

CRITICAL TEACHING AND THE IDEA OF LITERACY

C. H. KNOBLAUCH LIL BRANNON

Boynton/Cook Publishers A Subsidiary of Reed Publishing (USA) Inc. 361 Hanover Street Portsmouth, NH 03801 Offices and agents throughout the world

Copyright © 1993 by C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

"Are My Hands Clean" by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Copyright by Songtalk Publishing. Reprinted by permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Knoblauch, C. H.

Critical teaching and the idea of literacy / C.H. Knoblauch, Lil Brannon.

p. cm. Includes bibliographical references. ISBN 0-86709-317-X 1. Critical pedagogy—United States. 2. Literacy—United States.

3. Teaching. I. Brannon, Lil. II. Title.

LC196.5.U6K58 1993

370.11' 5 ' 0973—dc20

92-37899 CIP

Cover design by Twyla Bogaard Printed in the United States of America OPI Docutech 2005

Foreword

This book reads some stories from the educational world that are currently narrating the lives and circumstances of American citizens, particularly in their roles as parents, students, and teachers. It's a story about stories, and about the critical ways in which we should all be rewriting them, this one included.

For reading with us and helping to get our story straight, or perhaps we should say crooked, we thank Bob Boynton, certainly. He has encouraged us for lo these many years. More than anyone else, after Bob, we thank three Capital District teachers: Ann Connolly from Bethlehem Central, John Danaher from Shaker High, and Carol Forman-Pemberton from Burnt Hills/Ballston Lake. If the story had made no sense to them, it wouldn't have been worth the telling. Finally, we thank Jimmy Britton, Nancy Martin, Rosemary Hennessy, Ruma Chawla, Jim Collins, Suzanne Miller, and Glenn Hudak, all of whom have helped more than they know.

It seems proper for a story about stories to start with a story and we want to tell one about our daughter, Meta Susan. At the time of this writing, Susan is three years old and has just begun nursery school. One of the daily rituals of her nursery class is show-and-tell. Each day she brings a different item to class, as all the children do, and places it in a box outside the door of her classroom. After the singing, and crafts, and games, the children all go out to the box, bring in their special objects, toys, books, dolls, and talk about them, each in turn, with their classmates.

Coincidentally this fall, Susan underwent an operation to remove a birthmark from her leg, which left her in a cast from ankle to hip for three weeks while the incision healed. On the morning, three days after the operation, when she was to return to school, while sitting at breakfast, we all began to talk about what she might bring for showand-tell—and naturally her parents both agreed that the best object she could show her classmates would be her new cast. Surely it would provoke everybody's interest. Susan, however, was quite solemn about the idea, not nearly as eager as we thought she'd be. After a moment, she announced to us, firmly, that she couldn't possibly use the cast for show-and-tell. We were surprised at the rejection of such inspired advice and tried to press our case. Finally, exasperated

Foreword

at her parents' obtuseness, Susan explained that if she wanted to talk about her cast, she would first have to stand outside in the show-andtell box all morning long and would miss a whole day's school!

No doubt various readings of this story are possible, but one that stays in our minds is the power of conventional, routinized thinking to control people's lives. We all forget at times that the world contains more possibilities than any particular construction of it preserves, that we can recover unconsidered choices if we have the imagination and strength to do it. Of course, a child has that yet to learn. Had Susan's teachers reinforced her innocent conclusion, this story would not be as affectionately amusing as it is. And we all know the bureaucratic mind whose slavish devotion to uncontextualized rules has led to real suffering and harm. Or the still more sinister mind that aims to enforce convention just because it reminds everyone of who has power and who doesn't. Susan will learn about such people and figure out how to make accommodations. But this is a simpler story than that, about a child's understanding, and it includes, in the background, caring teachers whom we admire and trust. We know that the most important thing Susan will learn as she grows is that you don't have to stand in the show-and-tell box, even if someone tells you it's the rule.

This book, of course, is for Susan.

