

Critical Literacy through Initial Teacher Education in English.

Critical literacy (CL) is notoriously difficult to define (Morgan 1997; Gill and Thompson 2012), but must surely centre upon some notion of literacy as a means of deconstructing multiple texts through a culturally critical lens, seeking to uncover / discover the hegemonic relationships that underpin such texts. In this sense, CL is, or could be, a highly significant – if not central – part of English pedagogy. And yet, as any casual observer of English teaching in English schools today could testify – and any reader of official pronouncements and documents on English teaching couldn't fail to notice – CL is unlikely to manifest itself, explicitly at least, in the English school classroom. For those of us who feel that CL should be the cornerstone of English teaching and learning, this all paints a rather gloomy picture. And yet, despite the darkening shades, there may be something of an opportunity: to start from a different position, that presented by initial teacher education (ITE) in English. The critically reflective academic dimension of Master's level ITE courses is significant here, especially through universities' strong involvement, in that ITE should be seen as a *critical* preparation for teaching as opposed to a straightforward emulation and replication of current teaching practices: the multiple texts of schooling are thus themselves open to critical reading and evaluation. In this context, I continue to find that many beginning English teachers are receptive to – sometimes even enthusiastic about – the theory and practice of CL, and it was this realisation that provided the starting point and context for the exploration, undertaken with the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Secondary English group at Durham University during 20012-13, recorded and reflected upon in this paper.

In England, initial teacher education (ITE) practices are governed by a set of competences, known as Teaching Standards (Dept of Education 2012): essentially a narrow conception of the competence model of training, and in both spirit and letter very far from the theory or practice of CP or indeed any humane conception of what teaching is all about (Heilbronn and Yandell 2010; Stevens 2010; 2012). Indeed, as both Yandell and Heilbronn point out, 'The universalising tendency of the standards approach...., part of a wider shift in policy away from local democratic accountability towards a model of centralised control' (Yandell 2010: 18) has meant that 'Promoting and developing critical reflection in teacher education has proved problematic in the climate of performativity that has prevailed over the past 30 years

in England' (Heilbronn 2010: 29). However, despite the legal status of the Standards, it may yet be possible (and desirable) to transcend them, and in so doing, to subject the competence model of ITE itself to critical scrutiny. That this is possible is part of my purpose here.

Indeed, we were inspected by Ofsted during the year of the research, and inspectors noted approvingly the work I and colleagues were doing – vindication from an unexpected quarter, perhaps, but none the less welcome – in extending the professional repertoire of our student teachers in critically reflective ways, especially in exploring the nature of CL both in English and beyond. In order to do so, of course, it was essential to foster a spirit of criticality towards all texts, including the school-based curricula and the Teaching Standards, in favour of a fresh re-conceptualisation of pedagogical knowledge and understanding. In this context, somewhat paradoxically and in a way of course unacknowledged in the Standards with their pronouncements about 'secure' knowledge, genuine understanding recognises and endorses, even celebrates, the fluidity of knowledge in a critical spirit. Here, as so often, Paulo Freire, who did so much to develop notions of criticality in pedagogy, helpfully elaborates:

'Knowledge begins with the awareness of knowing little ... Human beings constantly create and re-create their knowledge, in that they are inconclusive, historical beings engaged in a permanent act of discovery'. (Freire 2005: 107.) As Ruddock maintains (1985, in Moore, 2004: 10), it is all too easy to fall prey to what she terms 'a hegemony of habit', whereas 'good teaching is essentially experimental, and habit, if it is permitted to encroach too far on practice, will erode curiosity and prevent the possibility of experiment'. The exploration of CL with members of the PGCE English group should be seen as part of this broader critical / reflective approach to ITE.

