A Teaching-Learning Grant Initiative: Developing the Critical Literacy Instructional Abilities of Pre-Service Educators

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ABSTRACT- Pre-service educators in a fall 2016 section of EDUC 2120, Exploring Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Diversity in Educational Contexts, were introduced to the concept of critical literacy. Throughout the course of the semester, students (sophomores who are interested in exploring teacher education prior to making a commitment to the field) were provided with the opportunity to apply their knowledge of this conceptual framework through a series of faculty-facilitated discussions of the young adult novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (Abdel-Fattah, 2008). Guest speakers—in the form of a local high school student who recently began wearing a hijab to school, as well as a visiting scholar who specializes in critical literacy—expanded students’ perspectives. Results of a pre and post-test, as well as reflections on strategies that can be utilized in a classroom to teach children and young adults to read from a critical literacy viewpoint, were evaluated. This Teaching and Learning grant funded initiative fostered meaningful collaboration between the reference and instruction librarian for the College of Education and teaching faculty in the College of Education in addition to providing valuable opportunities for dissemination of lessons learned.
Introduction

Problem Statement

Critical literacy "accounts for ways that literacy can be used in service of self-actualization and social change" (Riley, 2015, p. 418). Reading has social, cultural, and political ramifications. When students become aware of the messages about race, gender, and power within the text, they can better connect with their own views about how these issues influence their interpretation of what they read (Hall and Piazza, 2008). Reading through the lens of critical literacy allows students to understand what they are reading from diverse perspectives (Norris, Lucas, & Prudhoe, 2012). Students learn how to read, but are not always taught how to analyze the text critically (Jones, 2006). This can often be attributed to the fact that their teachers may not have learned how to teach students to read texts from a critical perspective (Norris, et al., 2012). The goal of this collaboration was to address the efficacy of combining critical literacy and training in diverse literature for candidates in the College of Education. This Teaching and Learning grant funded initiative fostered meaningful collaboration in addition to providing valuable opportunities for dissemination of lessons learned. This framework will enable students to develop techniques to integrate critical literacy strategies throughout the curriculum of their future classrooms.

Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (as cited in Iwai, 2013) assert the significance of using multicultural literature in schools. This is a powerful tool which helps students develop multiple perspectives about their culture and provides them with insights about understanding other cultures and people (p. 189). By including literature with differing perspectives, teachers can ensure that all students can make connections while also “providing a realistic view of our pluralistic society” (Landt, 2013, p. 22). Therefore, undergraduate students enrolled in a course
taken prior to applying for admission to College of Education degree programs were chosen to participate in this study.

Students in a Fall 2016 section of EDUC 2120, Exploring Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Diversity in Educational Contexts, with a focus of this course centered on utilizing sociocultural perspectives to analyze the nature and function of culture and social class, were introduced to the concept of critical literacy and participated in an interactive series of faculty-facilitated small group discussions. The students’ initial use of critical literacy was assessed through a pre-test, and reassessed using a post-test composed of open-ended questions. An additional evaluation measure at the end of the class involved class discussions where students described how critical literacy strategies can be implemented in their future classroom.

**Anticipated Outcomes**

Anticipated outcomes of this collaboration were as follows:

- Teacher candidates’ use of critical literacy will increase.
- Teacher candidates will discuss strategies that can be used in a classroom to teach students to read from a critical literacy viewpoint.
- Collaboration will be fostered between the university Library and the College of Education, as well as between junior and senior faculty members.

**Activities and Methods**

**Book Description**

Students who participated in our study were each provided with a copy of the young adult novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah (2008). The text, selected by the librarian, is a young adult novel featuring a seventeen-year-old Australian-Palestinian-Muslim woman who decides to wear her hijab, the traditional head covering worn by Muslims as a part of their faith, on a full-time basis. Over her winter break, Amal makes the decision to wear the
hijab while watching an episode of the television show “Friends.” Amal has friends from a range of backgrounds who each have their own opinion regarding her decision to wear the hijab. The reader learns about intricacies of the main character’s cultural background as well as influences from her parents, family, and peers throughout the course of the book. The story deals with issues that any high school student faces, with the additional pressure that Amal must tackle. She struggles to be authentically herself in an environment that is not always welcoming to anyone who is different.

**Close Reading/ Critical Literacy Theory Workshop**

The Assistant Professor of Reading presented a workshop on close reading strategies to students enrolled in the course at the beginning of the semester. Close reading was introduced as a lens through which the reader sets a purpose for the literacy task, interprets words and phrases, analyzes the structure (visual and text elements), finds patterns and relationships between details, seeks to understand the author’s reasoning and use of evidence, integrates ideas from the text, and promotes connections (Lehman & Roberts, 2013). A rationale for the importance of close reading strategies was also presented to students. This led to a discussion of how the process of close reading can help students concentrate on what is being read; encourages sustained effort to understand the text; and develops critical reading and thinking skills. Overall, the value of close reading strategies to facilitate students’ ability to become strategic and independent readers was modeled.