Contents

Foreword vii

Chapter One **"Representation"** Naming the World in Schools 1

Chapter Two The Real Political Correctness 25

Chapter Three Images of Critical Teaching 48

Chapter Four Functional Literacy and the Rhetoric of Objectivism 74

> Chapter Five Literacy and the Politics of Nostalgia 99

> > Chapter Six **Expressivism** Literacy for Personal Growth 123

> > > Chapter Seven Critical Literacy Language and Power 147

Contents

Chapter Eight **Teacher Inquiry** Knowing for Ourselves 177

Bibliography 203

Chapter One

"Representation" Naming the World in Schools

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

> Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. [People] are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in actionreflection.

> Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Our city newspaper recently ran an advertisement on behalf of the local shopping mall, an ad plainly aimed at stimulating business for Father's Day. Half a page in length, the ad features a letter from a young boy to his father, composed by hand in a print evidently meant to evoke the image of a child not quite in control of letters and struggling at a labor of love. The word "signed" at the bottom of the letter is spelled "singed." The text reads, "Dear Dad, Somebody told me Father's Day was invented by some merchants to hype sales during the slow June selling season. [Paragraph] But that somebody

also thinks that the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus are marketing strategies. [Paragraph] I think that Father's Day is another chance to say I love you to you. [Paragraph] Singed, Your son." We ask ourselves, what are the messages here? An affectionate child, bravely postponing the cynicism of adulthood, rises above troubling charges that are at once true and false about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny in order to communicate something of value to his father. The reader naturally hopes that the child will preserve his innocence, that he will remain unpersuaded by that "someone" sneering at commercial motives behind public holidays. The reader may even indulge a fleeting recollection of her own former innocence, her childhood with beloved parents, reading the letter with a complicated adult mix of amusement, sympathy, remembrance, sentiment, and skepticism. Nothing in the ad aims directly to sell merchandise or even to encourage people to shop for Father's Day: it could be read as nothing more than a public-spirited reminder of an opportunity for children, whatever their ages, to reaffirm parental bonds. One almost forgets who is responsible for the ad, how expensive one of this size must be, and how useful a shopping mall might find the identification, among consumers, between the love of children for parents, the official designation of a day to reassert that love, and the opportunity to purchase goods. Almost.

In a collection of essays titled The Feminist Critique of Language, the editor, Deborah Cameron, reflects on the way in which two English newspapers describe an incident involving a married couple whose house had been broken into. One newspaper is the respected Daily Telegraph, the other a tabloid, the Sun. The lead in the Telegraph reads, "A man who suffered head injuries when attacked by two men who broke into his home in Beckenham, Kent, early yesterday, was pinned down on the bed by intruders who took it in turns to rape his wife." The lead in the Sun reads, "A terrified 19-stone husband was forced to lie next to his wife as two men raped her yesterday." What strikes Cameron in these accounts is that in both "the act of rape is being represented as a crime against a man rather than a woman" (17). The first emphasizes, both grammatically and rhetorically, the man's head injuries, the violation of "his" home, the loss of his freedom—having been "pinned down," and the attack on him by "intruders," who also, as a last indignity directed at the man, raped "his" wife. The second emphasizes the man's terror, insinuating an incongruity between that emotion and his large size, and the horrifying, yet also perhaps luridly titillating image of him "lying next to his wife," a position implying not just sexual encounter but also ownership, while two other men stole from him his sexual prerogative. In both, the issue of rape, here plainly a crime against a

"Representation"

woman, is framed exclusively in terms of the violation of a man—his body and his "property." The only distinction between the reports is the greater willingness of the tabloid to capitalize on barely suppressed sexual imagery; the "respectable" paper no less than the tabloid takes it for granted that rape is a form of theft, that the woman who is raped becomes "damaged goods" (17).

