Critical Pedagogy and the Teaching of Reading for Social Action

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Introduction

When the teacher asked the students "What did the author mean?" I blushed. Did she actually know what the author meant? – because I didn't.

More often than not, teachers like the one I was observing that day ask students to read and find the right answer, the one and only meaning of a text, as if reading were about uncovering one particular truth that a writer had established. Teaching reading as deciphering or guessing what writers mean does not seem to be the appropriate route to developing reading skills. In practice, one cannot know the author's intentions or messages unless the author is there to guide readers in the process. What we, as readers, can do is create our own meanings based on the ways we understand and interpret what we read or, at the very least, reconstruct meaning by using the clues that an author gives us.

Reading is not a guessing game, some kind of treasure hunt where teachers reward the student who can rescue the "original" meaning of a text. Moreover, there is no such thing as original meaning that needs to be salvaged from incorrect or misguided interpretations. One cannot say that reading is not about getting meaning, though. People do read to get information and to expand their knowledge. However, much of the meaning of reading has to do with assigning meaning. Reading is an interactive process and meaning is constructed as a result of the dialogue between a text and a reader (Rosenblatt, 1996).

Reading teachers, novice or experienced, face the hard task of having to teach students how to read by moving beyond the mere "surface level" of reading (finding meanings in the text) into a more critical perspective (assigning meaning to what is being read). Many teachers struggle in trying to reconcile these two perspectives as they teach learners how to read. In addition, teachers also struggle with assessment, particularly as it relates to the expected outcomes of reading. Instead of being evaluated based on what the students consider relevant and meaningful (what the text means to the students), students are evaluated on what teachers expect them to take from a reading activity (what the teachers think the text should mean).

In this article, I will explore the contributions of critical pedagogy to the teaching of reading and discuss an approach that helps learners move beyond the level of comprehension and use what they have learned in reading towards engaging in some kind of social action. I argue that, for reading to be effective and purposeful for both teachers and students, there needs to be a concrete connection between the text and the real world, and that this connection can be achieved through encouraging social action.

Critical Pedagogy and the Teaching of Reading

Reading has been used in classrooms both as a tool for language development and as a way of supplementing and extending content area knowledge (Rudman, 1993; Smallwood, 2004). In order to develop the ability to read, learners need to be taught not only to understand what is presented in a text (comprehension), but to activate their previous knowledge, make comparisons and connections (analysis), and create new knowledge (synthesis).

A critical approach to the teaching of reading involves the search for multiple possible interpretations and requires that teachers stimulate differences in the way readers relate to a text. Equally important, learning to read a text critically requires developing an awareness of how the themes that students read can lead to individual and collective transformation.

Paulo Freire (1970) hit a nerve when he elaborated on the dichotomy of students as subjects as opposed to objects of their own learning process. In contrast to more traditional or conservative approaches to education that are based on rote learning and that do not encourage the development of critical thinking skills or creativity in the classroom, the idea that students should take a stance and express their own beliefs and views towards the material at hand must have sounded revolutionary. Approaches like this, which essentially constitute students as objects, deny learners the opportunity to become engaged in their own learning. Teachers silence any other voice but theirs, and reading becomes an activity of finding the meanings the teacher expects students to find – the right answers, the one accepted interpretation.

A critical approach to education, on the other hand, highlights the importance of having learners actively engaged in their leaning process and being able to find and develop their opinions and positions (Freire, 2005). Even for teachers who believe that to be true, however, there still seems to be a distance between this philosophical orientation and the actual classroom practice. Freire (1992) believed that for the learner to move from *object* to s*ubject*, he or she needed to be involved in dialogical action with the teacher and the materials being studied. Dialogical action has two basic dimensions, reflection and action. Freire's view is visually expressed through the following function: Action + Reflection = word = work = praxis.

In transposing this "formula" to the teaching of reading, teachers need to encourage learners to reflect on what they read, create and discuss possible interpretations, and move toward some kind of action based on what is read. In the Freirean praxis, the word is the precursor to work and that is the ultimate purpose of becoming a reader. Engaging in critical reflection requires "moving beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, into questioning existing assumptions, values, and perspectives" (Cranton 1996, p. 76). Assisting learners in undertaking critical reflection is a frequently espoused aim of education (Bright, 1996; Brookfield, 1994) but it is a goal that is not easily achieved.