However, before we can meaningfully start this exploration, I sense, there needs to be some sort of positioning as to what, for the purposes of this research, I envisaged as CL. Morgan (1997: 2), from an Australian perspective, is helpful here:

'Critical literacy critics and teachers focus on the cultural and ideological assumptions that underwrite texts; they investigate the politics of representation; and they interrogate the inequitable, cultural position of speakers and readers within discourses. They ask who constructs the texts whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; whose interests are served by

such representations and such readings; and when such texts and readings are inequitable in their effects, how these could be constructed otherwise’.

Broadly, Morgan’s clear formulation provides a working model for the research outlined here, although it is important to remember that such principles should themselves be subject to critical appraisal – as indeed they were, often refreshingly so, during discussions and activity with student teachers. Clearly, despite my guarded optimism, expressed above, about working within the ordained competence-based system (and even with the apparent approval of Ofsted), such an approach to literacy challenges current orthodoxies and practices – not only in ITE, but throughout our education system. This is where a distinctly subversive dimension enters, and is, even more predictably, avoided by the strictures of the Standards. The kind of educational experience implied here is manifestly about power, about who has it, and what is done with it to whom, whether in macrocosmic or microcosmic context. Whereas for traditional schooling, the kind embedded in the language and message of the Standards, notions of power are rarely brought to the fore, and any inadvertent teaching about or through power structures does nothing to question their nature except perhaps in very generalised terms, for the CL teacher the nature of these structures is central, manifest, and necessarily subversive. The form of the subversion may be in the culture of the classroom itself, manifesting itself in the open, debated acknowledgement of inter-subjectivities, social relations, and a questioning approach to the role of the followed curriculum, as well as in the content of that curriculum, as taught. As Guilherme elaborates,

‘Critical Pedagogy (CP) ... intervenes with ways of knowing and ways of living thus being a cultural enterprise as well as an educational one. CP deals with the relationship between the self, the others and the world and by leading the pupils to critically examine these relationships it makes them believe that they can make a difference and, in so doing, the pedagogical and the cultural become political too’.
(2002: 21.)

Freire himself starts from the perspective of problematisation in teaching and learning, as opposed to simply gaining competence confidently, if superficially. As he elucidates, there is certainly no one single path to be taken towards effective teaching: each pedagogical situation requires problematising in order to demonstrate precisely this:

‘In the process of problematisation, a step made by a Subject [ie teacher or student, or of course student-teacher] to penetrate the problem-situation continually opens up new roads for other Subjects to comprehend the object being analyzed. Educators who are problematised by engaging in this kind of action ‘re-enter into’ the object of the problem through the ‘entering into’ of the educatees. This is why educators continue to learn. The humbler they are in this process the more they will learn’. (Freire 2005: 135.)

As such, problematisation is the Freirean basis of understanding and critical empowerment for both teachers and learners, the very antithesis of the competence-based model, and he quotes Erich Fromm to underline the point:

‘[Man] conforms to anonymous authorities and adopts a self which is not his. The more he does this, the more powerless he feels, the more he is forced to conform. In spite of a veneer of optimism and initiative, modern man is overcome by a profound feeling of powerlessness...’ (In Freire 2005: 6. Gendered language acknowledged).

This perception is powerfully apposite to the nature of the Standards, offering as they do a sometimes beguiling ‘veneer of optimism and initiative’ whilst masking the critical complexity, at once liberating and problematic, inherent in the processes of teaching and learning. Once again, Freire is clear in his appraisal of what teaching can achieve in this context, and his critique applies with similar validity to any learning, whether it be young pupils in a classroom or older student teachers grappling with imposed standards and competences:

‘The role of the educator is not to “fill” the educated with “knowledge”, technical or otherwise. It is rather to attempt to move towards a new way of thinking in both educator and educatee, through the dialogical relationship between both. The flow is in both directions’. (Freire 2005: 112.)

It was in this spirit that the exploration described here was undertaken, as I hope to show in the ensuing appraisal.

