

# Critical literacy as comprehension: Expanding reader response

*Maureen McLaughlin, Glenn DeVoogd*

**Critical literacy helps teachers and students expand their reasoning, seek out multiple perspectives, and become active thinkers.**

**When we were** in school, we believed everything we read. We never questioned who was writing the text, who was determining what topics would be included, or who was deciding what would be excluded. We never questioned if there was any perspective other than the one presented in the daily newspaper, on the evening news, or in our textbooks. As a result, we grew up believing the information presented to us, which included that all inventors of importance were white men and excluded information about events such as the Japanese American Internment. Since that time we have learned much more about a wide variety of topics from a diverse array of sources. Through those learning experiences, we have realized the need to read from a critical stance—a need to question rather than passively accept the information we encounter.

Today's school students interact with many more information sources than we did at their age. And as they read, they, too, need to question the text. They need to know the author's intent, to understand the sociocultural influences, and, as Pearson (2001) suggested, to comprehend with a critical edge.

**McLaughlin teaches at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania (Stroud Hall, 112, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301). DeVoogd teaches at California State University, Fresno.**

In this article, we present starting points for helping students to become critically aware, including a rationale for reading from a critical stance and ideas to foster students' engagement in critical literacy. We begin by examining Rosenblatt's work on stances and defining the critical stance and how it functions in relation to the Efferent–Aesthetic Continuum (Rosenblatt, 2004). Then we present and discuss four principles of critical literacy. The next section describes environments that promote critical literacy, including the role of the teacher and a variety of ideas to promote critical literacy in the classroom. Finally, we discuss the promise of reading from a critical stance.

## Developing a critical stance

Rosenblatt (2002) suggested that stances are “aspects of consciousness.” Her Efferent–Aesthetic Continuum (2004) reflected the belief that readers transact with text from aesthetic and efferent stances. The aesthetic stance is a more emotional perspective; the efferent stance is a more factual one. Rosenblatt (2002) noted that no reading experience is purely aesthetic or purely efferent, but rather that readers are always making choices about their thinking, focusing on both stances and sometimes more on one than the other. A third stance—the critical stance—can be viewed as another component of that continuum. When reading from a critical stance, readers use their

## Questions that promote reading from a critical stance

**Print** (e.g., books, newspapers, magazines, song lyrics, hypertext)

Whose viewpoint is expressed?

What does the author want us to think?

Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted?

How might alternative perspectives be represented?

How would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance?

What action might you take on the basis of what you have learned?

**Television or photographs**

Who is in the video or photograph?

Why are they there?

What does the videographer or photographer want you to think?

Who or what is missing from the video or photograph?

Who is silenced or discounted?

What might an alternative video show?

What might an alternative photograph look like?

How would that contribute to your understanding the video or photograph from a critical stance?

What action might you take on the basis of what you have viewed?

background knowledge to understand relationships between their ideas and the ideas presented by the author of the text. In this process, readers play the role not only of code breakers, meaning makers, and text users but also the role of text critics (Luke & Freebody, 1999). In other words, readers have the power to envision alternate ways of viewing the author's topic, and they exert that power when they read from a critical stance. This reflects what Durrant and Green (2001) described as "a situated social practice model of language, literacy, and technology learning...authentic learning and cultural apprenticeships within a critical-sociocultural view of discourse and practice" (p. 151). As a consequence, students reading from a critical stance raise questions about whose voices are represented, whose voices are missing, and who gains and who loses by the reading of a text (see Figure).