For Freire (2002), literacy is a political act. In a democratic society, schools serve as the place where students learn to become informed citizens. Schools empower learners toward participation and action by teaching them how to listen, how to identify alternatives, how to consider possibilities and how to search for multiple possible answers. From this perspective, reading is a libertarian activity and not an action of conformity (Freire, 1992). In and outside the

classroom, the political awareness that one gains through assigning meanings to the knowledge one brings into the school leads further to the dissemination of that knowledge and to the production of new knowledge.

Freire's political-pedagogical discourse reveals an interconnectedness between the social and the political being. In fact, his well known problem-posing framework is a result of this concern of education being associated with people learning how to solve daily problems collectively and collaboratively. As established through the idea of dialogical action, critical pedagogy presupposes the teaching and learning of words and actions. This means that a sound critical pedagogical practice needs to focus on identifying and discussing problems that affect a certain community, and it will only result in transformation if accompanied by some kind of action (Freire, 2006). The power of knowledge and the ability to question and reflect should be seen as an essential tool to intervene in the world (Gadotti, 2005). Through cooperation, dialogic subjects are able to "focus their attention on the reality which mediates them and which—posed as a problem—challenges them. The response to that challenge is the action of dialogical subjects upon reality in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 149).

The teaching of reading is an appropriate vehicle for teachers to help learners develop critical thinking skills (Krashen, 2004), a way to enable students to develop reasoning and argumentative skills, and a means to learn to express their opinions in socially acceptable ways (Naiditch, 2006). Reading approaches like the one described in the introduction of this article, where the teacher asks students to identify the author's intended meanings, personify Freire's criticism of "banking" education where learners are constituted as repositories to be filled with information by a teacher, who embodies both official knowledge and the established authority (Apple, 2000).

Many teachers would choose this *one-way-street approach* (Naiditch, 2003) to reading as a way of establishing authority and hierarchy in the classroom. This often results from a need to preserve control and maintain the teacher's sense of security. Established curricula often provide rigid scripts for content and teachers often feel pressured to "get through" the material. In addition, many teachers are not prepared to deal with diversity of opinions and pluralism in the classroom and prefer to have students search for the one "correct" answer. These kinds of teachers are the ones who usually choose a top-down approach to education (Senge, 1990) and do not see their classroom as an arena for learning and practicing democracy. Students who are taught to find the expected or the acceptable answer echo Freire's own observations as he developed his approach to the teaching of literacy under Brazil's military regime.

In fact, for learners who are taught under such circumstances, the idea of one only way of looking at the world goes beyond learning how to read; it is part of what is considered their official history: one only widely accepted possible interpretation of world events. In his well known motto of reading the word as a metaphor for reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 2001), Freire argued for multiple voices to co-exist in the classroom. These voices represent not only pluralism or diversity, but the actual existence and acknowledgment of multiple identities in the classroom that need to be affirmed, recognized, valued and respected.

A critical approach to the teaching of reading, thus, looks at learners as *subjects* who need to be empowered to elaborate on and express their views. Reading becomes as much about getting information as it is about assigning meanings and creating interpretations based on what is presented. This does not mean that, in reading a text, anything goes. Interpretation needs to be based on facts presented in a text and students need to learn how to develop points of view based on reality. However, reality is a much broader concept than what some teachers would like to think and it encompasses each individual student and the personal and collective histories in a classroom.

The Freirean praxis presupposes a shared dialogue of experiences among educators and students in order to understand social, political, and economic context as well as creating new knowledge and possible solutions for the challenges one faces. From a critical perspective, the teaching of reading should reflect Freire's praxis of exercising dialogue as a way of potentially transforming social condition. Teaching students to read critically requires strengthening the dyad 'comprehension-action' (Freire, 1992) in the Freirean approach and assessing its effectiveness in transforming the relationship between teacher, student, text, and knowledge.

