Research Readings for November 4, 2013: Chapters 19 and 20

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**Chapter 19**

***Point of View:***Prior to commencing their discussion of the notion of critical literacy, Freebody and Freiberg (2011) highlight two important points: (1) conceptions of critical literacy are highly dependent on conceptions of text, and (2) individuals either believe that knowledge is acquired (as Socrates believed), or they believe that it is constructed. With regard to the second point, the authors imply that critical literacy is dependent upon an inquisitive person that is not merely acting as a passive receptacle.

***Findings:*** The various definitions of literacy that are offered fall into a few key categories. Because most of the definitions come from governmental agencies, literacy has been (and still is) typically seen as the individual’s ability to function and communicate within her society. In the United States this has often meant the ability to speak and write in “correct” English. Yet, a few of the definitions given highlight the individual’s ability to engage in healthy interactions with her society, and a couple of the definitions home in on the ability of the literate person to achieve his goals and, presumably, self-actualize (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011).

The authors also imply—even explicitly state in certain sections—that viewing literacy in dichotomous terms is archaic thinking. It is no longer productive to view literacy in terms of the “haves” and the “have-nots.” With every new study the construct of literacy grows and becomes more complex. The concept of digital literacy, in particular, has become central in discussions of twenty-first century skills and job readiness. With expanding definition(s) of literacy come challenges to other archaic perceptions, such as the early twentieth century belief that reading canonical literature would “tame” the working class (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011, p. 438). Most significantly, however, is that broader conceptions of literacy are challenging the Socratic belief that there exist fixed bodies of knowledge—stores of information that individuals must acquire through set rules and to set standards.

***Conclusion(s):*** While Freebody and Freiberg (2011) posit that learning occurs through dialogic activity (e.g., the Socratic Method), they present evidence that argues for an empowered reader. They have highlighted the plight of the marginalized student, who feels that he must submit to the authority of his textbook. The authors recognize that digital technology has the potential to level the playing field for struggling readers of all sorts. Yet, at the same time, they acquiesce that Web savviness is not tantamount to critical literacy—quite the contrary

Socrates viewed writing as a mere “show of wisdom” (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011, p. 444), not as the true brand of wisdom that is uncovered through dialogue. In this vein, the authors implied that Socrates would is rolling in his grave over the idea that young people have a wealth of information at their fingertips, but they lack the skills to evaluate the information they cull. Consequently, the authors suggested that critical literacy be taught as a body of technical knowledge that can be applied in countless contexts, or in their words:

The argument we put her is that the term *critical literacy* covers a distinctive body of curricular knowledge with application across a broad range of current school subjects on the matter of knowledge about textual practices to do with reading, constructing, analyzing, and evaluating texts and interpretations of texts. (Freebody & Freiberg, 2011, p. 447)

The implications of this argument are profound. In fact, it might influence some curriculum planners to reconceptualize traditional academic subjects (e.g., mathematics) as various strains of literacy.

**Chapter 20**

***Point of View:***  The Moje et al. (2011) article connects with Freebody and Feiberg’s (2011) “The Teaching and Learning of Critical Literacy” in the sense that both sets of authors see text, however it is defined, as the common thread that runs through all academic subject material, even through Outside-of-School (OOS) material. Beyond that, in their meta-research piece, “The Role of Text in Disciplinary Learning,” Moje et al. (2011) present expanded views of text and literacy that result from the synthesis and analysis of a plethora of relevant research. Specifically, they conceptualize text, as do Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993), as anything that “can be interpreted or is seen as carrying meaning” (Moje et al., 2011, p. 454).

***Findings:*** The first set of findings conveyed relates to roles and uses of social studies texts, and the research revealed the following: (1) history textbooks are seen as authoritative, virtually error-free renditions of historical events and figures; (2) students are not encouraged to construct meaning when they read social studies texts; rather, they are taught to summarize; (3) students are not examining authors’ rhetorical purposes; (4) textbooks are seen by students as lifeless and dull because they lack authorial voice and subjectivity; and (5) educators privilege printed texts over digital texts (Moje et al., 2011).

Similarly, problems with mathematical texts, most notably the misuses of those texts were noted in the article (Moje et al., 2011). In particular, the examined research highlighted the following: (1) changing textbooks is not enough to improve quality in light of the fact that textbooks are often misused; (2) textbook math problems are artificial and have little to do with real life; (3) ironically, only doctoral students are allowed to deal with real-life mathematics; (4) the content in math books for lower-level students is presented as absolute truth, whereas upper-level books are more open to interpretation; (5) low socioeconomic status students tend to want “clearer directions [and] fewer words” (Moje et al., 2011, p. 472).

Out-of-School (OOS) texts (e.g., graphic novels, video games, instant messaging) are proving to be viable means of validating student interests and of connecting to more traditional and academic forms of text (Moje et al., 2011). While it has been challenging for researchers to define what counts as OOS, the following have been deemed by scholars as common characteristics: 1) OOS texts are dynamic; (2) OOS texts are nonlinear; and (3) OOS texts make clear connections to other media. The benefits of OOS texts are perhaps best understood relative to the benefits of bilingual education. As the bilingual student, in the long run, has a verbal advantage over her monolingual peer, the student who is facile with OOS texts and traditional academic texts possess greater learning potential as a result of this “hybridity” (Moje et al., 2011, p. 477).

***Conclusions:***It is not surprising that Moje et al. (2011) concluded that the nature of text is changing. With that, the authors implied that there was a causal relationship between the broadening conceptions of text and the broadening conceptions of literacy itself. Moreover, the authors stressed that, in the end, the quality of a given text is irrelevant if the text is misused (e.g., posited as an error-free account of history) by an unimaginative teacher. Also, research has shown that rewriting history textbooks to provide opportunities for students to deconstruct them is a productive endeavor. Furthermore, more studies need to examine actual text use in math and history classes. In addition, math curricula need to be driven more by inquiry than by textbook content. Finally, OOS text, composition and content, needs to be studied in more depth, so that texts are no longer viewed by students as lifeless, dull, and impersonal.

References

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