Critical Literacy, Digital Literacies, and Common Core State Standards: A Workable Union?

In this article, the authors consider ways teachers can bring critical literacy into the classroom using Common Core State Language Arts Standards as a starting point and examining an 11th grader’s response to a critical literacy assignment. Furthermore, they explore how teachers can use digital tools to introduce meaningful critical literacy without simply domesticating either of them. The authors conclude by suggesting ways that critical literacy can be used to make both digital literacies and standards seem more relevant to students.

As Luke (2000) asked over a decade ago, can “critical literacy move into mainstream state-mandated curriculum?” (p. 449). Correspondingly, Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel (1996) noted that proponents of critical pedagogy have had to deal with a series of difficulties and challenges associated with the almost inescapable demands on (critical) teachers to mediate both official curriculum and text/literacy/content requirements, and the standards and criteria for (genuinely) critical inquiry, analysis and understanding. (p. 152)

In U.S. educational settings, these difficulties and challenges persist, although we have yet to see how educators will respond to these changes as the Common Core State Standards replace state standards; as of this writing, they have been adopted by 45 states.

Because Common Core State Standards signify a focus on standardization that is both
intriguing and potentially stifling (with the possible result that standards can become the entire curriculum), we explore components of the standards as they relate to critical and digital literacies; we argue that utilizing these literacies is a way to offset some of the stifling aspects of standardization.

In this effort, we attempt to build on illustrative accounts of the ways in which critical literacy is “characterized by an emphasis on students’ voices” (Beck, 2005, p. 394; see also Bean & Harper, 2006; Bean & Moni, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004; Pescatore, 2007; Simon, 2008; Singer & Shagoury, 2005). Furthermore, some researchers have focused on minority students and the ways critical literacy can help them become “change agents” (Lawrence, McNeal, & Yildiz, 2009, p. 484; see also Lesley, 2008), and we aim to add to the representation of the voices of diverse students in this research base. To that end, we compare the standards with a sample of written work by Alexis, a then 16-year-old African American girl who attended 11th grade in a diverse urban West Coast high school.

Alexis was designated as below basic by a state-mandated standardized assessment but, as we show, her work on a critical literacy assignment contradicted this label. We discuss how a traditional letter to the editor activity meets the Common Core State Standards while also encouraging Alexis to practice critical literacy. Since educators are under increasing pressure to meet standards, we explore how standards provide a preliminary point but need to be critiqued since they, too, are “written and read in particular social contexts” and “do not emerge from a timeless, placeless zone” (Mellor & Patterson, 2001, p. 120).

**Critical Literacy in Education Spaces**

Although there is variation among classroom critical literacy curricula and approaches (Behrman, 2006), some shared characteristics exist. Luke (2004) defined critical literacy as using print technologies and other media to examine and question the practices of how rule systems are organized and the systems affecting the social fields of everyday life. Similarly, Lewis, Seely Flint, and Van Sluys (2002) synthesized definitions of critical literacy as consisting of four related components: (a) disrupting the commonplace, (b) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (c) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (d) taking action and promoting social justice. Critical literacy practices often involve identity work as students “reflexively consider how texts function within the context of that discourse-practice to construct value” (Myers & Eberfors, 2010, p. 154; see also Jones & Enriquez, 2009). The definition that we utilize here also includes students assuming an evaluative stance and acting upon these stances as they uncover manifestations of social injustice in their lives and in the world around them.

From the Common Core State Standards

As part of the Common Core State Standards for grades 11 and 12, students should “(d)emonstrate command of technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update work in response to ongoing feedback, including fresh arguments or new information.” Although digital literacy maintains a relatively low profile in the remaining English/Language Arts standards for these grades, critical literacy is more easily identified in the following:

**Key Ideas and Details**

1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
2. Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
3. Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

**Craft and Structure**

5. Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.

6. Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text.

**Speaking and Listening**

1. Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

   a. Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

   b. Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.

   c. Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

   d. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

2. Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

Given that both the mention of digital literacy and the standards above are fairly general, educators have the opportunity to shape the standards toward a stronger inclusion of both digital and critical literacies. “Citation of evidence” and “analysis” are malleable activities, and this malleability provides opportunities for educators to curve them to include a stronger critical literacy component.

In the next section, we discuss how a traditional letter to the editor activity meets the Common Core State Standards while also encouraging Alexis to be critical in a wider context beyond the classroom and assert her authority as a writer.

**Letter to the Editor**

Although Alexis would earn a grade of “B−” in her eleventh-grade English class, the standardized test she took at the end of that academic year designated her as below basic. That score and description, obviously limited, was not borne out by her performance on the letter to the editor assignment.

