Critical Literacy and Popular Culture in Urban Education

Toward a Pedagogy of Access and Dissent

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Abstract

Ernest Morrell, professor of education at UCLA, offers an overview of critical literacy and popular culture beginning with definitions and a framework for a pedagogy of access and dissent. Morrell argues for the need to teach access to academic literacies and also social critique of power relationships. Through case studies with inner-city youth, practical applications illuminate examples of praxis, students learning academic literacies and also becoming ethnographic researchers positioned as activists and advocates for social change.

Critical Literacy and Popular Culture in Urban Education: Toward a Pedagogy of Access and Dissent

Ernest Morrell

T eaching popular culture offers tremendous possibilities for classroom literacy practice. By honoring and drawing upon local literacy practices and the everyday culture of youth, educators can prepare curricula that simultaneously increase academic literacies while also reaching into the worlds of students, facilitating empowered identities among these students, and making connections between their local practices and global concepts of educational and social justice. A pedagogy of youth popular culture in literacy education can be innovative, compliant with standards set by the discipline (NCTE/IRA, 1996), and geared toward social justice. The role of literacy research, then, is to simultaneously design and investigate the outcomes associated with pedagogies of popular culture in the process of developing grounded theories of practice that can inform literacy pedagogy, literacy policy, and the preparation of future literacy teachers. In order to make these transformations in teaching and research, we must properly situate the term "literacy" within its proper social, historical, cultural, and political contexts. Doing so will allow us to acknowledge that academic literacies have been intentionally exclusive and elusive, but it will also allow us to acknowledge that literacies exist outside of the world of the classroom and can and should be included in academic instruction.

Literacy is a powerful yet elusive concept in the world of educational research. While we know that acquiring literacy is important for students in schools, as researchers and educators we have not been able to agree on a definition of literacy or the purpose of literacy education. On the one hand, there is the basic definition of literacy, literally the ability to read and to write.

According to that simple definition, nearly our entire population is literate. Indeed the United States is one of the most literate nations in the world.

Others distinguish between basic literacy and more advanced literacy skills although the advanced literacies are scarcely defined. The general belief is that citizens with advanced literacies will be able to more effectively participate in the global exchange of capital. This is certainly a worthwhile goal. However it is defined, it seems that people who attain advanced literacy are also able to acquire professional employment, they are more likely to earn higher incomes; they are more likely to participate in the electoral process, and they are less likely to be incarcerated.

However, advanced literacy doesn't exactly translate into power, and it certainly doesn't translate into power equally for everyone who possesses it. Further, advanced literacies do not equate necessarily to a fuller, more tolerant humanity. Being highly literate, for example, could not gain an African American entrance into a whites-only restaurant in the South during the Jim Crow era, and being a highly literate population didn't prevent southerners from instituting an oppressive regime of Jim Crow. White males with a high school diploma earn more than African American males with a college degree, and women earn considerably less than their male counterparts of equivalent education as positions become "gendered." Some of the most literate populations in the history of civilization have been massacred; some of the most literate populations in the history of civilization have done the massacring. Being literate doesn't prevent someone from being racist, sexist, homophobic, or downright brutal. It also doesn't guarantee someone a job or fair and equal treatment on the job.

Certainly this is not an argument against helping students to become better readers and writers. I am simply arguing that we may need to reconsider the nature of empowering literacy and the purposes of empowering literacy. Theresa Perry (2003), for example, points to the African American tradition of literacy for freedom and freedom for literacy. Perry argues that literacy has always been tied to collective freedom and empowerment in the African American community. Indeed African Americans during the antebellum period were prevented from becoming literate because their masters feared they would use these skills in their collective interests. Other examples of literacy as a tool for collective empowerment come from the Latin American literacy campaigns of the 1960s, where critical educators such as Paulo Freire and national leaders such as Fidel Castro sought to impart literacies to previously marginalized populations as part of a strategy of collective empowerment, as part of a larger process of political action and social change. In each of these examples, literacy development is tied more to personal and

social emancipation than it is to academic advancement or professional membership. Further, in these traditions literacy is theorized as a local practice with global implications (emancipation, egalitarian societies, etc).