Reading from a critical stance requires not only reading and understanding the words but "reading the world" and understanding a text's

purpose so readers will not be manipulated by it (Freire, 1970). For example, after viewing an advertisement for soda showing fit teens playing sports and laughing with toothy smiles, readers without critical awareness might begin to associate that image with the soda. Conversely, readers who are critically aware—who read the world—might recognize that drinking soda makes many teens overweight and contributes to decaying teeth. When reading the world, the critically aware readers comprehend beyond the literal level and think about the function of the text—in this case, selling soda by creating an image that fun, fit teens enjoy drinking it. Reading from a critical stance requires both the ability and the deliberate inclination to think critically about—to analyze and evaluate—information sources (e.g., texts, media, lyrics, hypertext); meaningfully question their origin and purpose; and take action by representing alternative perspectives. The goal is for readers to become text critics in everyday life—to comprehend information sources from a critical stance as

naturally as they comprehend from the aesthetic and efferent stances.

## Principles of critical literacy

A number of essential understandings and beliefs about the relationship that exists between the reader and the author underpin critical literacy. They include the following principles.

### ***Critical literacy focuses on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation, and action***

Whenever readers commit to understanding a text, whether narrative or expository, they submit to the right of the author to select the topic and determine the treatment of the ideas. For example, economically disadvantaged people might read a newspaper article entitled “Economy Falters as Food Prices Soar” and recognize the power of the author to name the problem and determine and express what he perceives to be the negative effects of higher wages for migrant tomato pickers in the United States. The readers may use their power to question that perspective and engage in reflection about whose voice might be missing, discounted, or silenced. As a result, they might choose to represent the alternative view of the subordinated group—the tomato pickers—and change the title of the text to “Stability and Prosperity Benefit Migrant Families.” The readers draw from their background knowledge to create this transformation, which might result in taking an action such as making a commitment to buy union tomatoes, writing a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, or speaking to a group about the importance of fair wages for the tomato workers. In addition, the readers may also gain a new appreciation of the effect of perspective in writing or even a new understanding of the possible positive costs of higher wages. This is an example of how critical literacy focuses on issues of power and helps subjugated or oppressed groups, in this case the

tomato pickers, “politicize themselves and engage in action aimed at challenging existing structures of inequality and oppression” (Cummins & Sayers, 1995, p. 23). Good intentions or awareness of an unjust situation will not transform it. We must act on our knowledge.

This dialogue, which represents a cycle of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” is what Freire (1970, p. 36) called “praxis.” By nature, this process is not passive but active, challenging and disrupting the ideal (Green, 2001) or commonplace (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002) for the purpose of relieving the inequity and injustice.

### ***Critical literacy focuses on the problem and its complexity***

Educational situations that are fairly intricate are often viewed from an essentialist or very simplistic perspective. In critical literacy, rather than accepting an essentialist view, we would engage in problematizing—seeking to understand the problem and its complexity. In other words, we would raise questions and seek alternative explanations as a way of more fully acknowledging and understanding the complexity of the situation. For example, it would be essentialist to suggest that unmotivated students should receive an extrinsic reward for reading or be punished for not reading. Problematizing, or examining the complexity of this situation, would reveal that the lack of motivation is likely due to a variety of factors including poor-quality texts; students’ past reading experiences; classroom climate; self-efficacy; purpose; or limited opportunities to self-select, read, and discuss books in social settings.

### ***Techniques that promote critical literacy are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used***

There is no list of methods in critical literacy that work the same way in all contexts all the time. No technique that promotes critical literacy can be

exported to another setting without adapting it to that context. As Freire (1998) observed, “It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them” (p. xi). It is key to any exploration of critical literacy that the teacher constantly assess student responses to ensure that the experience is true to the philosophy and goals of critical literacy but not necessarily consistent with the examples of others who practice critical literacy. For example, teachers might begin using an approach to critical literacy that is presented in this article or that they have seen working in another classroom. But upon reflecting on instructional goals and what is happening in their classes, they may adapt the method to make it more applicable—more meaningful—in that particular context. The dynamic nature of critical literacy supports this type of adaptation. There is a sense of empowerment and confidence in the act of creation that cannot be achieved by copying. Even when a method has been used, it is never quite the same. This is why those who are critically aware are fond of quoting Antonio Machado (1982, p. 142), the Spanish poet, who said, “Caminante, no hay camino, Se hace el camino al andar” (Traveler, there is no road. The road is made as you walk).