For us, the issue that relates the shopping advertisement and the two newspaper stories is representation: how things are named, who gets to do the naming, what motives are involved, what consequences follow, what possibilities for alternative naming have been forgotten, or gone unrecognized, or been ignored, hidden, or suppressed. Is it just unhappy accident that two editors, serving two quite different audiences, reveal the same misogyny in their representations of rape? Does it matter that both editors are male? Would a woman editor necessarily have told the story in a different way? Or is there something much broader, subtler, unconscious, systemic, and historically situated at work-a cultural propensity to "represent" women as property? How is treatment of women in English culture-and bevond-affected by, even conditioned by, such a structural representation at some given historical moment? What are the chances that the representation might be changed, and that the life circumstances of women in English society might be changed as well through its critique and a deliberate recomposing of "woman" as subject rather than object (rhetorically as well as grammatically) within public discourse? And what of the advertisement? Past the pleasurable sentimentality of its representation of Father's Day, what less sanguine economic motives might be entailed in a shopping mall's manipulation of our images of children, fathers, and family love? What motives underlie the use of secular signs—Santa Claus, Easter Bunny-that have reconstituted formerly religious representations, considering that both refer to creatures who give things to others, a noble gesture to be sure but one that is typically accomplished in this culture by first purchasing whatever is given?

The issue is representation, the practices by which people name and rename the world, negotiate the substance of social reality, and contest prior namings in favor of new or different ones. Naming can appear relatively straightforward: what's the difference between calling someone a freedom fighter or a terrorist, a confidential informant or a stool pigeon, gay or queer? What's the difference in calling a social practice "equal opportunity" as opposed to "reverse discrimination"? Naming can also be subtle and complex, as our previous examples illustrate, where more is at stake than a choice of nouns or adjectives, where entire habits of expression or textual statements are involved in multilayered significations. (Actually, "representation" is always more complex than we're suggesting here, but that's a story for Chapter 7.) And naming is inevitably political, entailing a struggle among opposing interests and competing possibilities, where the power to name, and also to enforce the subordination, even silence, of alternative voices, figures crucially in the distribution of cultural standing and social privilege. A recent news item, for instance, reports that women with AIDS have more difficulty receiving government disability payments than men do because the standard definition of AIDS does not include many of the symptoms that women uniquely experience. The problem lies in determining when an HIV infection becomes "AIDS" and therefore disabling in the eyes of the law. Health agencies list Kaposi's sarcoma as part of the definition, but women with AIDS rarely get this form of cancer. Meanwhile, cervical cancer, which HIV-infected women do get, is not included in the definition, so that women with this disease cannot claim AIDS disability that would entitle them to benefits for themselves and their children. The issue here is precisely one of representation, how something is named and what consequences attend that naming; it is also evidently political, with clear social advantages at stake for those who maintain as well as those who critique and work to change the current definition of AIDS.

Representation is a function of the verbal, visual, and other signs by which naming is achieved. Signs are the raw materials of cultural production, the means by which social reality is constructed: they include, for instance, the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution; the American flag; architectural styles; money and credit cards; novels and newspapers; television and movie images; paintings and sculptures; rock music and jazz; Reeboks and loafers; Bloomingdale's and Sears; the Cross and the Star of David; biographies and family albums; fairs, parades, and funerals; the physical spaces of factories and schools; dolls and cap pistols; yachts and canoes; everything from hair styles to the layout of neighborhoods (tenements here, ranches there) to salary scales (the auto worker, the CEO of General Motors). The world is thick with signs and their variegated meanings; the world is a human production in continual change as signs are composed, fought over, insisted upon, marginalized, resisted, and altered. Examining and critiquing signs as they function within concrete social and historical settings is the project of a discipline that has come to be called "cultural studies." The intent of cultural studies, according to Patrick Brantlinger, is to learn about "the lived experience of people producing meanings and values through everyday social interaction." Its intent is also to promote, as a responsible "goal of all serious intellectual work," the achievement of a fully democratic "common culture" (38), where all people

have equivalent authority to engage in the production and negotiation of signs—the practices of representation.

