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IDEA SHARING

LOOKING THROUGH THE CRITICAL LENS WITH

THE PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT: A

SHORT DISCUSSION IN TEACHING PRACTICE

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Introduction

Success for lifelong learners in the 21st century requires a more active, dynamic, and critical engagement with the diversity of texts inside and outside the classroom. This cornucopia of texts is constantly available for both educators and their students. Especially with the limitless access to texts via different media outlets, acute awareness and vigilance are necessary when certain texts are applied in any classroom. Within a classroom discourse, the development of critical thinking skills can be transformed into a social practice in the global community. Teachers can guide students in challenging established power relationships and social norms and practices, allowing for the growth of a community of participatory learners. Within this community, a competent development of a critical lens thus becomes essential. This lens, therefore, sharpens the learners' skills not only in –reading‖ the texts within the classroom, but also in applying what they have read in other contexts outside the classroom.

Freebody and Luke (1999) discussed the four resources model of reading, which they developed in 1990, as a means to reformulate the practices of literacy in pedagogy, culture, and society. This model includes the four competency stances or –roles‖ for a reader in today's

postmodern, multi-textual culture: coding, making meaning, pragmatic usage and critical application (Freebody & Luke, 1999, p. 1). Posited as a normative model, these four resources aim to integrate well-developed literacy practices conducted by educators with the opportunity for skill development of learners (Freebody & Luke, 1999, p. 3). In essence, these roles for readers are a set of practices which are consistently carried out in a given dynamic, social context. According to Freebody and Luke (1999), this –family of practices,|| therefore, indicates what readers notice in the outside world of –hybrid multimedia texts|| (p. 3). Using this model, the classroom can traverse different avenues with active and critical engagement exploring relevant issues the learning community is impelled to discuss.

Ludwig (2003) reasoned that applying this model in classrooms entails students to be involved members of a modern and literate community, in which students become more adept at text comprehension and usage in an interactive, multi-modal, and multi-purpose environment (p. 2). Furthermore, UNESCO (2003) emphasized that literacy practices are inherently plural in nature, as they are firmly enveloped in the social realities of work, family, politics, and the like (p. 12). This notion of literacy serving many purposes indicates that individuals are given the capacity to attain their goals, expand their knowledge and hence, become participating members in the wider community (UNESCO, 2003).

Bridging critical literacy and engagement with classroom contexts in Thailand, this short discussion explores the theoretical and practical values of using a specific text called the public service announcement (PSA), an advertisement commonly employed in public relations programs. By incorporating the PSA in literacy-based instruction, educators and their students are encouraged to become more cognizant of pertinent issues outside the classroom, which in turn, impels them to be more effective collaborators in the community.

Critical Literacy as an Imperative

To be an active participant of a community, one must not only understand it but also be able to challenge it. Being perceptive with the multiplicity of texts is the first step to honing the critical lens. When students begin asking *why* and *what for*, they then build on this step and delve into the intent, purpose, and relevance of the texts they encounter.

Hughes (2007) defines critical literacy as a multi-pronged conduit that unveils various ways to understand texts of different kinds, thus allowing individuals to consider and question implicit values, assumptions, and attitudes (Critical Literacy section, para. 3). Such closer examination and analysis beget empowerment and social action in a more democratic community. Consonant with Shor (1997), critical literacy is a confrontation against the status quo, enabling individuals to determine other avenues for development in society (p. 1). Critical literacy practice then behaves as social action through the use of language, thus creating change agents that challenge social constructions (Shor, 1999, p. 2). When learners therefore demand a justification or explanation for a text, they are promoting a behavior that can qualify as a critical engagement. They are activating their critical lens to investigate the powers that are currently in place.

As a confrontation to the present values, literacy deepens the integral role of language and language teaching. Freire and Macedo asserted that “reading the world precedes reading the word” and the latter action implies a continuation of the former (as cited in Hughes, 2007, Critical Literacy section, para. 3). On that account, being an effective, responsible and critical reader amidst today's exceeding fascination with technology and multimedia is an imperative. This acquired skill of basic literacy seems to have been accepted with indifference as the rise of technology has afforded better and more interactive ways for students to engage – or perhaps disengage – with the subject matter at hand. Thus, the 'reading and writing' of a more fast-paced, globalized community behooves students and teachers to

continually understand, dissect, and adapt the subject matter's complexities.