### ***Examining multiple perspectives is an important aspect of critical literacy***

Expressing ideas from a variety of perspectives challenges students to expand their thinking and discover diverse beliefs, positions, and understandings (McLaughlin, 2001). Examining texts from a variety of viewpoints is applicable in a wide range of classes including literature, social studies, science, and mathematics. For example, in social studies teachers might consider looking at Christopher Columbus’s explorations from multiple perspectives. In reflecting on whose voice is missing, the class may decide that the perspectives of the Tainos, the people who inhabited the island where Columbus first landed, or Columbus’s crew on the final voyage are not represented. Appreciation for and exploration of

these alternative perspectives facilitates our viewing situations from a critical stance (Lewison et al., 2002; McLaughlin, 2001).

The principles of critical literacy help us understand what critical literacy is and how it functions. It is a dynamic process that examines relationships, expands our thinking, and enlightens our perceptions as we read the word and the world—as we read from a critical stance.

## **Creating an environment to promote a critical stance**

Teachers, students, and texts play important roles in creating a context that fosters critical literacy—one in which reading from a critical stance is a natural occurrence that extends beyond the classroom to everyday life experiences. The role of the teacher in initiating and developing critical literacy is multifaceted. It begins with personal understanding and use of critical literacy and extends to teaching students about critical literacy, modeling reading from a critical stance in everyday teaching and learning experiences, and providing access to a variety of texts that represent critical literacy.

When examining the teacher’s role, it is important to note that we cannot just “become critical.” It is a process that involves learning, understanding, and changing over time. This includes developing theoretical, research, and pedagogical repertoires; changing with time and circumstance; engaging in self-critical practices; and remaining open to possibilities (Comber, 2001). So the teacher’s role in helping students to become critically aware actually begins with personal understanding of and engagement in critical literacy.

Once the teacher is critically aware, teaching students to read from a critical stance should be a natural process. First, as in any other act of reading, the teacher should ensure that students have the background knowledge necessary to read from a critical stance. The teacher might then choose to scaffold learning by using a five-step

instructional framework: explain, demonstrate, guide, practice, and reflect (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002). This gradual release of responsibility to the students provides time and opportunity for them to become comfortable with reading from a critical stance. To begin, the teacher can explain what it means to be critically aware and then demonstrate it by using a read-aloud and a think-aloud. During this process, the teacher provides a critical perspective that questions and challenges the text. She may use questions such as “Whose viewpoint is expressed?” “Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted?” “What action might you take based on what you have learned?” or introduce strategies such as “juxtapositioning,” problem posing, or alternative texts, which are delineated in the next section of this article. After the teacher explains and demonstrates, students—in pairs or small groups—offer responses as the teacher guides their reading and as they practice reading from a critical stance. As a final step, the teacher and the students reflect on what they know about being critically aware and how it helped them to understand the text. This often results in their making connections (text to self, text to text, text to world) and leads to discussions of how they can apply what they have learned to the reading of other texts.

Students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective. They understand that the information presented in texts, magazines, newspapers, song lyrics, and websites has been authored from a particular perspective for a particular purpose. They know that meaning is “grounded in the social, political, cultural and historic contexts of the reading event” (Serafini, 2003). When learning how to read from a critical perspective, the students know that their ultimate goal is to view text from a critical stance as naturally as they view it from aesthetic and efferent stances.

Texts that have a critical or different perspective of an original text can help students become critically aware. These texts should challenge

whatever text or ideal is being considered. For example, when problematizing the initial understanding that Japanese caused oppression and suffering in World War II, *A Special Fate: Chiune Sugihara: Hero of the Holocaust* (Gold, 2000) might be used as a critical text. It tells the story of a Japanese ambassador in Lithuania who helped thousands of Jews get transport visas out of Europe. The knowledge provided by such a text helps the reader take a critical stance. In contrast, a reader without such knowledge may be less able to take a critical perspective. A number of the titles listed in the Sidebar provide alternative views on a variety of topics and can be used to help readers take a critical perspective on views that are common in our society. Several of these titles are featured in teaching examples in the next section.