The classroom, therefore, becomes a locus for the generation of knowledge and action. It is a participatory sphere, engaged and sometimes improvisational, that promotes liberation from established, official narratives and conventional action. The challenge is not limited to the students—it is also assumed by the teachers who must continually question and renew their own practice. In this space, learners develop a deeper understanding of their social environment, their histories, and themselves. They also learn to develop their social visions (Simon, 1992) and explore possible ways of acting upon and affecting the world around them.

Learning to Read Critically: Skills and Strategies

The problem-posing approach to education has been used as a way to help learners develop critical thinking skills. It has also been associated with a student-centered curriculum that promotes active, inquiry-based learning (Shor, 1992, Quintero & Rummel, 2003). Problem-posing also extends on Freire's idea of dialogical action by putting learners in a position of "critical co-investigators" who engage "in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 1970, p. 68) and with the material at hand (Naiditch, 2009).

The problem-posing approach to developing critical thinking skills starts with the identification of a problem that comes from students. It can be a personal, collective or social conflict that needs to be addressed. A teacher must be able to listen carefully to students in order to establish trust and to elicit the issues that the students bring to class. This model of listening represents one of the foundations of critical thinking skills. The problem-posing approach develops this and other skills, including:
- Identifying (students identify issues)
- Understanding (students develop a broad understanding of the issue they identified)
- Making meaningful relationships (students relate their issue to other issues and to the larger socio-economic and political contexts)
- Analyzing (students understand cause and effect, reasons and consequences, and make generalizations)

- Creating solutions (students come up with possible ways of addressing the issue at hand)

Auerbach (1992) has elaborated on five steps for learners to go through within the problem-posing approach. By following these steps, teachers will be guiding students towards the development of their critical thinking skills:

1. Describe the content
The content comes from what is referred to as a code. Codes originate from learners' experiences and reflect the problem being posed (Wallerstein, 1983). They are presented through any kind of media (written, oral, visual). The code, for example, can be a reading passage, a newspaper article, a photograph, a brochure of some kind, etc.
2. Define the problem
Defining the problem means uncovering the issue presented in the code, i.e., what students have identified as a problem that needs to be addressed.
3. Personalize the problem
It has been argued that unless students are able to personalize an issue and relate it to their lives, cultures, and experiences, the process will not make sense to them (Duckworth, 2006). An issue needs to be *theirs* to become meaningful and relevant.
4. Discuss the problem
Once the problem has been identified and personalized, students need to engage in a contextualized discussion. This implies analyzing all the different aspects of an issue: its socio-economic importance, political consequences, personal and collective values, how it affects the students individually and as a community.
5. Discuss alternatives to the problem
This step involves students' suggestions on how to deal with and resolve the problem being posed. Students need to create different ways of addressing the problem and weigh all the possible consequences of their various choices.

As can be seen from these steps, the development of critical thinking skills is associated to not only selecting a problem to be investigated but making it meaningful to one's context and larger community by relating to it on a personal (the individual student) and collective (the classroom, the school, the community or the larger society) level. Teachers act as facilitators of this process, and it is their job to guide the students through these steps with questions that engage students and make them consider an issue from different angles.

Freire's (2002) idea of *conscientização* (consciousness) embodies this educational tenet, which establishes that learners need to access and make use of their personal experiences so they become shared experiences and generate the content ("generative themes") to be dealt with as part of the class. All of these are considered skills that need to be developed as part of a critical pedagogical approach to education. As far as reading is concerned, these skills are essential in forming critical readers. To do so, teachers need to observe the following steps:

1. Understanding and defining reading:
In order to establish new relationships between reader and text, teachers need to develop new understandings of reading. One can only do that by first uncovering what students

understand by reading. Some of the responses I have received from students in class, for example, included: "we read to learn new things;" "authors are people with a lot of knowledge and teachers want us to read to learn about things;" "reading is very lonely;" "reading is boring;" "we have to read because we need to learn about the world." How do we move from these ideas to the idea of reading as an active process, one that involves collaboration between text and reader? If the reader does not believe that he has an active role in the process, then reading classes are bound to become boring and meaningless, as some students describe them.