The PSA as a Tool for Critical Literacy

The use of a PSA opens pathways to a plethora of discussions within a critical framework. More importantly, learners become involved as community participants. Freire, who exemplified the development of critical literacy in an educational setting, discussed how students can be “more socially aware” through a dialogue or discourse vis-a-vis social issues (as cited in Coffey, 2008, p. 2). The PSA motivates students to question such issues and consequently take part in a meaningful dialogue among the broader community. In essence, the foundation of “reading the world” is fortified by this agency of dialogue and participation.

Public service announcements are generally video or audio productions that serve a public relations campaign for non-profit organizations. Usually ten, thirty or sixty seconds in length, the PSA is an effective way to use public service time (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006, p. 262-263). Such announcements promote current, significant issues germane to society, such as tobacco use, child abuse and bullying, to name a few. Created for the public interest to raise awareness and motivate a behavioral change, the use of the PSA is instrumental in raising such critical awareness in a classroom.

Currently engulfed with media on a daily basis, students with access to such media can become accustomed, and hence passive to, its messages. When educators bring such media to the forefront in their classrooms, students are provoked to critically engage with this everyday deluge they encounter. The PSA, in this regard, has a more focused objective. Still an advertisement, nonetheless, the key message is more conspicuous, clear, and more importantly, critical. With the teacher as a facilitator and guide, students can examine the issue as well as the media outlet's agenda. Students, therefore, read in a “reflective manner” (Coffey, 2008, p. 3).

For instance, the use of a PSA by the Australian-based National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) can incite within students debates on issues regarding family dynamics, role modeling, and personal safety (Eastwood, 2006). In this 60-second spot, children are mimicking a range of adults' habits – smoking, littering, drunkenness, road rage, and racist name-calling (Bogado, 2011). A provocative advertisement such as this allows teachers to delve into a critical framework involving learners in student-centered assignments and discussions which explore matters of sociocultural concern.

Alluding to constructivist theories in education, Weimer (2002) advanced the view of learning as a social engagement with communities in which students make their own meanings with the texts they encounter (p.11-12). When presented with the NAPCAN advertisement or text, students can begin to decode prevailing conventions, beliefs, and attitudes by themselves and with each other.

In the case of a listening and speaking module, teachers can act as facilitators as they guide their students in eliciting ideas which recognize pertinent social issues provoked by the video. Such fundamental issues in students' lives trigger a confluence of ideas that promote critical literacy. This is a process to familiarize and frame the students with the context, thus preparing them with some language features to use in subsequent activities and discussions. Eventually, this engagement with sociocultural issues leads to students analyzing various power relationships in different socioeconomic environments. Students then evaluate and critique not just the message of the PSA itself but also how that message is being delivered. Furthermore, this exposes students to biases in texts (Coffey, 2008). Since certain social issues are placed in a prominent position via the PSA, there emerge valuable questions that students then consider if they are to participate in a critical dialogue inside and outside the classroom.

Applying the Four Resource Model with the PSA

For the teaching and learning of critical literacy to be effective, the abilities and skills, which are applied when face-to-face with the diversity of texts in the social context, must be redefined and reshaped (Freebody & Luke, 1999, p. 2). Inherent in these abilities is the recognition of the interplay of social activities in different situations. Hence, a foremost aspect to remember is the power of those who are literate. The relations of power have the hand to constrain, mediate and redefine this literacy in a social setting (Coffey, 2008; Freebody & Luke 1999). Such relations can be imbalanced and ideological.