## Critical literacy in action

We know that becoming critically literate is a developmental process; to engage and learn more about understanding critically it is necessary to begin through practice and reflection. But the question is where to begin. Although methods are something most critical scholars shy away from, there are starting points teachers can use to help students develop a critical stance. The following ideas and resources provide some direction for initial engagement. As noted earlier, teachers need to take these ideas, adapt them to their particular contexts, and scaffold students’ learning.

### **Juxtapositioning texts, photos, videos, and lyrics**

Juxtapositioning is a technique that helps demonstrate multiple perspectives. It can occur in a variety of formats, using a number of informational sources. When using juxtapositioning in theme-based focus groups about World War II, a middle school reading teacher used a whole-class setting to read aloud excerpts from *The Greatest Generation* (Brokaw, 1998, Random House), a theme-related text that represented the perspective

of Ally soldiers. Students then read theme-based books that represented a variety of other perspectives including German soldiers, victims of the Holocaust, victims of the Japanese American Internment, the citizens of Japan, American and Japanese survivors of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and a variety of political leaders that included Winston Churchill.

After the teacher read, the students, organized in small groups based on the text they had chosen, read and discussed the perspective represented in that text. Next, the groups reorganized so that every new group had students who had read novels that represented different perspectives, and small-group discussions focusing on multiple perspectives ensued. Students began by describing the people or characters in the books they had read and how they perceived World War II. Many students found the number of perspectives surprising, noting previously that they had only thought about World War II from the point of view of the U.S. military. They reported that not only had they never considered perspectives such as those of the victims of the Japanese American Internment, but also they had never thought about the perspectives of women who had worked on the home front or of people who had helped to save the victims of the Holocaust. An interesting discussion of the media also resulted. It focused on the immediacy of information we experience now as compared to the radio news and handwritten letters used to communicate military developments during World War II. The discussion then moved on to a critical analysis of the media, focusing on issues such as who decides what information is included in and excluded from the news we see and read.

After in-depth small-group discussion, pairs of students created posters on which they juxtaposed visual representations of the World War II perspectives they had read about. Then the posters were shared and discussed in a whole-class setting. The Sidebar contains a list of sample texts used for the theme-based focus groups on World War II and other critical literacy-related titles.

## BOOKS THAT CAN BE USED TO REPRESENT CRITICAL LITERACY

### Books about World War II that represent critical literacy

Allen, T.B. (2001). *Remember Pearl Harbor: American and Japanese survivors tell their stories*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society.

Personal recollections of Pearl Harbor survivors, both American and Japanese, military and civilian, are presented in this book. Maps, pictures, and timelines to help readers follow the events of the attack on Pearl Harbor and World War II in general are included.

Appleman-Jurman, A. (1989). *Alicia: My story*. New York: Bantam.

This autobiography recounts Alicia Appleman-Jurman's triumph over the terrifying, unrelenting brutality of the Nazi regime. After witnessing her own mother's murder and managing to escape, she helps others escape with her to Palestine (now part of Israel).

Elliott, L.M. (2001). *Under a war-torn sky*. New York: Hyperion.

Set in France during World War II, this book is based on recollections of the author's father. A young U.S. pilot's plane is shot down in Nazi-occupied France, and the French Resistance works to get him safely out of enemy territory.

Friedman, I.R. (1990). *The other victims: Non-Jews persecuted by the Nazis*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Personal narratives tell the stories of the many non-Jews persecuted by Hitler and the Nazis before and during World War II. Some of the groups discussed include gypsies, homosexuals, blacks, physically challenged individuals, and political and religious activists.

Gold, A.L. (2000). *A special fate: Chiune Sugihara: Hero of the Holocaust*. New York: Scholastic.