Precisely at the intersection between cultural studies as an academic pursuit and any classroom full of students who deserve rich opportunities to learn and grow and become productive citizens lies the educational practice that we will call "critical teaching," borrowing the name (the "representation") from Ira Shor (Critical Teaching and Everyday Life). Our principal theme throughout the arguments that follow will be the goals and means of critical (also called "radical" and "liberatory") teaching, specifically in the domain of reading and writing instruction in high schools and colleges. Liberatory pedagogy can occur in any academic discipline-physics, history, mathematics—in any educational setting—the inner-city vocational school, the suburban prep school, the adult community workshop, the labor union literacy program—and at any academic level from elementary through graduate school. Our choice of literacy instruction in high school and college reflects our interests and professional experience, but critical teaching is a more encompassing activity, just as cultural studies is a broader intellectual domain than "English." Our concern is for "representation" in the school world, specifically that portion of the school world given over to the teaching of reading and writing. We propose to look at how things are named in that world, who has authority to do the naming and who doesn't, how representations frame parents, teachers, and students, cast them in certain kinds of roles or "subject positions" (note in such language our own tactics of representation, the academic discourse that informs our statements). We want to look at definitions of literacy in particular, as they range across the political as well as intellectual spectrum of American life, in order to offer parents, teachers, and students a way to examine the rhetoric of those definitions, acknowledging the power but also the potential for revision of "stories" imposed upon them through the authoritative discourses of public life, the privileged languages of politicians, university researchers, and school administrators. To see these stories as rhetorical constructions, historically situated, is effectively to see "through" them to their ideological designs. To see "through" them is to exercise the power to think critically and to act upon the school world, as parents, students, and teachers deserve to act upon it, in transformative capacities.

Critical teaching aims to transform. That ambition is both subversive and entirely common, akin, that is, to the aim of any teaching. Schools, after all, accept the burden of assisting the nation's young people to become responsible and productive citizens. Hence, teaching is always a transformative act: students aren't expected to leave

"Representation"

their classrooms thinking, knowing, judging, living in the ways they did before they entered them-fundamentalist students encounter evolution in biology class; students raised on television read literature; students from "liberal" backgrounds study growing crime rates in sociology and the cost of assistance programs in economics; "conservatives" study the women's movement in history class or Marxism in philosophy. The choices teachers make in their classrooms are always, in part, choices about what children "ought" to become, what the nation "ought" to aspire to through the productive action of succeeding generations. These are political choices: the question is, what indeed should students become and who should have the power to sav so? What indeed should the nation aspire to, and who should compose the stories about that aspiration? Critical teaching differs from other sorts primarily in its answers to these questions and in its self-consciousness about the political nature of schools (including its own practices). It presumes that American citizens should understand, accept, and live amicably amidst the realities of cultural diversity—along axes of gender, race, class, and ethnicity that are the hallmarks of American society. It presumes that people are entitled to fairness in their social and economic lives. It presumes that a critical citizenry, willing as well as able to take responsibility for the nation's future, is preferable to a passive, unengaged citizenry that lets government, business, and mass media do its thinking. Finally, it presumes that no one group is exclusively entitled to the privilege of representation, but that each has a right to tell its story, critique other stories, and participate in forming a community responsive to the needs of all its members.

Since politics is the essence of social life—people negotiating the terms of free and fair collective existence-and since schools are social formations, critical teaching accepts the political character of schools and educational practice while attempting to encourage a politically intelligent and alert citizenry. Disciplinary knowledgemathematics, history, a foreign language—becomes more than a neutral "content" to be transferred to passive students for narrowly selfish credentialization or other gain. That knowledge becomes, instead, a means to productive living, an opportunity to develop forms of understanding and ability that make for informed social practice. Studying biology offers the capacity to discuss issues of reproductive freedom and responsibility or the damage of environmental pollution, not just the opportunity to enter medical school. Studying mathematics offers the capacity to challenge deceptive statistics on the costs of welfare to taxpayers or determine the fairness of a bank's interest rate or an oil company's profits, not just to manipulate the junk bond market. But disciplinary knowledge is also

subject to critique in its own right, along with the institutional arrangements that have assigned its priorities (so that science, for instance, is "represented" as more "important" than art appreciation, more "objective" and hence more "truthful"; so that sociology is a "real" subject while African American studies is not). The school world itself, in other words, is as much an object of attention as any of its disciplines, because that world (including its disciplines) has been formed in response to social and economic, not just intellectual, interests. The organization of school life-principals superior to teachers, teachers superior to students, parents on the sidelines; study apportioned in particular allotments of time; some activities required, others optional or unavailable; curricula fixed according to age, ability, or class affiliation; placement and competency testing; class sizes, attendance requirements, dress codes, rules of behavior reflects the socioeconomic purposes of schooling and determines the circumstances, not always for the better, of everyone living in the school world. For critical teachers, therefore, the school and what it "represents" become objects of discussion along with academic subjects, because the quality of life for teachers and students is very much at stake in the organization of the school, just as it is at stake in the surrounding world on which the school patterns itself and to which it contributes.