Just what are the relationships among local cultural practices, advanced literacies, and literacies for political action and social change? How is it possible for schools to fashion literacy pedagogies that are situated with/in the local, but that have global implications? What role can popular culture play in this process? In this chapter I articulate how a pedagogy of popular culture can be used to facilitate the development of academic and critical literacies among urban youth. I begin by explaining the conceptual foundations of a pedagogy of access and dissent.

Foundations of Literacy Pedagogies of Access and Dissent

When thinking about our goals in literacy education it is important to fashion a simultaneous pedagogy of access and dissent. For literacy educators, particularly of marginalized populations, it's essential that pedagogy lead to greater access than these populations have had in the past. This includes access to higher education, access to gainful and rewarding employment, and access to civic life. Each of these forms of access requires sophisticated literacy skills, skills that can be developed through an empowering literacy education. Even though progressive educators may be critical of the system of schooling (and justifiably so), it is irresponsible on our part to imagine literacy pedagogies that do not increase the access of the populations we care about. We would not be in the position to read this book or to participate as scholars if we had not acquired these literacies of access.

At the same time, however, education cannot be solely concerned with access outside of a critique of the very system that we ask students to navigate. Sometimes, blind access can come at great costs, including the loss of self, or alienation from one's culture, one's language, and one's values. Individual students may find themselves succeeding in the midst of a largely dysfunctional school culture that still fails most people who look and sound like them. In one version of education, this might be viewed as success. In a pedagogy of dissent, however, students can acquire the skills they need to "succeed" while also developing a powerful language of critique of systems of social reproduction. In fact, as I will endeavor to show throughout this chapter, students can develop their literacies of access through a curriculum that is itself a proactive critique of inequitable power relations in society and the role that cultural production plays in legitimating these conditions. In

addition, the students' learning can be situated within their own critical, counter cultural production.

Towards these ends, this work is situated within a framework of a pedagogy of access and dissent. First and foremost, such an enterprise envisions all students as learners and users of language and literacy. A generation of scholarship in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) reveals that young people are users of language and literacy in their everyday activities (Heath, 1983; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; Mahiri, 1998). In my own work (Morrell, 2004) I have drawn upon the literacy learning that accompanies participation in youth popular culture to develop classroom literacy practices that develop literacies of access and literacies of dissent. Part of the process, for any progressive literacy educator interested in reaching students and helping them to achieve must involve examining the everyday language and literacy practices of students to make connections with classroom practices. Curricula are designed upon a common set of philosophical and pedagogical principles but must be tailored to the everyday experiences, the needs and desires of the students in particular classrooms, at particular moments, and within particular geographical, cultural, and economic contexts. How can the literacy curricula in post-Katrina New Orleans look the same as literacy curricula in classrooms in South Central Los Angeles, even if teachers in both locations ascribe to the same core tenets? Part of this examination should entail determining the potential of drawing upon youth participation with popular culture to develop academic and critical literacy skills. This will necessarily involve teachers becoming ethnographers, critical teacher-researchers, and literacy advocates and activists.

These tenets emerge from research on classroom interventions that involve pedagogies of popular culture. I should also say that the simultaneous goals of these pedagogical interventions were to facilitate the access that accompanies a knowledge of academic literacies and also to facilitate a culture of dissent to dominant practices that lead to the marginalization of the urban poor. This is an important point because too often pedagogical interventions focus on one of these goals to the exclusion of the other. What I have advocated for and investigated is a critical approach to urban adolescent literacy instruction that fosters access while at the same time developing the language of social critique and spaces for transformative action. As I will show, it is often in these transformative actions that the greatest academic and socially meaningful learning occurs. Before moving on to a study of these popular cultural literacy interventions, I identify and define some key terms related to these studies: culture, popular culture, academic literacy, critical literacy, and critical teacher research.

Key Terms

Culture is a term that everyone uses, but it's not a term that everyone theorizes. Often the term has been used to separate those who have elite knowledge and dispositions from those who don't, a usage more in line with Bourdieu's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Culture is also something that other people have, people who paint their faces, live in jungles, and appear in *National Geographic*. Before beginning an analysis of popular culture and its pedagogical potential, I feel the need to recover these important terms and to explain their usage in my work. I will begin with culture.