2. Problematizing the relationship between text and reader:

Based on students' understanding of what reading is and what it entails, and how it can be used to develop critical thinking, teachers can move on to the problematization of the relationship between text and reader. This process requires students to confront the views expressed in a text with their own views of the topic being presented. This is not an easy skill to develop, as any kind of problematization involves drawing critically upon one's experiences and asserting one's position. Students need to understand that a text is not always "right." They need to be taught to argue with a text, to agree and disagree with an author, to confront what is being read. This requires the development of a skeptical attitude. In a critical reading class, it is essential that teachers encourage learners to question what they read by brainstorming possible ways of interpreting a text. The process of questioning an author's voice can help students to find their own voices.

Passive readers are taught to always relate to a text to get or extract information. They are taught to look for the author's meaning or the message that is being conveyed. Active readers, on the other hand, understand reading as a pluralistic activity; an activity which requires students to engage in an interaction with what they read with the purpose of generating meanings and ideas. Teachers also need to make sure they expose students to a variety of text genres, so students can get enough breadth and depth for their subsequent analysis.

In the end, students need to imagine themselves as "co-authors" of the texts they read and teachers need to develop classroom procedures that allow students to search for their voice in the texts they read. The classroom can only became a real place of knowledge production in the moment learners and teachers take ownership of the learning space and use it for reflection and research.

3. Becoming active readers by developing horizontal power relationships:

Transforming students into active readers implies elevating them to the level of co-writers of a text by empowering them to dialogue with a text. What this means is that learners are encouraged to develop a conversation with a text by identifying its perspective and contrasting it with their own. This is not an easy task, especially for learners who have been taught to believe that their contribution or knowledge is not valued in the classroom or that they read to get information only. This kind of vertical power relationship that we see in more traditional classroom settings does not encourage pluralism. The teacher represents the knowledge that needs to be gained and the texts are the vehicle through which this knowledge is transmitted.

Developing a critical perspective requires teachers to create an atmosphere of *horizontal learning patterns* (Naiditch, 2009) where everyone's knowledge and backgrounds are recognized

and learners' contributions and perspectives are encouraged and valued as much as that of the teacher or the authors of a text. Students can only begin to develop critical thinking skills when they perceive the classroom as a space of horizontal power relationships where there is no one-knowledge that is more important or more valued. In fact, when teachers position themselves as equal members of the classroom community as opposed to authority figures, students will feel more at ease when sharing their personal histories. Critical thinking presupposes no asymmetrical power relationships between teachers and learners or between learners and text. Everyone is on equal status and everyone's experiences are valued and relevant. The teacher and the text are just two more voices that add to the multiplicity of perspectives in the classroom.

Developing horizontal power relationships for classroom instruction implies seeing everyone as both a teacher and a student, as both a reader and an author. It also implies understanding reading as a dialogue and classrooms as dialogic spaces for comprehension and action. This libertarian approach to education has the potential of helping maximize the classroom space and time by creating an emancipating perspective for developing teaching and learning.

Traditional approaches to the teaching of reading have focused on teaching learners the sub-skills involved in reading (Harmer, 2001). Those sub-skills were also used as reading strategies for learners to deconstruct a text into smaller parts, search for specific pieces of information, and, in doing so, reconstruct the larger meaning. Such sub-skills and strategies involved, for example, skimming and scanning. Students are taught how to skim through a text to find the main ideas (reading for gist) and how to scan it to find specific information, usually in the form of proper nouns, names, dates and numbers (Matthews, Spratt & Dangerfield, 1990). As reading strategies, skimming and scanning are useful tools that help students achieve that first layer of meaning, which is reading for information – what the text is about and the arguments presented. Further strategies need to be used for readers to interact with the text on a deeper level to uncover other layers of meanings.

In developing a more critical approach to the teaching of reading, teachers need to think of strategies that help learners move beyond the mere identification and description of the elements of a text. Learners do need to be able to identify the topic of a reading passage and describe the elements that were mentioned by its author. However, the focus of a critical reading class should be on strategies that require learners to extrapolate the meanings of a text by exercising skills, such as the following:

1. Creating meaningful relationships
The first step in developing critical thinking skills through reading is to ask learners to relate what they read to what they know about the topic. Many teachers use this approach as a pre-reading activity, as a way of arousing students' interest in reading a certain text, and creating a reason for learners to read. This skill can also be developed as a post-reading activity to help learners examine and question "previous" and "new" knowledge: what they knew about something and what new information they have gathered.