In practical terms, the development of the research was effectively fourfold, as illustrated in more detail below. The entire enterprise took place during term 2 of the PGCE year: the busiest term, in many ways, since it combines a crowded university-based period with the first phase of the second teaching practice (the first having been completed in term 1). Firstly, I gave an introductory session to the whole PGCE English group (some thirty-six student teachers) on the nature of CL and its tensions and opportunities, followed by an invitation to the group for any volunteers particularly interested in the possibilities of CL to participate more fully in the research. This was followed in the university by a more detailed and participatory exploration of CL as it could operate in the English classroom, with a subsequent discussion teasing out the nuances of meaning and implication. As far as the whole group was concerned, certainly explicitly, that was the end of the matter; but for the handful of student teachers who expressed interest in participating in the research there were two further stages: the planning and teaching of a lesson or series of lessons in their teaching placements, observed by me and later reflected upon together; and an element of critically reflective writing (through the opportunity afforded by one of the course assignments) further exploring the implications of CL for pedagogical development. Following the initial session on the nature of literacies in English, including a brief exposition of CL, I presented the group with the following summary and plan for subsequent activity:

Literacy is generally, and I think rightly, seen as fundamentally positive; it'd be difficult (especially for an English teacher) to claim otherwise. As ever in education, however, there is a 'but', signalling some sort of deeper paradox perhaps: a suspicion that a purely 'basic' literacy may in fact play into the power structures of the status quo in ensuring that people are just literate enough to fall prey to linguistically manipulative and powerful interests – advertisers, for example, or unscrupulous politicians and media controllers. What we need, then, (I think) is some sort of critical literacy, enabling a deeper and more questioning understanding of the ways language and images work – and indeed whose work they're doing.

At the heart of critical literacy lies a potentially dynamic combination of the 'language of critique' with the 'language of possibility' (Freire (1974) *Education for Critical Consciousness*). It is precisely this combination that is vital: either one

without the other would be severely deficient – wholly negative, or purely idealistic. The critical / celebratory teacher's role is to balance these elements, managing the necessary dialectical tension between them. Seeing the word and the world (Freire's telling fusion) as new, open to critical insight *and* a sense of wonder, to critical distance *and* informed engagement, is absolutely fundamental here, and is at the heart of what critical literacy is all about.

What I'm interested in discovering here is how such a dynamic combination could work in practice, in the context of teaching English in secondary schools with all the attendant constraints and pressures notwithstanding.

In your peer-supportive subject knowledge enhancement groups, I'd like you to explore how critical literacy might play out in the English classroom, with each group focusing on their particular aspect of English.

After brief consideration of the options available, the members of the group chose to work within the following aspects of English, reflecting their subject-knowledge enhancement identities as already established, and on the following themes:

- Drama and Shakespeare: *the critical context for study of 'Henry V', including why it's studied and what messages it could convey in reading and performance.*
- Language awareness and grammar: *critical contexts for Standard English, accent and dialect as considered in the English classroom.*
- Media study within English: *critical contexts for studying the advertising of brands of chocolate.*
- The teaching of poetry: *critical contexts for teaching the poetry of T S Eliot.*
- Children's and young people's literature: *critical contexts for 'Holes' as presented and explored in the English curriculum.*
- The teaching of writing: *critical contexts for teaching persuasive / discursive writing on a given topic.*

The group-based deliberations ranged widely and imaginatively along these chosen lines, and diverse viewpoints were expressed. In general, all members of the wider group contributed with commitment and interest, although not all espoused the priorities of CL; indeed, discussion as to exactly how important it might be given the numerous pressures facing

English teachers gave rise to healthy debate. Some student teachers voiced concern that CL may itself represent a species of cultural dominance, in that it could only ever be introduced and developed (as the critique goes) through teachers valuing this form of literacy above others / others'. In this respect, it may be said that CL was itself being subjected to critical examination, and appropriately so (and not for the first time either; see for example Morgan's (1997: 10-17) discussion under the apt heading 'Critiquing the Critical). In respect of the PGCE group's activity, a consensus as to the value of criticality in English teaching was more easily reached when creativity was emphasised alongside criticality: what McCallum (2012) terms 'critical-creativity':

'...critical-creativity does not operate in general, abstract terms, seeking to pass judgement on cultural production and institute norms; rather it establishes the critical-creative possibilities within all of us, acknowledging that anything we do, anything we create, if it is done from a position of understanding and reflection, is, in its own way, offering a critical comment' (McCallum 2012: 113)

The risk here, it seems to me, is of a too broad, all-encompassing definition, but as a working principle such a formulation was apt in enabling the smaller groups to work constructively on the themes outlined above.