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1995) articulates three components of culture that are essential to any thorough analysis of the subject. The first of these is the *Ideal*, in which culture is a state or process of human perfection in terms of absolute or universal values. This definition most closely associates with the cultural capital notion I alluded towards. According to the *documentary* component, culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which human thought and experience are recorded. This notion also fits very well within the framework of schooling. An elite education is predicated upon the engagement of the best books, plays, and works of art that have been produced by our culture. E.D. Hirsch's (1988) *Cultural Literacy* comes to mind when I think of the documentary elements of culture. Having read Shakespeare or Goethe makes someone more cultured because, through reading these works, individuals have been exposed to the greatest ideas in human record. This documentary element makes itself most prevalent in schools in the English curriculum, where a raging debate exists over what students should read. Writers such as Diane Ravitch (2000) have argued, for instance, that the movement toward multiculturalism in literature selections prevents students from having access to the most rigorous and illuminating literary works.

Finally, the third, or *social*, component of culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and "ordinary" behavior. This third element of William's articulation of culture has really come about with the anthropological turn in the social sciences over the past generation (Cole, 1996). The social component of culture is important to contemplate because it forces us all to admit that we have culture and that culture is not only practiced in elaborate rituals and ceremonies; culture manifests itself in everyday practices that we usually take for granted. It is this same cultural turn that has opened the conversations about multicultural education and

culturally relevant pedagogy and, in my own work, the exploration of the pedagogical applications of youth popular culture.

In my work I have tried to draw upon Williams' analysis of culture to articulate a theory of popular culture. In the *ideal*, popular culture is an expression of universal human values, namely the desire and struggle for freedom from tyranny and oppression. Just as the case with culture, popular culture also *documents* human experience via hip-hop music, film, and the mass media. Finally, it encompasses the everyday *social* experiences of marginalized peoples as they confront, make sense of, and contend against social institutions such as schools, the mass media, corporations, and governments.

Cultural theorists also see popular culture as a site of struggle between resistant subordinate groups and dominant forces that seek to capitalize upon and co-opt this resistance. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998; Docker, 1994; Hall, 1998; Storey, 1998; Strinati, 2000) This becomes particularly important for contemplating literacy pedagogies that utilize popular culture. It is not necessarily important (or even desirable) to condemn popular culture as the ideological arm of the culture industries or to celebrate it as the unadulterated resistant voice of the masses. What's more important is that the pedagogies account for the conflicted nature of the terrain and that they assist students in becoming more informed and empowered consumers and producers of popular culture. Certainly literacy development plays a part in both sets of activities.

While not a widely used term (academic literacy is usually only referred to as "literacy" since that's the only place most people believe that literacy happens), academic literacy is an important concept for progressive literacy educators and researchers. Many of us recognize that all people use language and literacy, yet we also realize that there exists a huge literacy achievement gap between the haves and the have-nots. We are challenged, therefore, to help these populations to acquire the literacies needed to navigate the academy. For the purpose of this chapter, academic literacy is defined as those forms of engaging, producing, and talking about texts that have currency in primary, secondary, and postsecondary education (Harris and Hodges and, 1995; Street, 1995; Venezky et al., 1990).

Changing technologies and the emergence of new literacies are changing what it means to be academically literate (Alvermann, 2001; Cushman, Kingten, Kroll, and Rose, 2001). Academic literacy is an ideological target, a politicized target, and a moving target, yet it is a target worth aiming for. As literacy educators, researchers, and policymakers, we cannot really afford to provide the next generation with instruction that does not impart academic

literacies, no matter how many problems we have with the term as it changes to suit the needs of particular moments and interests.

It is important to note, however, what a slippery term is this academic literacy. At its most basic level, it is the literacy practices that can lead to academic achievement. This is obviously problematic, yet the ability to access dominant institutions and dominant discourses is one major goal of this critical literacy work. Even as we challenge limited ways of representing literacy and knowledge in general, we are charged with developing strategies to help marginalized youth to perform better in school—to acquire and successfully demonstrate academic competencies, literacy being chief among them.

Critical literacies involve *the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations; and promoting individual freedom and expression* (Morrell, 2004). Critical literacy is the ability to not only read and write but to assess texts in order to understand the relationships between power and domination that underlie and inform them (Hull, 1993). Critical literacy is a reading and re-writing of the world. Critical literacy can also illuminate the power relationships in society and teach those who are critically literate to participate in and use literacy to change dominant power structures to liberate those who are oppressed by them (Freire and Macedo, 1987). Finally, critical literacy can lead to an emancipated worldview and even transformational social action (Freire, 1970; Hull, 1993; McLaren, 1989; UNESCO, 1975). All of the interventions mentioned in this chapter simultaneously sought to develop both academic and critical literacies.

