

The Critical Advocate

The notion of critical advocate has immediate antecedents in critical theory—especially as advanced by sociologists such as Bourdieu (1991) and Foucault (1989), philosophers such as Marx and Engels (1967), and a number of literacy scholars addressing issues of race, class, gender, and inequities using critical discourse analyses and other tools to interrogate hegemonies (e.g., Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson, 1997; Apple, 1988; Baker, & Luke, 1991; Comber & Simpson, 2000; Ellsworth, 1989; Enciso, 2004; Gee, 2015; Gilbert, & Taylor 1991; hooks, 1994; Janks, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Luke, 1994; 2014; McLaren, 1989; Shannon, 1989; Shor, 1980; Sims, 1982; Willis, 1995). Critical advocacy is propelled by an effort to understand power and challenge hegemony. The advocacy requires one to counter discrimination, privilege, and selective/marginalizing representations of any and all groups and ideas. Accordingly, critical advocates interrogate the circumstances of our worlds through a lens that examines the politics and ideologies that govern them. The critical advocates seek to understand the political designs that undergird texts, people, and events, including how individuals and events are portrayed. Critical advocacy could be regarded as an aspect or offshoot of critical thinking (see Side comment III 5 a 1) but notably in a direction tied to political engagements. Arguably, elements included in discussions of critical thinking are foundational to the discernments needed for reflective considerations and well-reasoned judgments and thoughtful and deft actions and decision-making. Perhaps a key distinction may be differences in alignment. Whereas critical thinking often touts suspended judgement as a key disposition, critical theory is driven by ideological considerations.

Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, J.S. (2001) differentiate critical thinking from critical literacy in terms of approach contrasting a liberal humanist orientation from poststructuralism and emancipatory ideology. Whereas critical reading might analyse the audience, the assumptions, arguments, warrants and stylistic tendencies, critical literacy interrogates the positioning of ideas especially in terms of matters of power examined in terms of socio-political considerations. As Cervetti et al., suggest:

In its pedagogy, critical literacy combines poststructuralist, critical, and Freirean understandings. From poststructuralism, critical literacy understands texts as ideological constructions embedded within discursive systems and has borrowed methods of

critique. From critical social theory, critical literacy understands that texts, being products of ideological and socio-political forces, must be continually subjected to methods of social critique. Finally, from Freire, critical literacy understands that literacy practices must always have social justice, freedom, and equity as central concerns. P.7

Side comment III 5 a 1.

Discussions of critical thinking have a history that extends back centuries including deliberations by John Dewey (1910) and John Rawls (1971) as well as an unpacking by Robert Ennis (1996), John McPeck (1981) and numerous others (see Hitchcock, 2010): Discussions of thinking critically or critical thinking or critically framed reading involve behaviours, dispositions, perspectives and abilities (both general and specific) tied to what Rousseau(1762) and Dewey (1910) considered to be reflective thinking befitting a form of inquiry that extends to a consideration matters of justice. In education, critical thinking or critically framed reading intersect with the taxonomic approaches undergirding curriculum developments such as the taxonomy proposed by Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill & Krathwohl(1956) in the cognitive domain, in the affective domain proposed by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964) and approaches to reading literature (e.g., Wolf, King, & Huck, 1968) including response to literature. Some have also examined these matters by enlisting frames from the study of arguments by Stephen Toulmin (1958) and Deana Kuhn (1991) or moral stages, such as those documented by Lawrence Kohlberg (1976).

Befitting the tenets of liberatory pedagogy, critical advocacy is not passive critique but aligned with transformation, social development, and protagonism (e.g., Andreotti & de Souza, 2011; Boal, 1979; Freire, 1972). This protagonism goes beyond reading and responding or reading in an evaluative fashion. Reading, analyzing, and interrogating texts might be necessary, but it is not considered enough. Critical advocates are expected to act responsibly upon their readings.

These actions include pursuing transformative change in the interests of society, interrogating inequities and injustices relative to considerations of social justice and fairness. Critical readings involve seeking improvements in ways that connect with communities, inclusive of challenging the status quo—especially in terms of advocating for the rights of women, the rights of Indigenous peoples, members of LGBTQ+ communities, religious subgroups, and persons living with disabilities. Critical readings are problem solving

processes—mobilizing support, interrogating systems, disrupting hegemonies, seeding change, and pursuing advocacies, by being an ally or by protesting.

Undergirding critical advocacies are forms of critical reflexivity—reflecting on ourselves and our worlds in the company of other readers. Critical readers are akin to researchers, positioning themselves and grappling with their own identities as they scrutinize the world, themselves, and the cauldron of socio-political forces involved. Critical readers uncover what may have gone unnoticed, or that which was misunderstood or ignored (see McIntosh, 1989). They examine events, settings, characters, and issues from different perspectives as they observe and participate aesthetically, vicariously, efferently and respectfully as advocates, allies and activists. To these ends, critical advocates should have a sense of place with regard to different meanings that they might hold, encounter, or derive from others; they need to be aware of the gaps in their understandings and what they may need to do for next steps. They need to be conscious of the layers of meaning through which they might travel and what these various orchestrations of meaning intend to prompt.

Ultimately, critical advocacy requires the recognition of one's own perspective and the perspectives of others, as well as an interrogation of the structures that undergird them. Hence, critical readers need to read aggressively, not just from one source but from many, and not just with one perspective but with many and for real world purposes. They need to research what they know and explore alternative views prior to, concurrently with, and after any engagement—fitting or aligning their own thoughts and new information with further ideas and possibilities. They will likely have multiple readings that are collaborative, multi-perspectival analyses of power and identity. Their readings should be participatory, exploring issues of positioning such as cultural affirmation, sidelining or subjugation. And apart from being critically reflexive, they should be advocates. Their critical advocacy should extend to forms of investigative inquiry that explore the nature of specific circumstances and what might be done in support of others in need or lacking in voice or support. Critical advocates need to adopt a range of perspectives and sources as they seek understandings and pursue strategies to enhance the agency of others—doing so in ways that are self-examining and, in terms of supporting others, respectful, responsive and not colonizing or self-serving (Smith, 2005).

The advent of the critical wave spurred a shift in socio-cultural activism—that which interrupts the systems used to perpetuate the social reproduction of privilege or advance bias and

discrimination. The critical wave brought to the fore socio-political-cultural readings of ourselves and our worlds that challenged complacency as they made visible racism, sexism and other inequities across systems. Moreover, critical advocacy went beyond reflection toward action, pursuing activism and advocacy or being an ally with others. Befitting the civil rights movements of the 70s—including the rise of feminism together with frameworks from sociology that examined power dynamics—the critical wave challenged our consciousness (what Freire, 1972, termed our *conscientização*), especially in terms of the systems in operation that perpetuate discrimination and bias. As Paulo Freire (1972) argued, critical consciousness pursues action against the oppressive elements in our world illuminated by those understandings.

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