Plainly, critical teachers accept a more complicated and burdensome responsibility in educational life than those colleagues who remain content, either out of apathy or a commitment to less presumptuous obligations, to teach what they are told, in the authorized ways, without change through the years and without concern for any larger context of public action. Critical teachers develop an informed reflectiveness about the conditions both within and outside schools that impinge on their quality of life and that of their students-for instance: American socioeconomic hierarchies reproduced in schools through "tracking" policies; or factory models of work reproduced in regimented, clock-punching, mind-numbing school days; or manager/worker distinctions reproduced in relations between school administrators and faculty. They remain similarly reflective about their instructional practices, so that they stay responsive to the fullest range of student needs as well as the ethical imperatives of social justice-so that issues of gender, race, and class, for instance, along with other cultural realities of American life, are woven self-consciously into pedagogy, not subordinated to a myth of disciplinary neutrality or a myth of the American melting pot. Finally, they undertake to translate these forms of reflectiveness into pedagogical action that both serves their students and, over time, changes the very character of American

schooling, making it more responsive to democratic ideals amidst the complexities of socioeconomic life.

In short, there is both a theoretical and a practical dimension to critical pedagogy, an interrelationship between reflection-thinking about the world, one's own positions in it as well as those of others. the nature of a teacher's responsibilities-and action-doing work that affects the world, alters it in the service of productive living. Paulo Freire, a leading exponent of critical pedagogy whose work we will explore later, refers to this reciprocity as "praxis," a sustained, directed, thoughtful effort, grounded in lived experience, to name the world and to change it (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 60-61). Praxis entails a theorizing of the "work" of teaching, but also a continual reconstituting of theory by appeal to the concrete experience of practitioners. We're not talking here about that other notion of "theory" to which high school teachers, for instance, are regularly exposed when outsiders, typically from universities, drone on about "residual learning outcomes" or "the acquisition of decoding skills" during sterile in-service meetings designed to colonize the working class so that Madeline Hunter or the publishers of basal readers can make more money. We don't mean theory that is purchased with federal funding and "disseminated" to docile faculties, theory prepackaged with color-coordinated transparencies and imposed by local superintendents. This kind of theory merely allows "managers," whether politicians or principals or university researchers, to retain control of education by subordinating teachers, parents, students to a jargon, an esoteric body of knowledge, and an agenda all essentially foreign to the school world. Praxis doesn't descend from above (although much "theory" does); it emerges from within. Praxis entails teachers' own "representations" of what they do, standing at a critical remove both from the hectic, daily routine of the classroom and also from the alternative representations that cast teachers (students and their parents too) exclusively as characters in other people's stories rather than as subjects coauthoring the narrative. In true praxis, teachers scrutinize for themselves the choices they make in the classroom, remembering that they are constantly deciding what to do and how to do it, albeit so routinely that they might well forget the agency that suffuses their work. Theory reminds teachers that they're acting by design-never merely their own design, too often indeed mainly that of others, but hopefully in some measure a design that they have helped to negotiate. Theory involves wondering about practice (Steven Mailloux calls theory "practice about practice"), mulling over alternatives, questioning motives, reassessing values and purposes. If theory unresponsive to practice is at best empty talk and at worst an academic power trip at the expense of other people,

teaching without theoretical articulateness is a product of unthinking custom, accident, and the impositions of others, with no less potential (perhaps more, in fact) for taking advantage of the powerless.