Critical research can best be understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals (McLaren, 1989), both as participants in the research process and benefactors of the research process. Critical educational researchers consider schools to be institutions designed for social and cultural reproduction and the maintenance of existing hierarchies and power imbalances (Merriam, 1998). It is through schooling that marginalized populations are encouraged to accept their lot along with the present set of social conditions as the only and best possible scenario for human organization. Critical teacher research, for example, is intended to engage and benefit those who are educationally marginalized in society through investigating curricula and pedagogies that expose existing structures of inequality and develop the literacies and identities of students (Morrell, 2004). Critical teacher research is "critical" because it involves teachers as legitimate researchers, because it investigates praxis (actual classroom interventions), and because its primary purpose is to produce empowering and transformative learning spaces.

As a teacher-researcher, I drew upon multiple sources of data during the course of these interwoven studies, which were conducted over the course of twelve years across three major sites which included a twelfth grade English class in Northern California (1993–1999), a college access program in Southern California (1999–2001), and a university-sponsored summer research seminar offered to teens in the Greater Los Angeles area (1999–2004). It is important to note that each of these studies occurred in low-income contexts with students attending under-resourced and under-performing schools. I will now transition to talk about the praxis of popular culture in literacy classrooms. I focus on the teaching of argumentative writing and research for social change.

Situated Literacy Instruction:
From Local Literacies to Academic Transformations

One of the more difficult skills to teach in literacy education involves helping young people to develop the skill of making formal arguments, especially in their writing. Throughout secondary and postsecondary education, teachers assign essays and complain about the lack of analysis, the lack of supporting evidence, and the inability of their students to weave together a thesis statement and supporting argument. Adolescents, however, argue all the time when it matters to them. They argue with their parents about boundaries; they argue among themselves about whose favorite sports team is better, about what to do on the weekend; and they argue with their teachers about just about everything! When they make arguments that matter to them, they are able to make cohesive arguments; they naturally use multiple rhetorical devices; and they use sufficient evidence in appropriate places. Theses are clear and concise; even counter arguments are anticipated and disproved.

The problem for educators, then, is not one of teaching students how to argue but of making connections to schema that youth were familiar with that required arguments similar to the ones we wanted them to make in their writing. After doing extensive searches of popular culture, I determined that the court trial offered the perfect schema for argument. Youth were familiar with court trials from television, and the formal arguments of court trials could map on very nicely to teaching students how to develop formal arguments in their writing. It is absolutely impossible to successfully argue a case in court without having a strong thesis statement, without bringing in evidence, and without anticipating and refuting a counterargument.

I designed several classroom units that combined the study of a novel, play, or epic poem with a large-scale court trial. Two core units were *Canterbury Tales* (where Geoffrey Chaucer was tried for libelous portraits) and *Native Son* (where Bigger Thomas was retried for the murder of Mary Dalton). With each story, it was important to choose a theme or topic that would generate great debate among the students. One of the first important steps in developing a critical stance as a reader is understanding that literary texts are meant to be interrogated and that the reader has more work to do than just decoding the words and understanding the plot. A second step entails helping students realize that they have something to say that matters. Additionally, it helps to create a context that is at once fun and engaging for students to express their opinions, or to even express contrary opinions that may not necessarily be theirs.

The trials usually lasted 3–5 weeks and followed an elaborate format that developed over time. At the culmination of the literary work, students were given the trial assignment and the class would be split into two groups. The teams would have a week to prepare for the trial. During this week, each group would have specific tasks. For one, they would have to select students to play the witnesses that their side had to produce. They would also have to select a series of attorneys. Attorneys were only allowed to question or cross-examine one witness, so each side had a large number of attorneys. Each side also had to produce lawyers' assistants who would perform background research and help to prepare witnesses for cross-examination from the opposing side. With the large number of roles, everyone in a class of 30–35 students could have a role as either a witness, an attorney, or an attorney's assistant.