Alexis’ teacher, Diana, a White woman who had been teaching 5 years at that point, utilized a timeline of Martin Luther King’s life in the educational resource section of the Seattle Times Web site (http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/special/mlk/king/timeline.html); she described her goal of critiquing the timeline as having “students question popular media representations of MLK and other African American leaders,” consistent with a critical literacy approach.

After reading King’s speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” (1967), students then crafted letters to the Seattle Times editor.
Alexis included specific citations from King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech that she felt were missing from the timeline.

Dear Letters Editor,

Hello, my name is Alexis H. and I’m a student at Seaview High School, located in [...]. Recently, in my English class we have been studying the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., and while studying his life, we have chosen your timeline as an informational resource. As I was reading your timeline I’ve noticed that you omitted what I consider to be the three most important years of his life. During those last three years of his life, he made a lot of accomplishments. He helped organized the “Poor People’s Campaign,” gave a speech stating that it was time for the people of the U.S. to speak out on the Vietnam War, and other regards about the war.

For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Speak.” The purpose of this speech was to persuade other people that it is time to speak out against this war. In his speech he’s not only holding people of the U.S. responsible for being silent about the war, which he believed was wrong. In fact in his speech he states “over the past two years as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and speak from the burning of my own heart.” In this quote he was saying that he knows that it is easy to turn the other cheek when you see and know things you should speak out on. He’s not only holding them responsible for doing these things but he is blaming himself for also doing this shameful action.

In “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Speak” King explains his question on the Vietnam War, what he called “strange liberators,” and how that women and men all over the world were being forced to fight in this war. This speech is very important to know and learn about because this is exactly what is going on in today’s life. Most of the problems he listed in his speech are the problems we have today. This speech is letting citizens know that it may be hard but we need to speak out on what we know is right. Not only did he deliver this speech, but in 1967 before his death he and members of the SCLC began to plan its “Poor People’s Campaign” which focused attention on the problems faced by the poor people of America. Then King was killed. Five weeks after King’s murder, the Poor People’s Campaign marched in Washington, D.C., and constructed “Resurrection City.” I think this should also be in your timeline too because in this event he encouraged people in need to stand up for what they need.

I don’t know if your company/co-workers understand the importance of the last three years of his life. But the purpose of my letter is to ask or maybe even suggest changes that could be made to your timeline. I think that you should at least put the title and date of these events in between the dates of 1965 and 1968 to give these events more details then you should give them a subtitle, as in: 1967—He gave a speech regarding the Vietnam War. Also, he helped organize “the Poor People’s Campaign.”

Thank you again for making your time-line available for me to get information from it. It was very helpful. But, you can make it even more helpful and informational by putting the accomplishments he was in for the last three years of his life in your time line.

Respectfully,

Alexis H.

Instead of relying on the “I” of personal connection, Alexis switched to the collective “we” who are still faced with the same problems that were prevalent in King’s time. It’s tempting to allow students to stop with personal connections to text and then move on to the next assignment, but critical literacy requires a larger social context. Alexis related to what she read and then reframed the speech’s context in a way that served her purpose of recommending revisions to the timeline. In this instance, one text is not only compared to another on a surface level (e.g., what is in one that is missing from the other?) but one is used to critique the other and this process helps to develop a more critical reader.

Returning to Lewison et al.’s definition of critical literacy (2002), the four components are present in Alexis’ letter, albeit in varying degrees. If one views the commonplace as reading the newspaper timeline and answering teacher-generated questions, divorced from a social con-
text, then this assignment did disrupt that particular approach. Alexis subsequently asked about the absent information and the editors’ purpose in leaving the information out. Sociopolitical issues inspired the content as well as the prompts leading up to it, namely, the annotations of King’s speech. Writing a letter is literacy-in-action and arguably, the beginning of pushing for fairness of representation, an aspect of social justice. Alexis moved past connection into social commentary and presented herself as an expert because she was a reader who could read behind the lines.

In terms of meeting Common Core State Standards, this assignment, as a response to an informational source, pulls “evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text” (p. 40). Furthermore, Alexis does analyze and “evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging” (p. 40). A fairly traditional letter to the editor activity does not have to work very hard to meet the aforementioned standards, but meeting the standards should be one of the minimum goals, and not the overarching one. We are concerned that the last several years of an emphasis on standardization has created a culture of “just meet the standards” that precludes other foci, such as critical literacies.

