). Still, according to Luke (2003), the various means and agents of this assembly, to impose a critical lens on a semiotic perspective, could potentially illuminate the systems of inequality operating within a semiotic framework. In other words, if semiotic theorists view communities as assemblies of signs, then critical literacy theorists could examine how these signs were assembled, according to whose authority, and reflecting whose agenda. And service-learning, therefore, would offer the curricular means to do just that.

The Praxis of Critical Service Literacy: A Reality Check

So what could this *actually* look like? What would it mean to adopt a critical service literacy approach in a classroom, and how would that compare to other approaches? How can a community *become* a curriculum, and how would that transformation impact the school, the community, and the students? What experiences can teachers realistically and pragmatically offer students that would offer a mutual benefit to the students and community partners? And what could this potentially mean for the American educational system as a whole?

As we consider these questions, we must remember that, again, the idea of schools engaging with community is nothing new. Nor, for that matter, does cultivating a sense of critical service literacy need to involve exhaustive resources, tremendous effort, or excessive time. In fact, it may not involve much at all, save for a slight shift in pedagogical focus and a little

adaptability. As with the development of any literacy, students will foster a sense of critical service literacy if they are given 1) access to the linguistic and systemic tools necessary for development, 2) admission into the appropriate discursive spaces, 3) agency to navigate and negotiate these respective spaces, and 4) appropriate and consistent support from those who have already demonstrated competency within those spaces: what Gee (2012) calls “Masters of discourse,” and what Brandt (1998) terms “literacy sponsors” (p. 169).

Perhaps one of the first things teachers can do to promote critical service literacy in their classrooms is holistically reevaluate their practice as teachers: course projects, teaching materials, methods of assessment, and, of course, the students themselves. Rather than simply accepting these constructs as nonnegotiable or inherently inflexible, teachers could ask themselves a few overarching questions to guide their transition from classroom to community:

- Why am I teaching this material?
- Where did I find it?
- What do I want my students to learn from this activity?
- How does it make them better people? More responsible? More conscientious?
- How does it promote democratic citizenship?
- How does it highlight student agency?
- How does it relate to our community as a whole?
- What social concerns or needs does it address?
- How does it meet state standards, yes, but also
- How can I meet state standards while also serving the needs of the state?

If we can shift our focus from creating assignments that merely serve to address state standards, to crafting tasks that serve the state of our communities themselves—with all their

myriad issues, tensions, boundaries, borders, and burdens—maybe we can cultivate an educative space that is equal parts politicized, productive, progressive, and pragmatic. There’s nothing wrong with community service, but in itself, community service doesn’t traditionally allow for the type of student learning that critical service literacy necessitates. There’s little opportunity for literacy development in a paradigm in which the provider is assumed to be complete, while the beneficiary is assumed to be deficient.

Rather, critical service literacy demands the mutual benefit of both provider and recipient. And, in keeping with the need to meet state standards and school curriculum demands, this type of literacy can exist alongside a service-learning initiative, providing simply that teachers are willing to resist the isolation of the classroom walls and engage productively with their surrounding communities. This can be done in a number of ways.

- Composition teachers can assign writing projects for real world (i.e., local) audiences/applications.
- Literacy teachers can incorporate various community texts to accompany course materials.
- Science teachers can structure portions of their classrooms to address sustainability issues, public health concerns, indigenous fauna, or other environmental topics.
- Computer classes can assist local agencies with their digital platforms by aiding in website maintenance/creation, graphic design, video editing, or sound production.
- Math classes could incorporate various mathematical principles in community construction projects or other local STEM endeavors.

- Physical education courses could perform physically demanding local tasks throughout the year by way of emphasizing physical conditioning and promoting good physical and mental health.
- Music and visual art classes could collaborate with local agencies to create displays throughout the community that would serve a variety of rhetorical purposes.

Regardless of which of these or other pursuits they may adopt, teachers should remember that critical service literacy and standardized education are not mutually exclusive. In fact, with a little imagination, one sees not only how they complement each other in truly organic and intriguing ways, but also that they lend themselves to interdisciplinarity and cross-curricular learning.

None of the above examples should exist independently of one another. Indeed, each of them marries with their counterparts in illustrative and disarming ways: ways that could very well challenge the prevailing dominant structures of their respective communities, exposing inequity and championing the call for social change. And that, if nothing else, is the point of critical literacy—reading the world and the word in such a way as to critically examine the corrosive nature of power and privilege, while elevating communal access and agency.

Without a service-learning component, critical literacy risks stagnating outside the classroom. But when soldered to the educative act of service, critical literacy transcends mere linguistic parameters and becomes more than simply a way to read the word—it becomes a lens through which student citizens may view the plots, characters, and conflicts of their surrounding worlds.

Conclusion

Even though they're often couched within two distinct theoretical frameworks, teachers should recognize and embrace the inherent ties between service-learning and critical literacy. As service-learning advocates suggest, progressive engagement with, for, and to the community offers perhaps the most efficient and mutually beneficial way to foster a sense of critical literacy in students. In order for critical literacy to be effective, we must curricularize our communities. To curricularize our communities means that the words of our classrooms should never exist independently of their surrounding worlds; rather, we teachers should seek ways to extend the boundaries of our classroom spaces to include the lessons embedded in our greater communities. Especially since the notion of "curriculum," in its purest sense, derives from the verb *currere* meaning "to run," teachers and schools should maintain a productive degree of active presence in their communities, assessing societal issues, delivering necessary services, and constantly engaging in reciprocal, verb-based learning. And in order for service-learning to be effective, we must engage with and envision these communities through a critical lens. Ideally, the two share a symbiosis off which we base our entire curriculum. The raised consciousness theorized by Freire and Macedo—a logical extension of Dewey's progressive education—derives from a critical literacy perspective. But this methodological approach—this philosophical, theoretical underpinning—cannot work without a certain degree of pragmatism grounding its execution. In other words, if critical literacy serves as the framework, service learning offers the tools necessary to actually raise students' consciousness, and the literature reflects this. Again, the idea of schools engaging with community is nothing new. But unless that engagement—that mutually beneficial service-learning—is facilitated by critical, ameliorative agents seeking the end of

injustice, newness will never prosper. Numbness will prevail. And our literature—and music and paintings and art and all the other cries from the margins—will reflect this.

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