A variety of writing tasks were associated with the week's preparation. For instance, each side needed to develop a set of questions for each of its witnesses along with the probable responses. In other words, they needed to create a script. The sides also needed to create a list of at least three questions that they expected the opposing side to ask of its witnesses along with probable responses. Teams were allowed to work together, but, with such a large task, students needed to take portions of the assignment to complete. Each student would have to have these items in their *casebook* in order to receive full credit. Each side also needed to produce the script for an opening argument, and at least two students needed to participate in the opening argument, which could not exceed 10 minutes. The opening arguments usually had a team of writers responsible, given its importance to the case.

During the actual trial, the rules were fairly conventional. Students were taught how to object and the various grounds for objection were explained. To insure a quick-flowing event, sides were limited to 15 minutes of questioning

or cross-examining of a witness. When the arguments were completed, we would recess for one full class period and allow the teams to draft their closing arguments which, again, could be presented by as many as two students who had not played a role in the opening statement. During the actual trial, the primary writing assignment was that each student was responsible for taking "copious" notes each day. The running commentaries were to be used on the final assignment and were also to be included in the casebook.

After the trials were completed, the final assignments entailed assembling the casebooks. The casebooks included a copy of the opening statement, which was written by selected members of the team. The second set of items included scripts for witnesses, anticipated cross examination questions, and questions for cross examination for opposing witnesses which were also written by selected members of the team. The third item consisted of the daily notes of the trial, which were completed individually by the students. The final item was a 5–7 page argumentative essay proving the case of a particular side. The students were able to use the actual text along with any information contained in their casebooks to complete the assignment.

Drawing upon the court trial as a popular cultural phenomenon allowed youth to develop their skills of argumentative writing, which they demonstrated in their completion of the trial casebooks. Over the course of a three-year period, I collected and analyzed each of the casebooks handed in by my students (approximately 400 casebooks). While the actual court trial served as an excellent barometer of students' ability to develop formal arguments around literary texts, the real evidence of the impact on their writing could only be determined through a thorough analysis of their writing, particularly the analytic essays that anchored the casebooks.

Student essays revealed an acute understanding of the formal rules of argument that govern the court trial, and they incorporated these sophisticated rhetorical strategies into their writing. Consider the following example, a closing argument from a member of a litigation team charged with defending Bigger Thomas in the *Native Son* trial:

> We have spent more than three weeks trying to prove that Bigger was innocent. He was innocent beyond all doubts. The prosecution has no solid evidence that proves that Bigger is guilty. Throughout this whole case it has become obvious that a mere observation is really different from actual evidence...The prosecution tried to prove that Bigger was crazy and that he killed Mary [Dalton]. Most of their witnesses are racist whites who shun all blacks. They do not care for a black man's life...Mr. Dalton, a man known to the whites as a very giving man. He is known to donate money to the blacks for education. If he had so cared about the blacks, why did he charge his black tenants far more rent than the whites? If deep down inside he really cared for the blacks, he would have personally gone down to where the blacks live. Mr. Dalton has

a reputation for being a man who loves all people, but his actions contradict this reputation.

This essay proceeds for seven pages to dissect each of the prosecution's witnesses—first, by discrediting them as racists and then by showing holes in each of their arguments. The author then proceeds to amplify the testimony of each of the defense's witnesses, stating clearly how each one supports her final argument; that her client is a victim of the racist times more than he is a cold-blooded killer. In making this argument she has thoroughly investigated the text and written eloquently about the most serious and debatable issues in the text. The argument is clear, concise, thorough, passionate, and well written. It demonstrates how seriously the students took their roles as litigants and how the schema of the court trial allowed them to develop sophisticated arguments around a canonical literary text.

Students also utilized their literacies of access to engage in political action. Following the culmination of one court trial, the students began to question whether or not they had racial justice in their own school. They incorporated their skills of formal argument and their investigative skills to create a series of articles that became a special journal entitled "Serious Voices of Urban Youth." In the six weeks that this particular class dedicated to producing the magazine they visited neighboring schools to document economic disparities that existed along racial lines; they interviewed administration and teachers; they used videotape to gather evidence; and they even interviewed all of the candidates in the upcoming mayoral elections. While it is difficult to gauge the impact that the political action had on their school, there is no doubt that it had quite an impact on a classroom of students who decided to hold themselves accountable for changing their school.