This phase of the research was intended as preparatory to what I hope would occur in real English lessons as taught by those student teachers who chose to participate further, and as such is not the main focus of this paper; nevertheless, some illuminating and telling ideas emerged. The drama and Shakespeare group centred on cultural receptions of the play 'Henry V', including the famously patriotic Olivier version and its use as propaganda, and more recent performances rather emphasising the suffering of common soldiers compelled to fight their masters' wars. The group's deliberations culminated in a short script for a dialogue between Bardolph, Nym and other footsoldiers bemoaning their plight, thus undercutting the ostensible thrust of the play. The ways in which emphasis on Standard English militates against working class pupils in schools provided the focus for the language group's activity, using some alarming instances from the student teachers' own language autobiographies and recent professional experience. The media group's work was especially illuminating, I felt, dealing as it did with the carefully concealed realities of the chocolate industry and its basis

in what amounts virtually to third world slavery conditions, and how advertising uses language and images to convey quite a different impression. T S Eliot's cultural conservatism, belittlement of working class cultures and blatant anti-Semitism provided the thrust of the poetry group's activity, with the question of whether a poem / poet may be seen as 'great' despite such contextual insights. Exploration of 'Holes' and discursive writing practices, by the remaining groups, were similarly concerned with the concealed subtexts of literary and persuasive writing and how these may operate on readers. Throughout all these examples, and many others arising from discussions and presentations, I was constantly alerted to the critical creativity of these beginning English teachers, and – importantly – to the ways in which such teaching may find both opportunities and constraints in the English classroom. CL, in this sense, need not be seen as a different species of teaching, but more as an alternative emphasis and reading of curricular possibilities. We need now to turn to a selection of two contrasting examples of actual English lessons as practised by those student teachers who elected to pursue the research further.

My first instance comes from an outstanding student teacher, whom I shall call Emma for purposes of anonymity, teaching at a challenging but highly successful school in a small examining town in County Durham. Emma, it must be said, thrived on the PGCE course and was immediately enthusiastic about the prospects of teaching CL through English, and of reflecting critically upon the implications for future professional practice. For the Year 9 (upper ability group) lesson I observed, she chose to focus on Orwell's novel '1984', as part of a cohesive scheme of study, with the emphasis on the novel's language and its relevance and implications for today's world in the contexts of surveillance and censorship. In the best traditions of English teaching – and of CL – Emma started the lesson by eliciting what the group already understood of censorship through word and world familiar to them: partly through a participatory exposition of the implications of the word itself, and subsequently through a 'mise en scene' exploration of a piece of Banksy graffiti art depicting a street artist painting the slogan 'One Nation Under CCTV' on a house side. Thus, in the spirit of CL (and indeed all resourceful English teaching), the terms of literacy were significantly broadened to include strongly visual elements. Throughout all this, and indeed during the whole lesson, Emma's stated purpose, as explained to me, was 'to problematise assumptions about the nature of censorship and surveillance as the pupils may have experienced such things, or thought about them, in their lives'. Thus, when initial responses to her question about

defining censorship focused simply on censorship as protection from unsuitable material, Emma's skilfully probing questions guided pupils towards asking 'who censors what and in whose interests?' Similarly, in responding to the Banksy artefact, Emma's guiding questions were 'Why was it made? Who is it aimed at? What does it mean? How could it be interpreted?' in a sense, of course, such questions are rhetorical; the point in asking them is to provoke genuinely critical discussion, and in this context they worked admirably. They also served to provide a strong foundation for the beginnings of study of '1984', through the route of the 'Big Brother' artefact, well known to pupils, of course, from a quite different source. As pupils thought more deeply in response to the theme of the lesson, their own offerings became more sharply perceptive and, in the broad sense, critical: internet surveillance, for example, emerged strongly and contentiously as an area of familiarity and insight, often in ways which enlightened both Emma, as teacher, and me as observer. One of the central tenets of CL was thus observable: that teachers and pupils work together towards insights of critical comprehension.

