Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching
Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section

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Disrupting the Commonplace through Teacher Research

During a Saturday critical literacy workshop, a teacher contemplates the critical practices in her own life. She questions the ways in which she assumes (or does not assume) a critical stance towards consumerism, media, and pop culture. Days later, when implementing a critical curriculum, she continues to think about her own instructional stance and how it affects student engagement. Referring to her class's discussion of Baseball Saved Us (Mochizuki, 1993), a book about Japanese internment camps in the U.S. during World War II, and students' questions regarding media coverage of war with Iraq, she comments that she did not “want to engineer the conversation.” Her comments strike us as particularly insightful as she reflects on her role and her students’ role in determining the critical pathways of learning.

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their work. She is beginning to recognize her complicity in directing conversations in particular ways.

We (Amy, Katie, and Mitzi) have been working with this teacher and fourteen other elementary teachers over the past three years to carefully examine our understandings of critical literacy and what it means for instructional practice. Our definition of critical literacy includes four dimensions: disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple perspectives, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking action to promote social justice (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002). The workshop meetings have served to help teachers enact the four dimensions of critical literacy, build community, support reflective practice, and engage in action research.

A series of full-day critical literacy workshops are held in Bloomington each fall, spring, and summer. They are funded by a Profitt grant, an internal grant competition at Indiana University that supports research studies related to teaching, learning, and curriculum. The timing of the workshops gives the teachers ample time to try out new strategies and conduct informal research between meetings. The fifteen participating teachers come from six schools in the Bloomington area (public and private) and include K–6 classroom teachers, as well as art, physical education, and English as New Language (ENL) teachers, and one curriculum coordinator. The three of us, acting as facilitators, are from a local university.

Starting in January 2000, teachers have been coming together to begin conversations on what it might mean to participate in a critical literacy curriculum. The teachers wondered what critical literacy was all about, how appropriate it would be for younger children, and what their roles would be. We began by inviting teachers to experience working with children’s literature that problematized dominant political and social perspectives, presented multiple viewpoints, or documented social action (Harste et al., 2000). We engaged in discussions about these texts, and the group shared personal connections and concerns about how to use these books in their classrooms. We also talked about possible tensions in using such texts. At this point, most teachers were having their students interrogate texts to examine how authors privileged certain viewpoints while leaving out others.

Reflection was an integral part of our collaborative efforts. End-of-the-day evaluations invited teachers to think not only about the workshop content and structure, but also about their own process of learning about critical literacy. We asked teachers to consider how their knowledge was changing and how this affected their instructional practices and curricular structures. As facilitators, we relied on participant feedback to determine our next steps. In responding to teachers’ requests to learn more about their colleagues’ practices, we provided time in workshops for teachers to make mini-presentations featuring the work they had been doing in their classrooms.

Over time, the workshops provided an avenue for examining a range of possibilities when creating a critical literacy curriculum. For instance, the participants expanded their questions and inquiries to consider ways to use everyday texts (e.g., advertisements, headlines, popular media, songs, book orders, posters, etc.) in the classroom, to challenge commonplace practices and structures in schools, and to examine larger sociopolitical issues. We recognized the value of longer conversations to linger over these ideas. The discussions challenged everyone to consider new viewpoints and possibilities. The teachers further expanded their notions of critical literacy by engaging in action research projects. Some of their questions were: How does a critical stance affect my students’ writing? Can critical discourse analysis be used as a revision strategy? How does pop culture enter into and influence the lives of ENL students? Does critical practice move beyond the classroom when we’re not looking?

The workshop structure evolved as we dedicated time for working on these questions, reviewing gathered data (e.g., samples of children’s work, morning meeting notes, digital pictures) and taking steps towards data analysis and writing.

In this issue of School Talk, four of the teachers who have participated in the workshops share their research: Jane Hammel documents her personal journey as she expanded her understandings of critical literacy and what it meant for her students. Lee Heffernan shares her work with her third-grade students, as they became co-researchers in challenging social norms of the lunchroom. Rìse Paynter and Kevin Gallagher present an inquiry on how their students participated in the process of building critical curriculum.▲
I started my critical literacy journey by attending a workshop during the spring of 2000. As a participant, I was given money to spend at a local bookstore. I used a list provided at the workshop to begin building my critical literacy library.

With books in hand, I entered my K–2 multiage classroom ready to set sail with my students on a critical literacy journey. At first I stayed close to shore with a familiar format of reading and discussing a book. When we read *Teammates* (Golenbock, 1992), about Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese, our discussions focused on friendship and racial issues. These conversations were so engaging that we never finished the book. I then tried more books using the same read-and-discuss format.

The following year, I was determined to venture further from shore as I proposed some questions for study: How do we learn to hate? Where does hate come from? It was an interesting journey as we read about relationships in *Dear Willy Rudd* (Gray, 1993) and *Sister Anne's Hands* (Lorbeicki, 1998). We also read a book about the Oklahoma City bombing, *One April Morning* (Lamb, 1996). We stayed with the read-and-discuss format, but this time ventured into some written responses.