Students were invited to participate in a close reading demonstration with Avery colored dots. Before they began reading an article from the CBS News website on the topic of print versus online reading (Weiner, 2015), students were asked to jot down their purpose for reading on a post-it note. For their first reading of the material, students were invited to overview the
article in order to figure out what the text said. During the second reading, they were asked to consider how the text worked. With a pink Avery post-it dot, students recorded a text-to-self connection they generated while reading (along with a short note to remind them about the connection later). Next, they were asked to record a memorable word choice or sentence with an orange Avery post-it dot. Lastly, students utilized a green Avery colored dot to record language that conveyed the author’s perspective as they read. In the margin, they were invited to note why they selected this language as contributing to the author’s point of view.

This was followed by the “Knew-New-Q” activity (Gambrell, 2014), where students annotated the text. If the information in the article was content that they already knew, students placed a “K” in the margin. If the information was new to them, students placed an “N” in the margin. If students had a question regarding a portion of the article, students placed a “Q” in the margin. Afterwards, students shared their reflections with a peer and wrote a sentence to solidify their “Knew-New-Q” insights.

Additional close reading strategies were introduced and reinforced throughout the course of the semester. This included a “what do you notice?” chart to record ideas and spark discussion as well as additional annotation strategies that can be utilized while reading. Visual literacy activities with post-it notes (such as determining important concepts while reading and noting connections with lines, circles, arrows, and symbols to show the relationship between the ideas) were modeled. Strategies such as re-writing the text as a series of tweets, discussion circle roles, analyzing a text from different viewpoints, and creating student-generated discussion questions to accompany a text were also introduced.
Critical Literacy Strategies Employed throughout Discussions

Students were invited to employ a range of close reading and critical literacy strategies throughout their reading of the book and class discussions. These included the Avery colored dot strategy, the K-N-Q activity, making connections, visual outlines, and annotation strategies, among other means. College of Education students were invited to reflect upon how these strategies created a more critical reader. In addition, they were asked to share insights related to how a close reading lens could impact their teaching style as future educators. Student comments from the conclusion of the project yielded valuable data, demonstrating the impact of this project on these future teachers.

Additional Learning Opportunities

High School Student Guest Speaker

A local Muslim high school student was invited to visit the course. She shared her personal experience of recently beginning to wear a hijab to school. This included her peers’ reaction, as well as its impact on her participation in school activities, such as roles in the school play and gym attire. Students posed questions to the guest speaker, who spoke honestly regarding a range of inquiries about her family’s influence on her decision and her future life goals, both personally and professionally.

Faculty Guest Speaker

A professor who teaches courses on ethnographic-and place-based teaching, feminist theory and pedagogy, social class and poverty, early childhood education, and literacy spoke to the class. She also delivered a Friday lunchtime lecture to faculty, students, and invited community guests. Her presentation focused on how to implement critical literacy not only in the classroom, but also in everyday life. During her visit, the faculty guest speaker worked with this
class, teaching students how to “read their world” from a critical perspective and ways to encourage critical thinking in the classroom.

**College of Education Brown Bag Session**

A Brown Bag session was held at the conclusion of the project in order to share insights gleaned from the critical literacy project with the College of Education community. We introduced the context for the project; provided details on the course as well as the guest speaker from the local high school who recently started wearing a hijab; and modeled close reading and critical literacy strategies for attendees. Two undergraduate students from the course were invited to join us to help convey their viewpoints during this informal conversation. Both students described what they learned from participating in the book discussion and how they will apply critical literacy strategies to their own teaching practices as future educators. The Brown Bag provided a valuable opportunity to disseminate information about teaching critical literacy in the classroom to College of Education faculty and students.

**Research Methods**

**Participants**

Twenty-two students, including 18 females and 4 males were enrolled in the sophomore level course, *Exploring Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Diversity in Educational Contexts*, which is completed prior to acceptance in the Teacher Education program at a small state university in a southern coastal city. The students’ intended majors included Pre-education in elementary, secondary, and P-12 areas. This group ranged in age from 19 to 57, with eighteen (81.81%) of the 22 participants between 19 and 29 years of age. They consisted of 7 African American, one multiracial, and 15 Caucasian students.
Research Questions/ Research Design

Many of the students in the course revealed that they learned how to approach reading from a more critical perspective when asked to provide answers to several reflective questions. These questions were as follows:

- In what ways does the book reproduce stereotypes?
- In what ways does the book undo stereotypes?
- Who is benefiting from this kind of presentation of the text?
- What critical literacy strategies have you learned from this initiative?
- How has your view of literacy instruction for future students evolved over the course of the semester? Please be specific.
- How has this project impacted your own perspectives on the reading process?