This biography tells the story of a Japanese diplomat working in Lithuania who chooses to ignore his orders and listen to his conscience. Despite the risks to himself and his family, Sugihara writes thousands of transit visas and saves the lives of countless Jews.

Greene, B. (1973). *Summer of my German soldier*. New York: Puffin.

Patty, a young Jewish girl who is struggling to find

(continued)

## BOOKS THAT CAN BE USED TO REPRESENT CRITICAL LITERACY (continued)

herself, discovers Anton, a young German prisoner of war who has escaped. Patty takes incredible risks to conceal and protect Anton and learns a great deal about herself in the process.

Kuchler-Silberman, L. (1990). *My hundred children*. New York: Dell Laurel-Leaf.

A Holocaust survivor copes with the loss of her family by running an orphanage for 100 Jewish children who survived the Nazi occupation of Poland. The story recounts everyday victories like learning to laugh again as well as bigger issues such as leaving Poland for a safer home.

Lowry, L. (1989). *Number the stars*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

A 10-year-old Danish girl named Annemarie and her family risk their own safety to help Annemarie's best friend and her Jewish family escape to Sweden, where they will be safe from the Nazis.

Richter, H.P. (1987). *I was there*. New York: Viking.

A young boy who is a member of the Hitler Youth Movement early in the Nazi era tells his story. The first-person account provides some insight into the people who were part of the enemy forces.

Talbott, H. (2000). *Forging freedom: A true story of heroism during the Holocaust*. New York: Putnam.

Jaap Penraat, a young Dutchman, helps save over 400 Jews during World War II by using his father's printing press to forge identification papers for Jewish friends and neighbors. He then creates a bogus German construction company and smuggles his "construction workers" to phony job sites and safety.

Volavkova, H. (Ed.). (1971). *I never saw another butterfly*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Children of the Nazi concentration camp in Terezin, Czechoslovakia, created these haunting poems and drawings. Of the 15,000 children who went to Terezin, less than 100 survived.

Wiesel, E. (1982). *Night*. New York: Bantam Books.

This autobiography recounts the life of a young boy in a Nazi death camp. The book includes accounts of many tragic events including the author witnessing the death of his own family.

(continued)

When using photo juxtapositioning, two photos that express different perspectives are viewed from a critical stance. For example, a seventh-grade teacher used two pictures that appeared on the front page of a newspaper before the attack on Afghanistan took place. One photo showed a 7-year-old boy staring into the camera, raising a pistol in the air while sitting on a man's shoulders. Around them masses of bearded Pakistani men dressed traditionally held up posters bearing slogans against Israel and the United States. The other picture showed a 6-year-old boy running away carrying his 1-year-old sister on his back, all the while looking over his shoulder in fear. By showing both pictures and raising questions, such as those listed in the Figure, to prompt reflections about the photographs, the teacher showed students that the photos were not neutral, but rather that each had a strong bias and power to influence our understanding of which was the subordinated group.

### Problem posing

In problem posing readers question the author's message from a critical perspective. This technique works well in a variety of instructional settings, including student-facilitated literature circles and online discussion boards.

When engaging in problem posing, students begin by gaining a literal understanding of the text. For example, U.S. President Andrew Jackson was the topic of a series of lessons in a fifth-grade class. Through reading; writing; discussion; and the use of a variety of comprehension strategies including, predicting, self-questioning, and summarizing, students learned essential information about Jackson—including his military leadership during the War of 1812 and his service in the U.S. Senate. They learned that Jackson had narrowly lost the previous presidential election to John Quincy Adams, when the House of Representatives was called upon to determine the winner. They also discovered that slavery, states' rights, and the relocation of Native Americans were issues during his presidency.