2. Comparing information

The process of comparison, by definition, requires that learners recognize at least two realities. By comparing two points of view, learners are challenged to confront "new" information with what they already knew (or thought) about a certain topic.

3. Interpreting the meaning of a text

When it comes to interpretation, it is extremely important for the teacher to recognize the value of different (but plausible) interpretations. Interpreting the meaning of a text requires that students contrast the reality described in the text to their own reality and context so they can make sense of what they read and create meaning. Interpretation also involves filtering what is read based on individual experiences and emotions. As part of a larger critical process of interpretation, it is essential for teachers to realize that students have different perspectives based on their own life experiences and their way of relating to the word and the world. Therefore, as long as learners are able to use the text to support their interpretation, teachers should allow for and expect open-ended possibilities.

4. Analyzing the text

Analysis of a text is a result of the interpretation process. Students are required to look at the text in terms of what it means for them culturally and socially. An analysis of a text may also require students to direct their attention to specific parts of the text and focus on the nature of a particular element or feature of the text. Analyzing a text involves being able to look into its nature and production conditions aiming at understanding its constituent elements.

5. Synthesizing

The process of synthesis refers to students' ability to summarize what was read and to create possible generalizations. If interpretation and analysis require breaking up the larger text into small components to understand the whole picture, the process of synthesis represents the opposite. Students need to be able to elaborate their conclusions and this requires that they combine (or better, re-combine) and (re)arrange the different elements of a text to get to a conclusion. In a way, synthesizing is a process of reconstructing meaning – personal (what the text means to individual students) and collective (what the text means to the group) meanings. The process of synthesis can also be understood as reconciliation, as students need to take all the perspectives presented in class into account and formulate their own perspective.

6. Assessing

The assessment of a text is perhaps one of the most difficult skills learners need to develop. This is because assessment requires the development of personal values and judgment. Assessment involves establishing both your personal set of values in relation to what was read and the criteria used to judge the esthetic and content value of a text. Critical assessment does not mean what some traditional approaches to reading suggest ("Did you like this text?"); it goes further into selecting appropriate criteria for the appreciation of the social value of a text. The concern with assessment within the framework of critical pedagogy should be on how the text contributes to our understanding of the human condition. A critical assessment also allows learners to develop an appreciation of the elements of nature and humankind present in a text.

7. Developing social action
From a critical perspective, assessment should also be translated into some kind of social action (Freire, 2006). Students need to develop their understanding of the human condition taking its socio-economic elements into account. This involves developing a broad understanding of power and oppression in society and how students can act on the world around them by contemplating transformation – of society and of themselves. Within a critical pedagogical approach to reading, developing social action is a way of responding to the reading by making use of Freire's (2001) tenet of using the word to transform the world. In the Freirean praxis, reflection translates into action, and this is what happens in the process of developing critical literacy – you appropriate yourself of the word and the world.

Some of these steps are complementary and developed almost simultaneously. Many reading specialists, in fact, argue that steps 1, 2, 3, and 4 overlap, because in order to create relationships one needs to compare and contrast information and the interpretation of a text requires an ability to analyze it (Rosenblatt, 1994). Steps 6 and 7 are the ones that may require special attention from the teachers' point of view. From a critical perspective, assessing a text and students' reading comprehension needs to take into account what students take with them from the reading activity and how reading affects their lives. This is why assessment should be related to social action, a stage that gives students an opportunity to display not only the knowledge gained, but their ability to transform that knowledge into productive action for the betterment of society. Reading that results in social action leads to transformation, and this is the ultimate aim of learning to read the world.

Learning to Read Critically: An example

In order for the reader to understand how all these skills and strategies actually translate into a critical pedagogical practice, in this section I provide an example of classroom procedures using the elements that were described in this article, i.e., how to use critical pedagogy in the teaching of reading for social action.