Studying the Local: Student Research, Literacy Development, and Social Change

While reading and writing are essential components of any critical literacy curricula, a literacy curriculum geared toward political action for social change needs to involve students as critical researchers and knowledge producers. It was through our reading of Latin American participatory action research movements and theories of critical qualitative research in the context of literacy education that a team of colleagues and I designed a seminar that convened urban youth in Greater Los Angeles to participate as critical researchers of urban inequality.

The preparation and presentation of a major research project guided the curriculum of the seminars. The five-week seminars included a week-long introduction to research methods and critical theory, one week devoted to research design, two weeks in the field, and a week-long focus on data analysis and write up. However, there were multiple desired outcomes relating to literacy development and growth as political agents and social actors. While it is difficult to conceive of a research project that didn't involve the use of sophisticated academic literacy skills, it is possible to design a research seminar that enhances the opportunities for students to develop these skills. We provided substantive time for students to read and write daily including a 45-minute journal period. We also created activities with literacy development in mind, such as workshops on writing field notes, conducting literature reviews, and reading through statistical databases to name a few. We also set aside small-group activities that involved close reading of a small chunk of academic-level text. During the data analysis and write-up phase, we asked students to write memos, progress reports, and multiple drafts that were evaluated by several teachers in addition to the students themselves.

During the course of becoming critical researchers of youth popular culture, these students learned the valuable tools of activist research. They developed complex analytic tools (i.e., surveys, questionnaires, media protocols) that were applauded by university faculty, that were embraced by community organizations, and that were championed by local policymakers. An examination of the student discourse and the student-generated work products revealed that the process of participating in the research seminar allowed students to improve their level of reading and writing as well as their mastery of sanctioned academic discourses. Finally, interviews with the students and samples of their critical memoirs and final projects revealed that the process of engaging in research of popular culture changed their relationship to dominant society. Subsequent to their participation in the seminar, students have presented to teachers and administration at their schools; they have become writers for their school newspapers; they have started clubs on campus; they have spoken to regional and national conferences; they have become teacher educators; they have written articles in peer review journals; and they have lobbied legislators at the state level.

I would like to turn to an example from the summer seminar that amplifies the claims that I have made about the impact of the research process on student literacy and identity development. Consider the following example from a seminar where students conducted historical research on the experiences of students of color in the city's schools in the 50 years following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The following is an excerpt

from the formal presentation of the group that examined the experiences of students in Los Angeles schools from 1954–1963:

> Many are familiar with the overt racism that has characterized the South during the 60s; however, few are familiar with the overt racism that was experienced by both teachers and students of color here in California during the 1950s and 1960s. Naturally, overt racism was apparent in schools that were completely segregated and communities that were completely segregated. Schools such as Plantation HS, Cottonfield HS were completely segregated, and we had two of our subjects who stated at that either they were or they knew someone who was harassed and arrested and beaten for crossing the tracks to the wrong neighborhood.

> We spoke to Mr. Leader, who was a teacher and who attended Westville HS, no he did not attend Westville HS, but he was a teacher and he became a superintendent, I spoke to Mr. Leader (who is African American) and he told a story of a school he attended as a youth that used to have dances. All the [white] students would be inside, enjoying the dance and participating while the African American students were forced to go outside and remain outside for the duration of these dances. So yes this school was integrated, however, he still experienced overt racism because all the African American students were forced to go outside and didn't get a chance to participate in these dances that everyone else got to.

I chose this example because it is clearly an example of solid scholarship. This research group has uncovered data that contradicts many assumptions about the state of Los Angeles schools in the 1950s. Through conducting extensive oral history interviews, this group is able to tell a different story of the experiences of African American students in Los Angeles schools. The oral history interviews were donated to a permanent archive in the city that was attempting to tell the history of African Americans in the same neighborhood where the students conducted their research. This well-written account ultimately became part of a collective set of presentations given to university faculty and policymakers and posted on an academic website. The students assume dual identities as critical researchers and political actors in that they appropriated the tools of historical sociology and contributed knowledge to the ever-important conversation about race and education. They also participated in a community movement to collect historical artifacts to tell a story that had been overlooked by many traditional historians.