Later, when reflecting on the nature of the lesson and her thinking underpinning it for a PGCE assignment, Emma wrote (having first described and deplored the target-driven culture of contemporary English teaching, characterised in Freirean 'banking' terms):

Freire's alternative approach to the 'banking model' of education moves away from the functional, narrative form of transmission of knowledge that is currently dominant in the teaching of literacy skills to focus upon 'problem-posing'. Such a method of teaching emphasizes critical thinking, a representation of knowledge, and a dialogue between all participants of the classroom (including but not relying upon the teacher) for the purpose of liberation. The conception of education as liberation is certainly appropriate in a setting seemingly obsessed with the merely instrumental. It is this drive away from reductionism that the subject of English is ideally placed to explore.

Such a statement serves to contextualise Emma's broader purpose in teaching lessons like this. The lesson itself proceeded to emphasise the problematic nature of surveillance in a society apparently obsessed with safety / security on the one hand, and individual privacy on the other, simultaneously placing such concerns in a broader cultural and political context

through the agency of a telling quotation from ‘1984’: ‘Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past’. Small group discussions centred on understanding this formulation, ascertaining its relevance, and relating its message to language (having been briefly introduced to the Orwellian concept of ‘Newspeak’) and the study of history. The lesson concluded with each group briefly presenting a distillation of their thoughts, duly recorded as the basis for subsequent exploration in future lessons. A fine, engaging and provocative lesson, in my view, and Emma herself was pleased with the ways it went. Ensuing reflective discussion centred on whether and, if so, how CL manifested itself through the teaching and learning experienced. Emma observed, ‘I’m pleased with the lesson in that it got pupils really thinking critically about their lives and the language around them. I don’t know where the boundary lies between a good English lesson, though, and a more explicit critical literacy. I guess I’m working towards understanding this relationship’. I agree wholeheartedly, and in a sense this paper represents, hopefully, a part of this process of understanding. At the same time, though, it doesn’t necessarily matter too much where the boundary lies – if indeed there is one; the point is that with thoughtful ingenuity and conscious reflection by the teacher, relatively standard English curricular fare may inspire and develop genuine criticality. After all, as McCallum writes, ‘If English is to play its own small role in the quest for a fuller humanity, then the least it can do is offer students full, meaningful access to the material of study’ (McCallum 2012: 117).

An immediately topical news story informed my second example of CL in practice: the Boston bombing of April 2013 and its aftermath. At the time of the lesson, a few days after the event, the press and news media abounded in images and stories centring on what had happened and how, and denunciations of the Tsarnaev brothers, principal suspects, were ubiquitous. Often, images were accompanied by damning prose invective about the two young men in question. In such circumstances, the student teacher I worked with chose to develop another fundamental bastion of English pedagogy – empathetic discussion and writing – through a CL lens. This young teacher, here named as Michael, had early in the course expressed enthusiasm for the philosophies of CL, and was immediately keen to respond to my request for participants. Reflecting on the project, he wrote:

Critical literacy is of the utmost importance if this generation is to rise to the challenges of the 21st century. The lines separating the mass media, government policy and

education have become increasingly blurred, and while the social aspect of popular culture has been utilised in positive ways to produce democratic systems of government, as in the recent Arab Spring, it is clear that young people in the West are, in general, becoming more passive and isolated from politics. This could perhaps be attributed to an education system that rarely encourages critical literacy, especially of the subversive kind, and to a culture which promotes universal conformity and spectatorship. The challenge for English teachers is to ensure that their subject engages with modern culture, encourages free critical thought and, most importantly, inspires action.