Clarifying that this normative model is not meant to be —an instructional panacea,|| Freebody and Luke (1999) postulated that the four literacy resources are a map of possible practices in the classroom, as it can be applied with an understanding of the specific class's repertoires of cultural and linguistic practices (p. 3). Learners embark on four actions:

- Code-breaking: Students unravel texts' conventions, symbols, and codes by recognizing and using fundamental features of language, such as the alphabet and sounds.
- Text-participation: Students comprehend, compose, and hence, make meaning out of the texts that are encountered, taking into consideration their sociocultural backgrounds, experience, and knowledge; in short, students are constructing knowledge and applying meaning to them based on a personal reflection.
- Text-usage: Students understand and negotiate the purpose of the different texts surrounding them, thus gaining knowledge about and using appropriate text inside and outside the classroom; in addition, students recognize how to use the texts in a particular context and how they can be used by others.
- Text-analysis: Students critically look at texts and understand them as not neutral; in essence, these texts

represent specific points of view and simultaneously censor others, thereby influencing people's ideas; students can therefore present an alternative position in novel manners. (Freebody and Luke, 1999, p.4; Ludwig, 2003, p.2-3)

These actions enable learners to move beyond cracking the codes and arrive at understanding and applying texts on many levels for multiple purposes within a vast domain of technologies (Ludwig, 2003, p. 2). The acquisition and development of skills and knowledge vis-a-vis this model are in a non-linear manner (Ludwig, 2003, p. 3). Instead, educators are to practice and view literacy as a socially constructed practice (Coffey, 2008; Freebody & Luke, 1999; Ludwig, 2003). The classroom then transforms into a community of practice.

The use of the PSA in the classroom underpins the purpose and relevance of a learning community engaged in socially constructing meaning, rendering the classroom a cauldron for active dialogue. This classroom is transformed into a microcosm of the world beyond the walls, a place of social change (Fasset & Warren, 2007). The classroom provides a valuable and meaningful context, granting learners the sense of agency.

Two different PSAs are likely to be effective in promoting students as change agents for themselves and for their peers: anti-bullying and self-esteem with regards to ideals of beauty. –The Price of Silence, a 120-second anti-bullying PSA shows the consequences of victimization by bullies and the resulting acts of omission from bystanders (Shake State, 2010). From this advertisement, learners can become more aware of this issue prevalent among youth in educational as well as community settings. Likewise, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, which was launched in 2004, included a series of advertisements advocating self-esteem support among young girls (Unilever, 2013). One such PSA entitled –Onslaught or –Beauty Pressure presents the bombardment of beauty images that girls face throughout their lives (Piper, 2007; Unilever, 2013).

Using these two texts via the four resources model, learners and educators generate concepts to decode and make meaning out of these concepts. From here, they discuss and negotiate other texts that emerged during the earlier stages of the model. Such texts can be printed material, online articles and essays, or even blogs and Facebook posts that explore personal conflicts, violence and self-image issues in their own culture and that of others. Other texts can include films, songs, and personally conducted interviews exploring the negative impacts media has on their generation. Additionally, students can form teams or work individually to examine the causes and effects of the issues which arose from the viewing and understanding of the two PSAs.

The pragmatic and critical practices present students and teachers with the opportunities to inquire about the purpose of each text or PSA. Questions of *what to do* and *what this means* become edifying points for understanding the messages underlying the texts (Ludwig, 2003). From this vantage, they can begin to understand how such texts are misconstrued or manipulated by other texts. Students can then establish a hybrid text of their own that responds to and redefines the issues at hand. Such creative output can be in the form of a simple video production, a script, a role play, a poster, a speech and the like; these applications address the issues they deem critical for further dialogue.

The PSA in a Thai Classroom Context

The role of the PSA is valuable in Thai classrooms in that it engenders fruitful dialogue and encourages various critical literacy and learner-centered practices. Not only do some of these advertisements provide a level of entertainment well received by Thai students, but such ads also initiate student-generated ideas about social issues. The 5E learning cycle and instructional model which encompasses the elements of –engage, explore, explain, elaborate, and evaluate has been proposed to expand to a 7E model, adding the elements of –elicit and –extend on either end of the spectrum

(Eisenkraft, 2013). A model that supports inquiry-based learning, the 5E framework creates a participatory classroom environment in which learners embark on discoveries and process newly acquired skills (Broomfield, n.d.). This five-step model, along with the proposed expansion to seven steps, equips learners with the skills needed to build on experiences and knowledge they have and hence construct their own meanings.