Research Procedures

Participants participated in faculty-led discussions on a set number of chapters scheduled every few weeks throughout the fifteen-week semester. During each book discussion session, university faculty introduced various critical reading activities, inviting participant involvement to discuss the work of fiction from these viewpoints. As the semester progressed, an adolescent with the same cultural background as the main character of the book they were reading visited with the participants, providing them with an opportunity to test any bias and stereotypes they might have held. During the final class discussion, faculty asked open-ended questions regarding their experience. This included new insights gained regarding multicultural literature, reflections on critical literacy, and the project’s impact on students’ future teaching skills.
Results

When responding to the open-ended question, *How has this project impacted your own perspectives on the reading process?*, during the classroom discussion component, student responses included:

- “I really have learned to question what I read now. I’ve enjoyed diving deeper into it (the book).”
- “I have learned that looking beyond what we think we know is important. KWL, charts, and using colored dot techniques (were helpful).”
- “I feel all different kinds of people can benefit from this (book). Young Muslim females, future educators, and really anyone else. Personally, this text helped me very much. It has helped me see things from a different view.”

*What critical literacy strategies have you learned from this initiative?*

- “I learned a multi-cultural perspective evaluation of a work that at first glance seemed to be a ‘kids book,’ but it has appeal and a message for all ages.”
- “From this book and these workshops, I have learned to close read while still connecting to the character.”
- “I really liked the different colored dots connection method because it helped me read the text more deeply. I have always been a good reader so I had never really thought about having questions about details of the readings.”

*How has your view of literacy instruction for future students evolved over the course of the semester? Please be specific.*

- “My view has changed a lot because I never realized how important it is for students to know and understand what they’re actually reading and relate to it themselves.”
• “Before I just saw reading as enjoyment, especially with a book like this. Now I see the importance of writing and connecting to the book.”

• “I realized that it’s important to teach students how to dissect text so that they are actually retaining the information.”

**How has this project impacted your own perspectives on the reading process?**

• “I realized that I have been reading incorrectly—that’s why I have to read information multiple times to actually retain the information.”

• “It has opened up my mind and ability to (participate in) active learning.”

• “It has made my reading deeper and more critical in the way I think.”

Responses suggest that participants gained critical literacy skills and learned how to incorporate strategies throughout their classroom lessons through this lens. In addition, reading and discussing literature that focuses on the experiences of characters with perspectives different from their own encouraged critical thinking. Students were able to generate authentic connections with the main character, providing a realistic view of our pluralistic society.

**Impact on Preservice Educators and Project Effect on the College of Education**

Throughout the course of the semester, pre-service Education majors became familiar with a range of critical literacy techniques to utilize in their own future classrooms. In addition, teacher candidates learned that incorporating close reading strategies through young adult multicultural literature can facilitate better understanding of the diversity and various perspectives around us, while teaching critical thinking skills that will be used throughout a lifetime.
Discussion

This project served as a meaningful collaboration between a university librarian and two faculty members in the College of Education. Each of us put forth meaningful contributions to enrich this learning opportunity for students and the larger university community. For faculty and staff to be effective in supporting students’ learning, they must connect with Association of American College and University tenets that “broaden students’ perspectives and engage them in problem-centered inquiry about pressing and perennial issues. By bringing students into communities where they learn from those whose experiences and views (may be) different from their own, it also builds important capacities we need to succeed as a diverse and collaborative democracy” (General Education Maps and Markers: Designing Meaningful Pathways to Student Achievement, 2015). This book discussion and accompanying critical literacy project addresses the need to bridge theory with practice.

In addition, by providing university students who are in the early stages of their degree program within the College of Education with this experience, this project assisted the College of Education with accomplishing its strategic goals of providing transformative student learning experiences and increasing retention. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities text, General Education Transformed: How We Can, How We Must (2015), “Too many students experience general education not as a conspicuously useful and meaningful component of a coherent baccalaureate education, but as a curricular impediment that they must “get out of the way” prior to study in a major. . . they may be unable to visualize a meaningful trajectory in their curriculum, with an attendant loss of motivation and commitment to persist” (p. 5). In addition, information about teaching critical literacy in the classroom was disseminated to faculty members as well as members of the wider community as a result of this project.
Insights yielded from this initiative have helped us examine how we can better prepare our students for the demands of twenty-first century teaching through a collaborative approach.
References


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