As anticipated, Michael took the opportunity, with a lively Year 9 group in a comprehensive school in North Teesside, to practise what he preached. The lesson in question had as its ultimate focus a piece of creative writing, scaffolded by discussion and careful, resourceful preparation. Interestingly, Michael's teaching too used visual literacy powerfully, asking pupils to respond to two displayed photographs of Tamarian and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev with an open mind. Dzhokhar's visage particularly conveys a strikingly innocent impression, and the dichotomy between this appearance and the violence of the crime he was suspected of perpetrating gave rise to heated discussion, into which Michael introduced contextual factors suggesting (in his words) that, 'society needs to understand the conditions that give rise to terrorist acts, not just condemn them outright – even while denouncing violence we need to understand at the same time'. Certainly this is a controversial challenge, but one Michael was determined to meet. The discussions and reactions to the images were followed by writing tasks, prepared in small groups and subsequently written up individually. The three tasks were, firstly, 'Imagine you are the father of the suspected bombers, realising that your sons are terrorists now being hunted down. How do you feel? What memories of your sons do you recall? What do you make of the media coverage?'; secondly, 'Imagine you are the hunted younger brother; how do you feel now about your responsibilities and the acts you have accused of?'; finally, 'Imagine you are a policeman approaching the suspects' hiding place; what are your thoughts and fears? How does it feel to hunt another man?'. In the pre-lesson discussion, I challenged Michael as to how such empathetic assignments could lead to any sort of enhanced criticality, except on a very superficial level, but he felt it was a risk worth taking, especially as he had prepared the ground carefully. I still have some reservations, although the quality of group discussions, particularly with regard to a broader understanding of the parts people play in violent incidents, developed impressively as the lesson unfolded.

And the quality of some of the pupils' writing that arose from the lesson speaks for itself, as in this example (the second of the tasks set):

Memories flooded back of my homeland and the happy peaceful life we used to live as a family. Why had all this been destroyed? Who was to blame? Have I managed to do anything to make things better again, or just worse? I can hear heavy footsteps approaching and the sound of dogs. My time is nearly up...

Any conclusions from this project must remain tentative, if suggestive of possibilities for further development. I acknowledge with Gill and Thomson that 'Understanding is always partial, description-dependent and, in this sense, subjective' (Gill and Thomson 2012: 34). Partly, I am interested here in demonstrating (not least to members of ITE groups I work with) that CL teaching and learning may, potentially at least, be powerfully embedded in good English teaching. In part too I feel it appropriate to point out that CL, whilst remaining an ideal, is also achievable in small measures, even when imperfect. Again, Morgan is helpful in this context:

'If critical literacy, as a discourse, does not aspire to realise an ideal state (of being and society) but recognises that it is already a particular form of *social practice*, than this what we as critical literacy teachers aspire to for ourselves and our students: to practise that practice within specific social contexts and relationships located in time and space. It will inevitably be an impure practice, shot through with contradictions and tensions, contingencies, self-sabotage and resistances from within and from other discourses, as well as by modest if uncertain changes in our students and ourselves' (Morgan 1997: 28).

Possibly, it requires a shifting of perspective to envisage how CL may be meaningfully taught within an English curriculum dedicated – officially at least – towards quite different and conflicting aims. It may be that we need to rediscover some of the radical roots of English pedagogy in order to achieve this reconceptualisation: in effect, a creative synthesis between essentially Romantic traditions of English teaching, and the radical tenets of CL, which I have explored in more detail elsewhere (Stevens and McGuinn 2004; Stevens 2011 and 2012). This is not simply an intellectual exercise: by viewing English pedagogy through an

alternative lens in this way, we may be enabled to develop from foundations we never fully realised existed, and in directions hitherto unforeseen. That, in any case, is my hope.

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