Sponsored by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, the anti-smoking PSA entitled “Smoking Kid” can be used in the Thai classroom while integrating the 7E and four resources model. In this advertisement, two young children innocently asked adults around Bangkok to light their cigarettes. In short, this PSA aimed to force adults to reflect upon their smoking habits and thus motivating them to ask for rehabilitative help (Ogilvy, 2012). To apply the two models with this PSA, the following schema can be adapted:

- **Elicit** prior understanding of tobacco and smoking with questions or images related to tobacco use
- **Engage** students' minds by allowing them to formulate questions and statements regarding tobacco use they have witnessed or heard about. This also creates interest for the issue at hand. Students are also in the **code-breaking stage** as they decode and encode symbols and conventions as well as use fundamental features of language.
- **Explore** the subject matter with the viewing of the PSA. This of course can be done several times to allow students to **participate with the text**; hence, they are making meaning and connections with their prior knowledge and sociocultural backgrounds. This stage can also include the **usage of the text** as students negotiate the purpose of the PSA and its message.
- **Explain** concepts to students to facilitate more learning. Here, the teacher can guide students toward a more coherent understanding as a result of their explorations.
- **Elaborate** to allow students to apply their knowledge to new

areas and alternative texts; for example, they can raise new questions on the effects of smoking on relationships or school performance. This coincides with **text-analysis**, as students take a critical look at the texts before them.

- **Extend** explicitly reminds teachers and students the crucial practice of learning transfer. Applying this acquired knowledge in a new context allows for further **text-analysis**, as students realize that alternative viewpoints exist.

(Broomfield, n.d.; Eisenkraft, 2013; Freebody & Luke, 1999; Ludwig, 2003)

Using this particular PSA in the Thai classroom, teachers can apply tenets of critical literacy by having students become more aware of how tobacco use, prevention and rehabilitation is applicable in their local communities. Conjointly, the anonymous Thai children in the advertisement can readily connect with young Thai learners. The combination of the empowerment of literacy and –reading the world allows teachers to reconcile the values of social conventions and at the same time, encourage their learners to think critically about how such values are defined and redefined over time.

Educational quality in the post-reform age of the National Education Act of 1999 warrants a brief exploration, especially with regards to the controversy over policy-making and practices (Mounier & Pongwat, 2010). Mounier and Pongwat (2010) argue that educational reformers currently adhere to traditional, perennialist objectives but carry out such objectives through post-modern philosophical means. They assert that these reformers are seeking to assuage and maintain the hierarchical structure in society and education while advocating economic development in the globalized context (2010, p. 84). In their view, this compromise of a viewpoint through a post-modern method of teaching can only lead to a questionable –quality of education. Furthermore, Mounier and Pongwat (2010) point out that teachers face an inconsistency with learning behaviors and this new pedagogy (p. 85). If reflecting and

arguing are socially devalued and satisfying authorities is —better appreciated than voicing criticisms and taking bold initiatives, then the new approach to teaching appears nonsensical and contradictory to students (p. 85). This results in an overall discouraging and demotivating classroom atmosphere, in which teachers abandon their attempt to improve their teaching practices and hence, their students' learning (Mounier & Pongwat, 2010, p. 86). In this light, teachers are faced with a difficult set of parameters to create a critical engagement with texts.

The role of the PSA in this seemingly discouraging context can be applied, nonetheless, by establishing firm educational objectives that correspond to and are consistent with the evolving pedagogical practices in Thailand. The 5E learning cycle attests to this effective approach to student-centered learning (Eisenkraft, 2013). Naturally, students are part and parcel of this process of critical engagement. Asking them to conceptualize these issues with explicit instruction leads to a more competent participation in activities. This participation in the issues from the PSA can be framed in a critical context by connecting meaning to a social context. After this critical look into the issues, teachers can guide students into a project-based assignment that stimulates students to be more active learners and doers in their community inside and outside their classrooms.

The Critical Lens via the PSA

Success in the 21st century for students requires educators and communities alike to be actively engaged with the divergent world of texts around them. As pedagogical imperatives and policies continue to be reshaped and established, the responsibility for critical learning does not simply lie on the teachers and policy-makers but also on the learners themselves. Being an effective guide to sharpen the critical lens is an essential step for educators. Nonetheless, fostering autonomous, self-motivated learning and critical inquiry is an equally fundamental movement toward achievement for learners. The public service announcement is an instrumental element that can contribute

to this success. Not only is this text a way to explore and question current social attitudes and standards but it is also a useful outlet to make meaning of the world beyond the classroom.

The Author

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