After the students developed a literal understanding about Jackson, they engaged in problem posing to gain a critical understanding. The teacher explained and demonstrated how problem posing works, guided the students in their initial attempts to raise questions about the text, provided sufficient opportunities to monitor students as they practiced engaging in problem posing with peers, and then encouraged students to use the strategy on their own. During this process, they focused on a variety of questions (see Figure). Because the purpose of problem posing is to provoke critical understandings of the text, the students didn't slavishly list and answer each question but rather selected those queries that would facilitate critical understanding of the topic being studied. For example, after learning about Andrew Jackson's election as a populist president, students asked, "Who was marginalized, discounted, or silenced in that election and presidency?" Their replies included women, African Americans, Native Americans, and children—all of whom did not vote. This led to an in-depth class discussion of the presidential elections that took place when women and minorities were not permitted to vote and Jackson's treatment of slaves and Native Americans during his presidency.

### **Alternative texts**

An alternative text represents a different perspective about the topic the reader experiences. The text can be narrative or informational and can consist of oral, written, visual, or imagined representations, including but not limited to drawings, oral descriptions, dramatizations, and songs. By creating an alternative text, the reader perceives the text in a different way and begins to understand the complexity of the issue examined. When using this technique, students can examine the message conveyed by a text, photo, or song and then write an alternative text, take or find an alternative photo, or create alternative lyrics. For example, after seeing a billboard of happy people having dinner in their expensive house, a student might choose to create an alternative text—which

### **BOOKS THAT CAN BE USED TO REPRESENT CRITICAL LITERACY (continued)**

#### **Trade books on a variety of topics that represent critical literacy**

Anderson, M.T. (2002). *Feed*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick.

This science fiction novel explores the possibilities and implications of a society where everyone is wired with a "feed." This electronic implantation is the primary means of communication and the source of everyone's knowledge of the world.

Avi. (2002). *Crispin: The cross of lead*. New York: Hyperion.

This historical fiction work chronicles the adventures of Crispin, who loses everything after his mother dies and he is falsely accused of murder. The book details the boy's discovery of his true identity and the realities of medieval life.

Browne, A. (1998). *Voices in the park*. New York: Dorling Kindersley.

This seemingly simple tale of a visit to the park is really an exploration of the human psyche and voice in literature. The story of a chance meeting of two children in the park is told by all four people involved: the boy, his mother, the girl, and her father. Each individual has a distinct version of the day's happenings.

Bunting, E. (1991). *Fly away home*. New York: Clarion.

This picture book exposes the realities of a homeless father and son who live in an airport. The young child explains how to keep from being noticed when living in an airport. His ideas include sleeping sitting up and spending each night in a different area. Patterning reality, there is no set resolution to the little boy's dilemma.

Bunting, E. (1994). *Smoky night*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Both the story and the illustrations recount the events of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The book addresses the importance of learning how to get along with others despite our differences.

Dorris, M. (1999). *Morning girl*. New York: Hyperion.

This story, which is written in the first person, describes the carefree, friendly life of a native girl and boy. At the end of the book Christopher

(continued)



## BOOKS THAT CAN BE USED TO REPRESENT CRITICAL LITERACY (continued)

Columbus arrives and notes in his log that the natives would make good slaves.

Fenner, F. (1991). *Randall's wall*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Randall, an 11-year-old boy, builds an invisible wall to protect himself from the outside world and the pain and rejection it can hold. An outgoing classmate breaks through his wall in an attempt to bring Randall friendship and compassion.

Fleischman, P. (1993). *Bull Run*. New York: HarperCollins.

*Bull Run* is a collection of 16 fictional narrative perspectives of a U.S. Civil War battle. The stories are told by characters, such as a photographer, a young boy, and the sister of a soldier, whose lives were forever altered by the Civil War.

Fleischman, P. (2001). *Seek*. Chicago: Marcato.

This novel is written in Readers Theatre format and chronicles Rob's search of the airwaves to locate his DJ father, whom he never knew. The search begins when he pushes the seek button on his radio and then takes readers through messages from the many voices of the people in Rob's life, including his grandparents, his mother, and his friends.

Fox, M. (1989). *Feathers and fools*. San Diego: Harcourt.