I wanted to change course on our critical literacy journey, but our world was then exposed to the horrific events of September 11, 2001. Terrorism dominated our discussion, altering our journey toward very dark waters. We read the book *Sami and the Time of the Troubles* (Heide & Gilliland, 1992) about the life of a child during the civil war in Lebanon. The children brainstormed about whom they should write to as they connected this book with September 11. Their list of desired recipients was impressive: President Bush, Osama Bin Laden, the New York City firefighters and police officers, widows and children, Sami, and several others. The children felt empowered to share their support for stopping violence. They turned anger into hope and thought of ways to help serve their community.

The following year, 2002–2003, I wanted to use *Curious George* books to connect community field trips to my curriculum. I also wanted to build curriculum from students’ lives. While doing research on the Web, I discovered background information about the Reys, who wrote the *Curious George* books. They had an amazing story to tell. They escaped from the Nazis in Germany, carrying a satchel with five manuscripts. One of those manuscripts was the first *Curious George* book. I tried to connect their migration to my students’ experiences, but it didn’t work. The topic related to only a couple of students, leaving me feeling a little frustrated about my attempt at critical literacy.

Dr. Amy Seely Flint, who has been an observer in my classroom since I started on this critical literacy journey, encouraged me to look for an issue that would affect and engage more student participation. I thought about our playground interactions: Why do the children play together during the afternoon recess and separately during the noon recess? This question altered my thinking. Instead of my choosing and relying on a book to encourage critical conversations, students’ interactions on the playground became the focus of our critical literacy sessions. Reflecting on real issues happening in school, I began to find ways to explore the four dimensions of critical literacy in our K–2 community.

While the books we read introduced students to worlds outside their own and allowed them to explore multiple perspectives, examining playground interactions seemed like an opportunity for them to take action in their own community. Children worked with digital pictures and videotapes of recess and then engaged in conversations with their peers about playground rules: Who makes them? Why do we need them? They also looked at peer interaction: Who can cross gender lines and play together? I became more of an observer than troop leader as children engaged in small groups to think, discuss, and write about their playground interactions and ask what was happening and why? The power struggles are messy as our critical literacy journey faces some rough waters. Nevertheless, our journey continues.

by Jane Hammel
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Morning Meeting: Contradictions and Possibilities

Lee Heffernan
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Morning meeting is a time for building classroom community, an opportunity to address political, as opposed to personal, issues. Though I shared this vision with my students, many still saw morning meeting as a type of show-and-tell. The meeting sometimes evolved into a consumerist forum as kids brought in prized possessions and the rest of the class looked on with envy.

This year, I made the difficult decision to reject the sharing of personal artifacts at morning meeting. I explained to my students that morning meeting was not a time for show-and-tell, but rather a time to share information that was of value and concern to all present.

One day, as a contributor and participant in these meetings, I announced that I had received a notice that students in all grades were required to sit in assigned seats while in the cafeteria because of rowdiness. We began to discuss possible configurations for assigned seating. One kid groaned, “Boy-girl, right?” The general negative reaction about this mixed gender configuration led to a discussion about student perceptions of a mandated boy-girl seating arrangement as punishment.

I introduced the idea of “co-researching” the lunchroom seating rule. As co-researchers, we would spend time during morning meeting investigating the interactions of a commonplace site, our lunchroom. We talked about the situation in the lunchroom and taped our conversations. As we listened to our tape, we made a chart of topics that seemed to evoke a strong emotional reaction to the issue. (See Figure 2.) We also “went into the field” to observe lunchroom behaviors and interactions. Students were divided into randomly assigned research teams and asked to report back on specific research questions.

We viewed the Teaching Tolerance Web site, where we read information about a “Mix It Up” action project (“Mix It Up” is a national project that provides information to students and teachers about the importance of reaching across “borders” and reconfiguring social groupings in school cafeterias.) My students were surprised to learn that high schoolers also had lunchroom problems. We wrote in our notebooks about the “ideal” lunchroom and spent a week planning a “mix-it-up” lunch of our own. The children also wrote plays about the lunchroom issue and presented them to other classes.

Our morning meetings have evolved, but there is still work to do. Recently, during one of our meetings, I noticed that all the boys sat on one side of the circle, and all the girls sat on the other side. When I commented on the contradiction between our talk about “mixing it up” and how we sat at morning meeting, the kids started laughing and scurrying to new spots in the circle.

Kamler (1999) believes that these contradictions are important moments in classroom research:

Contradictions are a sign of struggle and struggles are ultimately hopeful; they indicate discourse in flux, shifting subjectivities and hence enable us to imagine the possibilities of change.

Morning meetings provide opportunities for bringing real events into the classroom. They can also be sites where groups can act as co-researchers into the norms of the social institutions they inhabit. It is a place of possibilities, where the contradictions and tensions between the personal and the social can be addressed and re-imagined.

Students Informing Our Curriculum

by Risë Paynter and Kevin Gallagher
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Our K–6 students gathered together in a large circle on the rug during our Thursday morning what's-on-my-mind (WOMM) conversation. Jeanette, a second grader, grabbed the day’s topic from the basket of student-submitted suggestions and pulled out “the possibility of war.” It was like a cloudburst. A rainstorm of comments followed.