The example that follows illustrates the steps taken in one of my classes. The identification of the theme came as a result of a school event. It all started when one of the high school students made it public that he was going to bring his boyfriend to the graduation prom and that he expected to be treated like anyone else – without being judged based on his sexual orientation and without being made fun of. He also expected the school to guarantee that he and his partner were going to be safe and respected like all the other students.

The students in my class decided that this was an issue they wanted to study and discuss further. For many of them, talking about sexual orientation was a new experience and having someone in the school come out and be so open about his relationship with another male student was a situation that needed to be processed and elaborated. Moreover, given the environment of homophobia and all the jokes and threats that followed the episode, students realized the need to learn more about a topic many of them condemned without being able to understand.

In their journals, students were able to write about their doubts, fears, questions, and share stories that involved other gay people they knew – family members, people in the community, celebrities, and even other students at school. Admitting to being gay or questioning

your sexual orientation was not an easy task for high school students in a predominantly immigrant Spanish-speaking area, so when students expressed an interest in learning more about it, we decided to develop a whole unit on the topic, and the unit involved reading for social action.

After analyzing and selecting a number of resources that were age-appropriate and adequate for classroom use, we decided that we were all going to read a book called *Reflections of a Rock Lobster: A Story about Growing Up Gay* written by Aaron Fricke (2000). The description of the theme came not only from the book students read, but from a variety of resources, including their journals (for those students who wanted to share them), newspapers and magazines, television shows, their own experiences and from different members of the school and the community. It was important to have students exposed to a variety of resources, as this promotes multiple views and presents different perspectives on the topic. This is a useful aspect of classroom procedure that helps students to develop an informed opinion on the issue at hand, particularly in terms of a critical approach. In this case, students read about and studied the emotional, psychological, and social processes a teenager goes through in search of his or her sexual identity.

The stage of discrimination with this particular topic was extremely relevant for these students, as it involved sorting through and learning to discriminate fact and fiction, reality from opinion. Students developed a "fact and fiction checklist" based on all the pieces of information they had gathered. This checklist helped them to develop their points of view based on evidence from the texts they had read and from other sources they deemed reliable. Understanding the value of different sources of information and comparing them forces students to make decisions as to which sources they can trust and why. This process also included a discussion on objective and subjective perspectives with students learning how to distinguish concrete facts from opinions disguised as facts using linguistic devices and stylistic resources as clues used by a writer to develop his or her point of view.

After students had gathered, selected, compared and contrasted information on sexuality and sexual orientation, it became much easier for them to develop an analysis of Aaron Fricke's book. The interpretation students developed was contextually based, as they transferred the context and situation described in the book to their own context of the classroom and school setting. As they discussed the issues raised by a gay teen who needs to confront himself and the school at the same time he deals with societal pressures, students realized how much of our personal feelings and perceptions are filtered through the act of reading and how much meaning we actually bring to what we read. Without even noticing, the research students had done, their checklists, their search for facts and accurate information, interviews, and discussions had transformed them into active readers. While writing in their journals, many of them shared with me and their classmates, how much they had "talked back to the book and to Aaron;" how much they could "relate to the characters in the book;" and, how the process had made them reconsider the situation they were experiencing at their own school where a teenage student was coming out and asking for school support and understanding.

The process of synthesizing what they had read did not come easy, as many students realized they had conflicting thoughts and feelings whereas some others needed more time to

process all they had been exposed to. This is a natural reaction, particularly when the topic is both personal and still taboo for many of these teenagers who are still developing their identities. This is why the next steps, assessment and social action, are extremely important and necessary not only for practicing active reading, but for preparing informed students to become citizens for democracy and social justice.

A number of suggestions were given as possible courses of action for students to engage in. As a teacher, my role was to guide and encourage them to weigh all the pros and cons of their possible actions and help them develop their projects once a decision was made as to how to transform their findings into social action. Furthermore, it was also decided that we would pursue different courses of action, thus allowing students to engage in multiple activities at the same time and to assess the value and effect of each one. Below are some of the social actions in which students engaged:

- Students contacted the local chapter of GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) to get information and materials in order to transform their school into a safe school.
- Students collected and distributed educational resources about sexual orientation around the school and the community.
- Students collected money and donations to buy more books about gay themes for the school library (which had no books on the topic before this project).
- Students contacted a number of people who could volunteer their time as guest speakers and come to the school to talk about their coming-out experiences and about the importance of tolerance and respect to sexual diversity.
- A group of students developed and acted out a play based on certain scenes from Fricke's book to perform at school.
- Some students created posters to hang around the school focusing on the idea of a safe school.
- Some students initiated the process to officially start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) student club in the school. They believed that by having both gay and straight students together, it would be easier to recruit members.