Praxis incorporates the dimensions of reflection and of action, the process of naming reality (theorizing, "representing") and the process of changing reality (directed action in the material, historical world). Teachers know the power of representation in the school world all too well because they are habitually on the losing end of a struggle over who gets to name the realities of that world. Consider the representations of "student ability" that are imposed upon teachers. Most of what counts as knowledge about the classroom comes from the educational research establishment and the testing industry (which maintain mutually beneficial ties that the public ought to regard with more suspicion than it does). For them children are often "represented" quantitatively as scores that fall in standard deviations above or below the mean. Students are placed on the basis of these scores in remedial, regular, or advanced categories, which "represent" their abilities and prospects while offering rationales for public expenditures and focuses of educational attention. The scores are used, too, in comparisons across cities, states, even countries, offering "representations" of success and failure (frequently against the backdrop of dire warnings about cultural decay) while stimulating an atmosphere of competitive hostility and suspicion (crystallized in militarist sloganeering like "the war against illiteracy"). Sometimes they are used to judge how well teachers teach, so that if reading scores decline in a district over a couple of years the cry is soon enough heard that teachers aren't doing their jobs. Always they have the effect of driving curriculum, since teachers are compelled, as a matter of job protection, to ready students to pass tests before they engage them in learning disciplinary content. Quantitative assessment is a dominant representational practice in American schools.

Anyone who has taught in this setting knows how limited and limiting assessment can be, how deadening it is to the possibilities of creative teaching and learning, how degrading for large numbers of people. Teachers know (and name) their classrooms differently, know that students aren't as tidy a reality as numbers are, that student performance varies over time, that students' abilities aren't necessarily equivalent to their performances (especially on tests), that the places they occupy because of previous testing aren't necessarily best suited to their development, that teaching whatever the tests mandate isn't necessarily the appropriate pedagogical decision given a particular group of students and a concrete educational moment. Teachers know these things but know too the power of the assessment-driven school world to enforce their participation in its

assumptions and practices. So, they dutifully divide children by "ability"—calling them red birds and blue birds, perhaps, since these names are more palatable than bright people and stupid people-and assign grades that are supposed to have measured all the complex activities and processes that constitute learning. But what if teachers claimed the authority to offer their representations of school life as challenges to those of the testing industry? And suppose teachers, acting collectively alongside like-minded parents, school administrators, and university colleagues, were to use that authority to critique the power and economic self-interest of the testing establishment? What if teachers' stories of classroom trauma resulting from assessment practices helped to create a more reflective American public that began to realize the culture, class, and gender biases in testing; began to worry about the power of testing to stereotype children at very early ages in ways that will stamp the rest of their lives; began to consider how test results reify, and therefore falsify, human potential; began noticing the frequency of technical error in testing-all the intellectual mistakes and abuses documented, but with little public reaction, in Stephen Jay Gould's Mismeasure of Man? What if Americans were to take seriously the story (portrayed in the movie Stand and Deliver, Warner Brothers, 1988) of Jaime Escalante's Hispanic students in East Los Angeles whose math scores, as a result of his and their effort, were dramatically higher than they "should have been," occasioning ETS charges of cheating? Suppose these were the dominant themes of an American educational story about quantitative evaluation?

Critical pedagogy aims to retheorize testing-tell a different kind of story about it than the one preferred by the assessment industrythen to envision alternatives to the mass testing practices that dominate American curriculum (portfolio evaluation is a modest instance) and to change the unimaginative school world that results from the sterile quantification of its community. A delightfully readable book by our colleague Peter Johnston, titled Constructive Evaluation of Literate Activity, will help in the conceiving of those alternatives. Meanwhile, a practical example of change is the work of the Center for Educational Improvement Through Collaboration at the University of Michigan, whose projects include writing instruction in the public schools of Saginaw and Detroit, Michigan. The CEIC has worked successfully to persuade teachers, administrators, and school boards in these districts that quantitative measures offer inadequate representations particularly of students classified as "nonachievers," leading to unresponsive curricula. It has sponsored a series of pilot courses for "nonachievers" in which the "measure" of success, in each instance, was a student publication of stories and poems, in-