Malcolm (grade 5): “War doesn’t bring peace!”

Stuart (kindergarten): “But the Civil War was necessary though, otherwise the slave team would have won.”

Jeanette (grade 2): “But people might think that we’re just kids and we don’t know anything about life, but we do.”

Jennifer (grade 4): “A peace walk might not make a difference in the bigger world, but it might make our community aware.”

As the teachers in this classroom, we began to recognize the potential for these kinds of conversations as opportunities to identify topics and issues to integrate into the curriculum.

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Critical Curriculum Building

The demographics of our multi-age K–6 classroom reflect the wide socioeconomics range of the school, including students with diverse backgrounds. There are fifty students and two teachers in this alternate configuration.

We use the four dimensions of critical literacy as a framework when developing curriculum. Our intention is not to isolate critical literacy but rather to let it permeate our time together. We hope that students leaving our classroom will be independent, capable of understanding and valuing perspectives other than their own, and will take social action. We constantly consider how to facilitate experiences and what questions to pose to push student thinking. Recognizing the need to give kids time, space, and voice to explore critical questions, we provide avenues such as WOMM to bring out the issues burning in our students’ minds.

Invitations Revisited

The WOMM conversation prompted a class revision of our topic for Invitations (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1988), a regular Wednesday morning curricular event in which students have an opportunity to deeply investigate important topics with other classmates. Invitations are open-ended learning opportunities designed so that groups of students can focus on a particular issue of interest, use multiple intelligences, offer alternative responses, and pose new questions.

Following the WOMM conversation, Invitations became a place for students to explore the complexities of critical literacy themes such as war, peace, and hate. From our perspective it wasn’t enough for Invitations to be “isolated critical literacy experiences” (Vasquez, 2001), so we asked students to look at the current list of topics and decide whether to keep or discard them based on whether they would help further their understandings of war, peace, and hate. Their work amazed us!

We started with “Looking Out My Window,” an invitation based on a book called Window (Baker, 1991), which asks students to take a critical look at the changing environment. Alice (grade 6) thrust her arm in the air: “We should definitely keep that one! It could be a look out the window in Iraq or New York City.” The hum of the crowd indicated class approval and understanding of what we were asking. Alice’s reasoning reflected our hope that children would consider multiple perspectives as they explored these critical issues. One of the children suggested that “Room 1 and 2 Opoly” should evolve into “War and Peace Opoly,” a student-made game in which the “good news/bad news” game cards directing players to collect or pay money were revised from classroom-related situations such as “Indoor recess again” and “New student arrives” to more global concerns such as “Trapped by falling economy” and “Negotiations brought peace to Asia.” As a class, we continued to review invitations, listening to students debate and discuss the fate of current invitations. Our new choices were ready for the next day.

What’s Next?

Our initial inquiry question was, How can we create arenas for critical conversations? By assuming a teacher-researcher stance, we realized we already had these spaces in place. Now our lingering questions are: How can we fortify these arenas for critical conversations and saturate our day with critical perspectives? How do shared negotiations of invitations align with the four dimensions of critical literacy (disrupting the commonplace, considering multiple viewpoints, focusing on sociopolitical issues, and taking social action)? How much of the teacher’s perspective should be allowed in decision-making?

A beautiful thing about working with children is that they eventually lead us to paths we never envisioned. The next morning, during ongoing projects, Jade (grade 3) excitedly handed us a note with an idea for an invitation. He had a Web site for us to explore that “is all about the war in Iraq.” And thus our work continues, with a fresh reminder about the powerful role students play as curricular informants and how important it is for us to give them time, space, and voice.

Final Reflections

As we reflect on the stories shared here, we can see how the teachers involved have shifted their thinking from asking how to “do critical literacy” to learning what gets uncovered when teachers and children question and interrogate the way things are. These stories suggest an opening up of curricula to resist scripted literacies in ways that foreground students’ lives and questions. We are pushing to consider the critical practices in our own lives and those of our students as we all work toward “enlarging[ing] the space of the possible” (Davis & Sumara, 1999, pp. 31–32).

—K.V.S., A.S.F., M.L.
Resource Bibliography


Next Issue: The October issue of *School Talk* will focus on writing.

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School Talk (ISSN 1083-2939) is published quarterly in October, January, April, and July by the National Council of Teachers of English for the Elementary Section Steering Committee. Annual membership in NCTE is $40 for individuals, and a subscription to *School Talk* is $15 (membership is a prerequisite for individual subscriptions). Institutions may subscribe for $30. Add $4 per year for Canadian and all other international postage. Single copy: $7.50 (member price, $4). Copies of back issues can be purchased in bulk: 20 copies of a single issue for $20 (includes shipping and handling). Remittances should be made payable to NCTE by credit card, check, money order, or bank draft in United States currency.

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Coeditors: Vivian Vasquez and JoAnn Wong-Kam. NCTE Production Editor: Rona S. Smith. Designer: Pat Mayer.

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