Throughout this chapter I have tried to link conceptual ideas about local cultural practices, learning, and power into the creation of curricula that drew upon engagement with popular culture to create authentic and meaningful learning opportunities for young people. I tried to give an equal focus to a conceptual framework, to curriculum design, and to an analysis of student production because all three are important to research in literacy education. Too often we focus on conceptual ideas to the exclusion of examples of real

literacy practice. And too often we focus on student development without a discussion of the underlying pedagogical principles of the intervention being studied. Literacy research, especially literacy research for political action and social change, has to be simultaneously concerned with social theory, with literacy pedagogy, and with student outcomes. I have tried to pay explicit attention to all three in this piece.

Implications for Classroom Practice

Popular cultural pedagogies can greatly expand the repertoire of texts and textual production in the traditional literacy class to include songs, films, websites, and media artifacts. As more classroom research is conducted, there will hopefully be an even greater acceptance of these genres in literacy classrooms. The changes even over the last decade have been quite profound. School districts and teacher education programs across the country are taking the idea of incorporating youth popular culture into literacy curricula very seriously.

Further, the pedagogy of youth popular culture is one that allows literacy educators to fashion curricula that promote political action and social change. In the research presented in this chapter, this happened in several important ways. First of all, any literacy pedagogy that imparts academic literacies to historically marginalized populations in a political action. Therefore, creating demanding and engaging literacy curricula in these classroom contexts is a political action with huge social ramifications. Further, however, these curricula positioned young people as critical consumers and producers of popular culture. The youth themselves, as part of the curriculum, became litigants, journalists, and critical researchers who utilized their textual production to promote social change. When placed in these positions, youth were far more motivated to read and write in powerful ways than they would have been were they only completing assignments for their teachers. As they were becoming academically and critically literate, these youth were also gaining a valuable citizenship education. There is no reason why citizenship education should be relegated to social studies classes. Every teacher at every level is responsible for the citizenship education of her students.

Some purists have critiqued these ideas, not because they haven't been successful with youth, but because they threaten to eliminate classic literature from the literacy curricula. I have several responses to these claims. First, our primary goal remains to reach students and to develop them as literate citizens. Using literature is a means toward that end and not an end in itself.

All that being said, I believe that there is room in a powerful literacy curriculum for both popular culture and the classics. While studying about race and justice, students read Richard Wright's *Native Son*. While preparing literature reviews for their critical research projects, students read widely across a range of academic disciplines including history, sociology, and legal studies. Once students are confident in their reading, and once they understand the power of reading, they will be far more motivated to approach canonical and disciplinary texts.

Second, it is also important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of youth popular culture. When educators think about bringing popular culture into their classrooms, it is important to understand that popular culture is practiced locally and will vary from context to context. As I argued earlier in the chapter, popular culture does not cohere in the CDs and DVDs that become cultural products, rather popular culture is embodied in the practices from which these documents result. What that means is that educators need to understand the ways that popular culture is practiced by their students, in their norms, their behavior, their dress, their activities, in addition to their selection of CDs, DVDs, magazines, and websites.

Finally, it is important to consider literacy instruction as a political act (Apple, 1990). Creating the spaces for critical literacy instruction that draws upon youth popular culture will require educators to acknowledge the political nature of the profession. Not only will the process of inclusion be a political one, the purposes of inclusion are also political. Educators need to be willing to advocate for curricular change, and they may need to explicitly challenge demeaning or outdated curricular approaches that are prevalent in their schools and districts. At the very least they should be prepared to justify their own classroom practices for the benefit of their own students.

Implications for Research

More attention must be paid to critical teacher research. Given their positionality in classrooms, teachers are a relatively undervalued population in the research community. Although practitioner-oriented journals exist and they do inform practice, teachers are rarely seen in research-oriented journals, nor are they heard in conversations about literacy policy. There are several steps we can take to prepare teachers to conduct the types of research that would be valuable to the field of literacy scholarship and to make certain that a forum exists to share this work with the larger literacy research community.

First of all, ethnographies of literacy should form a fundamental role in pre-service teacher education and professional development (Barton, 2000; Moll, 2000). That is, all prospective literacy teachers should learn how to become literacy researchers as part of learning how to teach. Both David Barton and Luis Moll have argued that teachers learn about the literate lives of their students and these students' families through conducting neighborhood ethnographies and studying the non-school literacies in the surrounding communities. Second, our research-oriented journals need to make space to publish and foreground innovative research conducted by classroom teachers. As a field we need to promote and accumulate examples of critical teacher research that will ultimately serve as an essential resource to informing grounded theories of the applications of critical pedagogies to twenty-first-century literacy classrooms. The systematic exploration of multiple classrooms across multiple contexts will yield the best data to help us learn more about the limits and possibilities of drawing upon critical theory to inform urban literacy education. Without drawing upon our K-12 literacy teachers as collaborators, we are severely limited in this enterprise.