**Extensions**

We would argue that digital literacies provide opportunities to enact critical literacy in unique ways. Lanksheer et al. (1996) asserted that “digital text is experienced overtly as being available for rewriting, reconfiguration, and, in general, as a resource for making meaning” (p. 175; italics in original); perhaps digital texts are creating a new locale, constantly under construction, where critical literacies can exist, and continue to develop, beyond the confines of standardization. Writing a letter to the editor that never leaves the classroom is a rhetorical exercise (although, in Alexis’s case, these letters were mailed to the editor). An additional way to demonstrate to students that they can develop their digital voices is to create a class blog, wiki, or Ning where students respond to Internet texts, like the timeline of King’s life.

Students’ voices could then be amplified by the digital component, which also brings in the question of audience. In turn, this can be discussed and explored with students: What are some consequences of the timeline being on the Internet rather than in a textbook? What effects are there from readers responding to a text like this timeline in an online forum instead of just in English class? If students then share their responses with texts’ creators, as well as with the public, their audience multiplies, as do the discourses they can utilize. As the English standards have moved to a national stage, so can students widen their response arena, using both digital and critical literacies in the process.

As a supplementary follow-up activity, teachers can ask students to find digital texts based on their own interests and post responses to, and critiques of, them that both the teacher and peers can read and respond to in turn. Rather than isolated writing exercises, divorced from the meaningful content of students’ lives, such a combination of digital and critical activities can encourage students to approach literacy as a live event, with texts that change and evolve as readers bring their own questions, interpretations, and analyses.

Because it takes only minutes to establish a digital presence, creating a blog is a relatively straightforward way to place critical literacy into a context that is familiar to students. The work that comes afterward can push both teachers and students into challenging spaces, as the boundaries blur between classrooms and public forums. What starts as a traditional letter to the editor writing exercise can be transformed into “a community effort and is no longer about students attempting to identify the answers that exist in our heads” (Hall & Piazza, 2010, p. 94). The meaning is in students’ hands, as is the dissemination of it. Educators might find the Web site “Young Critical Minds” helpful as an example of learners establishing a critical, digital presence: http://youngcriticalminds.com/about/.
Although we advocate a student-centered approach to critical literacy, we acknowledge “that teachers and schools can be instrumental and influential in both closing and increasing the gaps and discrepancies in access to and engagement with practice” (Freebody & Luke, 1996, p. 54). We believe that the most imperative critical literacy activity that could be added to an English/language arts class is to model for students the process of critiquing the standards themselves and asking why they should occupy such a central place in the classroom. They can be treated as a text in and of themselves and subjected to the same sort of questions we can apply to the timeline: Who authored the standards? Whose interests are served by the crafting and adoption of national standards? What are some of the possible effects on learners, particularly those who may not fare well under “standardized learning?” Whose voices are silent in both the ideology behind the standards but also in the types of learning and assessment they promote and recognize?

Even though educators have faced, through increased standardization, threats to their autonomy and agency, implementing the practice of positioning standards as questionable remains within their power. The same skeptical stance that Alexis applied to the timeline should also be directed toward the standards. If teachers encourage students to view standards as an evolving discourse, despite their presentation as staid and set, then they can put the question to students [who, along with teachers, bear the weight of standards]: How can these be “critique[d] and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways” (Freebody & Luke, 1996, p. 57)?

**Conclusion**

Critical literacy deserves a place in classrooms for its ability to help students uncover “the ideology inscribed in any text” (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 3). Additionally, if “student ability” is at least partly constructed in social interaction, and may not be stable beyond the context in which it is ‘produced’ ” (Kress et al., 2005, p. 83), then teachers need to provide contexts in which students can assume critical authoritative voices. Alexis’ letter is not the work of a below basic student but of a writer with legitimate concerns. Critical literacy assignments can provide an opportunity for students to transcend test scores and to add their distinct voices to the discourses of authority. Digital literacy can provide an inviting gateway into critical literacy, as students are often more willing to engage in technology-based activities than those rooted in more traditional ones.

Standards will likely never overtly endorse critical literacy; however, the Common Core State Standards should not intimidate teachers into avoiding reciprocal approaches that encourage them to involve their students in critical literacy work that uses digital literacies as a vehicle. The crucial aspect is for educators to apply a critical literacy lens to the standards themselves and to help their students do the same. Although there is no single answer to the challenges of standardization, we feel that a critical literacy approach provides a way to counter some of its negative and disempowering effects.

“Doing” critical literacies, with standards in mind, will always be a tense process because critical literacies often operate from a socio-cultural definition of literacy while standards define literacy proficiency in individual students (Luke, 2000, p. 459); their agendas are divergent, and, some might say, mutually exclusive. We believe that the creativity and professionalism of teachers can be called upon to reconcile these definitions and agendas in equitable ways. No set of standards can, or should, tell teachers how to achieve that.

**References**


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