This antiwar allegory details the war between the swans and the peacocks. The two groups of birds begin to fear and dislike each other because of their differences. These feelings eventually lead to war.

Hesse, K. (2001). *Witness*. New York: Scholastic.

This story takes place in a small Vermont town in the 1920s. Eleven characters, including children, share their individual perspectives of what it is like when the Ku Klux Klan attempts to infiltrate the community.

Hoose, P. (2001). *We were there, too! Young people in American history*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.

This book is a collection of biographies of dozens of young people who have played important roles

(continued)

might include a billboard design—about a sad person who is homeless and depends on shelters for food and a bed. The student might then take action by encouraging peers to actively participate in the school's food and clothing drive or by organizing a group of friends to work for that effort.

In another example of this technique, eighth-grade students wrote alternative poems after reading Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son." In Hughes's (1997) poem the mother tells her son that life hasn't been "no crystal stair" and that it had "tacks" and "splinters" but she has kept climbing. She warns her son not to turn back or sit on the steps because life is "kinder hard."

After a whole-group discussion of the poem, students met in small groups that were formed based on their interpretations of the metaphors. For example, Jason and the other students in his group interpreted the stairs to represent financial progress and the tacks and splinters to be crises and disappointments in life. After discussing the author's purpose, students wrote alternative poems. Jason wrote the following, suggesting that things will go better in life if, when you come to a difficult situation, you pace yourself and don't get too nervous or tense:

Life hasn't always been easy,  
But when hard things come just calm down and  
take them in stride.  
When things seem to get tough,  
Take a break and cool off,  
You'll find that things will get a lot easier and good  
things will come your way.

The Hughes poem describes a mother who encourages her son to keep moving on and up in life, despite life's disappointments. Jason's alternative text gives another perspective—one that suggests that success comes to those who are not burned out by their constant plodding ahead. During whole-class discussion, a number of interpretations were shared. Most discussed achieving success but focused on different ways of reacting to challenges and setbacks. When Jason

shared his thoughts, he noted that he was not supporting laziness but rather suggesting that people can achieve financial success if they focus on their goal and don't become too stressed or overwhelmed by the work needed to reach it. By taking this critical stance, Jason recognized that the poem didn't have power and authority over his thoughts.

Through the writing of alternative texts, Jason and the other students in the class became free to examine other perspectives and make choices about how they felt about striving to attain goals. Without that critical stance, the students might have only sought to understand the metaphor from one perspective.

These eighth-grade students also created alternative texts in other curricular areas. These included creating alternative texts in science class after reading newspaper articles about the effects of medical waste pollution on the ocean and developments in the use of cloning. In music class, students examined family relationships by creating alternative lyrics to a variety of songs, and in social studies students created alternative texts to provide a counterpoint to texts expressing views on a variety of political issues.

Teaching ideas such as juxtapositioning, theme-based focus groups, problem posing, and creating alternative texts are adaptable across curriculum areas. They provide opportunities to situate critical literacy in a variety of contexts and encourage teachers and students to view critical literacy as a natural part of learning.

## Seeing a whole new world

The ideas presented in this article provide information about the nature and practice of critical literacy. It is an introductory work, designed to encourage educators to infuse critical literacy into their teaching. Our hope is that it will help teachers and students to expand their reasoning, deepen their understanding, seek out multiple

### BOOKS THAT CAN BE USED TO REPRESENT CRITICAL LITERACY (continued)

in American history. Profiles date from the voyages of Columbus to the present day.

Jacobs, F. (1992). *The Tainos: The people who welcomed Columbus*. New York: Putnam.

This factual account reveals the often untold side of Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of the Americas. The Tainos were the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, and after the Columbus voyages, disease and domination led to the extinction of the culture. The only records of the Tainos' existence have been found in the letters of Columbus, writings of Spanish explorers, and their own cave drawings.

Lorbiecki, M. (1996). *Just one flick of a finger*. New York: Dial.