As can be seen from these examples, social action means translating what you have read into some kind of work that will benefit the larger community and that will demonstrate your understanding of what you have read (which is part of the assessment process). The actions students engaged in as part of this project also reflected their talents and strengths. Each student contributed based on his skills and they were all equally valued and important: students who were more artistically oriented engaged in creating posters or acting; students who enjoyed communications contacted agencies and speakers, while others worked on creating text or visiting local places around the community.

This critical approach to translating reading into social action also makes students understand the importance of reading for their personal growth and for the development of their cognitive and social skills and maturity level. When students realize their role in promoting change, they feel empowered. They understand that their contribution and participation can in fact have an effect in the world around them and this motivates them to want to read even more.

From the teacher's point of view, reading for social action also promotes inquiry-based learning that is truly student-centered. Students need to learn to take responsibility for their learning and a critical approach to teaching encourages student-led activities that are based on students' needs and interests. At the same time, it also gives students a sense of purpose while building their self-esteem and independence.

Conclusion

Reading in the classroom should be a fun and motivating activity that engages students at the same time that it promotes the development of critical thinking skills. While reading, students learn to question and to search for answers. They also learn that there are different ways of interpreting a text and that these reflect the different ways of interpreting the world and to relate to life situations and circumstances. When selecting texts for students, teachers should pay close attention to the problems students bring up in class and to the topics they express an interest in. This way, reading will be relevant to the classroom context and meaningful to the students' lives. Readings should reflect students' experiences, but it should also expose them to new experiences, broaden their horizons and widen their perspectives.

One of the greatest concerns for teachers is what to do with the texts selected and how to go about developing classroom activities that will effectively result in learners' development of reading, social, and critical thinking skills. The approach described in this article aimed at addressing this issue and was developed based on critical pedagogical principles that establish that in order to develop critical thinking skills and become socially engaged citizens, students need to relate to the texts they read on a deep and personal level, and that this is only achieved when students take an active role in the reading process.

The first thing to bear in mind is that the learner of the 21st century is as much a reader as he is a *co-writer* who contributes meaning to what is read by bringing in his or her own experiences, previous readings and views of the world. Reading is not a one-way street and readers contribute meaning as much as they get meaning from a written text. Teachers who ask students to find the moral of a story or the meaning behind an author's words express a misunderstanding of what reading entails. Reading should be an open door of possibilities and classroom activities should enable students to search for multiple interpretations. By encouraging students to dialogue with a text, teachers will be helping them to find their own voices and to develop a critical view of different topics and issues.

As a matter of fact, the reading skills and strategies described in this article can be readily transferred to any kind of learning. Additionally, this critical approach also encourages teachers to work collaboratively across disciplines. In developing the unit about *Reflections of a Rock Lobster,* for example, I worked closely with teachers from other content areas, such as health and physical education, biology, and social studies. This integration helps students create connections and analyze a topic from different disciplinary points of view. Apart from that, this inter-disciplinary approach helps students distinguish between fact and opinion and identify different text genres. This way, learners can activate specific knowledge every time they read a new text since they can predict the kind of language they will encounter and the kind of vocabulary and syntactic structures (e.g. an academic text uses more passive voice) they will find.

Over the years I have developed this approach, I have witnessed how students' perceptions about reading have changed. They learn that reading is a dynamic process that is always being reconstructed because we are never the same. As context and time change, so do our views and ways of interpreting and relating to the world. This is a result of the way we process and internalize our experiences. We are always constructing and reconstructing meaning every time we interact with a text. Above all, I have learned that texts need to speak to the students and that developing social action is a way for students to speak back to the texts.

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