There are a host of reasons, outside of lack of explicit training in research, that teachers are not more present in the literacy research community. First and foremost are the limiting definitions of what research looks like and who can conduct research that implicitly inform our field. As a field, we can play a role in articulating and expanding our range of "acceptable" research methodologies to include critical research methodologies and, by association, the critical research studies of our classroom teachers.

Third, there needs to be more study of critical literacy praxis among urban adolescents in and out of schools. While NLS-inspired ethnographies of literacy have gained prominence in our field, there are relatively few sustained, empirical studies of urban youth engaging literacy praxis for social change. Notable exceptions include recent research on youth involvement with hip-hop culture (Duncan-Andrade, 2004) and spoken-word poetry (Fisher, 2005). However, these studies form only the tip of the potential iceberg. We still have a ways to go to demonstrate the powerful literacies that occur outside of school settings by populations that have not demonstrated sufficient in-school academic literacy achievement.

However, in this day and time it is not enough simply to conduct much-needed research in classrooms and non-school settings. We must do better at theorizing production and distribution of critical literacy research. To do this, I argue, we must think about the rhetoric of our research distribution as much as we think about the methods of critical literacy research. I argue that researchers need to think more proactively about how the "findings" or

"results" of our work are produced and distributed to multiple audiences. For example, we are most rewarded for the peer-reviewed journal articles that are usually only read by a small circle of peers. We also receive credit for books and book chapters that may have a slightly wider appeal. However, if we are serious about becoming political actors interested in social change, it is important to think beyond the traditional outlets and modes of production to consider how critical literacy research can reach larger audiences. Some possibilities could include creating digital video documentaries or websites that can be accessed by teachers, students, and parents. We can also consider creating policy briefs that can be accessed by elected officials. If we can think together about developing multiple rhetorical approaches for multiple publics, then our work might have a larger reach than just the academy.

Implications for Political Action and Social Change

First of all, it is important that literacy teachers and researchers position themselves as activists and advocates for educational justice. While there are never enough hours in the day to do the things that are required of us, this demand may seem admirable but overwhelming to some. This positionality as activists and advocates does not have to add to the already overwhelming workload that educators and researchers face. Rather, the stance toward activism and advocacy is one that should be incorporated into the research and pedagogy. As I endeavored to demonstrate in this chapter, the various curricular interventions across the three sites all dealt with issues of social and educational justice in some form and worked to position students and teachers as political agents. Whether this took the form of research reports, student documentaries, or a student-generated magazine, the class work itself existed as political action and the teachers and students, by association, as political actors.

Teachers and researchers can also function as activists and advocates by finding multiple ways to share their work with other constituencies, which would include teachers and researchers in other locations, but it would also include administrators and policymakers at all levels from local to federal. It is not enough to create the ideal classroom or to conduct the perfect study, as agents of change, teachers and researchers must become more deliberate about affecting policy conversations. It is often the case that policy conversations happen absent the bodies that have the most at stake and that have the most intimate relationship to the policy being enacted. Namely, teachers, students, and students' families are absent in these conversations. Literacy educators,

literacy researchers, and the students who participate in critical research can utilize their scholarly output explicitly to affect policy. This would entail developing relationships with policymakers, writing reports and briefs directly targeted toward the various policymaking bodies, but it would also include developing relationships with media and coalescing community support to use as leverage to negotiate with policymakers who need to garner media and public support.

Certainly all of this may seem above and beyond the job description of those hired to teach kids or to conduct traditional academic research. If we are going to promote dramatic changes in literacy education, however, we must take ourselves seriously as change agents. We cannot stop at the publication of a piece of scholarship or at the culmination of a successful classroom project. Drastic times require drastic measures, and these are undoubtedly drastic times in literacy education. Even though we are identified as teachers and researchers, we never cease being global citizens with a social responsibility to utilize our skills and our status to do what we can to make the world a better place. What more compelling reason could there be to do the work that we do?

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