This picture book tells of the consequences of guns in school. When a young boy brings a gun to school to "scare" a bully, an accident occurs that changes everything.

Matas, C. (2001). *The war within: A novel of the Civil War*. New York: Aladdin.

Set during the U.S. Civil War, this book relates the story of Jewish family members forced to leave their home in Mississippi because of General Grant's Order #11, commanding all Jews to evacuate Confederate territory.

Naidoo, B. (2000). *The other side of truth*. New York: HarperTrophy.

After their mother is murdered, two children are smuggled out of Nigeria to London. Their journalist father, the intended target of the murder, eventually joins them and is arrested for illegally emigrating. The author reveals many facts and contemporary issues about Africa through this story, which explores issues of family, exile, and freedom.

Yolen, J. (1996). *Encounter*. San Diego: Harcourt.

This story of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the island of San Salvador is told from the point of view of a young Taino. The boy, who is telling the tale as an old man, recalls that he warned his people to be wary of the newcomers. They ignored him and welcomed Columbus, an act that had dire consequences.

perspectives, and become active thinkers who comprehend from a critical stance.

Beyond the first steps into critical literacy lies an increasingly fascinating intellectual world. It is a world filled with multiple perspectives, one in which the subordinated are acknowledged and valued. It is a world in which we naturally participate in reflection, action, and transformation; a world in which critical literacy is not viewed as a classroom activity but rather as a stance used in all contexts of our lives.

## REFERENCES

- Comber, B. (2001). Critical literacies and local action: Teacher knowledge and a "new" research agenda. In B. Comber & A. Simpson (Eds.), *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms* (pp. 271–282). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Cummins, J., & Sayers, D. (1995). *Brave new schools: Challenging cultural illiteracy through global learning networks*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Durrant, C., & Green, B. (2001). Literacy and the new technologies in school education: Meeting the literacy challenge. In H. Fehring & P. Green (Eds.), *Critical literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian Literacy Educators' Association* (pp. 142–164). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Gold, A.L. (2000). *A special fate: Chiune Sugihara: Hero of the Holocaust*. New York: Scholastic.
- Green, P. (2001). Critical literacy revisited. In H. Fehring & P. Green (Eds.), *Critical literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian Literacy Educators' Association* (pp. 7–14). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Hughes, L. (1997). Mother to son. In A. Applebee (Ed.), *The language of literature*. Boston: McDougal Littell.
- Lewis, M., Flint, A.S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers and novices. *Language Arts*, 79, 382–392.
- Luke, A., & Freebody, P. (1999, August). Further notes on the four resources model. *Reading Online*. Retrieved January 26, 2003, from [http://www.readingonline.org/past/past\\_index.asp?HREF=/research/lukefreebody.html](http://www.readingonline.org/past/past_index.asp?HREF=/research/lukefreebody.html)
- Machado, A. (1982). Proverbios y cantares. In A. Trueblood (Trans.), *Antonio Machado: Selected poems* (p. 142). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McLaughlin, M. (2001, December). *Sociocultural influences on content literacy teachers' beliefs and innovative practices*. Paper presented at the 51st annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.
- McLaughlin, M., & Allen, M.B. (2002). *Guided comprehension: A teaching model for grades 3–8*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Pearson, P.D. (2001, December). *What we have learned in 30 years*. Paper presented at the 51st annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, San Antonio, TX.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (2002, December). A pragmatist theoretician looks at research: Implications and questions calling for answers. Paper presented at the 52nd annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Miami, FL.
- Rosenblatt, L.M. (2004). The transactional theory of reading and writing. In R.B. Ruddell & N.J. Unrau (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (5th ed., pp. 1363–1398). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Serafini, F. (2003, February). Informing our practice: Modernist, transactional, and critical perspectives on children's literature and reading instruction. *Reading Online*, 6(6). Retrieved January 26, 2003, from [http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art\\_index.asp?HREF=serafini/index.html](http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=serafini/index.html)