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Why can't students read critically?

Independence in critical reading: An instructional strategy

by John E. Readence

and

R. Scott Baldwin

A question which typically mystifies classroom teachers is why students, even after thorough instruction in critical reading, are unable to read critically. This question becomes even more mystifying because, as a rule, students are capable of critical thinking as witnessed by their interactions with their peers on topics of common interest. Perhaps the answer behind this may be how we currently approach the field of critical reading instruction.

Traditionally, instruction in critical reading has emphasized the importance of experiential background and adequate concept development in forming a base for critical thinking during reading. Equally prominent has been the emphasis on direct teaching/training of various types of information deemed essential for successful critical reading.

One heavily emphasized method is training in the recognition of propaganda techniques which can distort critical evaluation (Karlín, 1977). Along similar lines, students are taught to sense writing which is designed to persuade the reader to a particular point of view (Robinson, 1978). Students are also frequently instructed to distinguish fact from opinion or fantasy and are encouraged to suspend judgments until an author's intent is clearly understood (Robinson, 1978; Spache and Spache, 1977). Another technique for teaching critical reading involves the recognition of signal words which provide clues to the probable validity of written statements (Aulls, 1978).

As can be surmised from these brief descriptions, most of these techniques for teaching critical reading take place isolated from routine reading activities. For instance, students may be formally introduced to propaganda techniques, e.g., glittering generalities, testimonials or the band wagon approach through the use of

overt, literal level contexts. Students may then be asked to identify these forms of propaganda in prose selections of various lengths.

The problem with exercises of this type is the underlying assumption that critical thinking skills which students learn to employ during directed reading activities will transfer automatically to other reading situations, e.g., reading regular class assignments in textbooks or reading for personal reasons. Rarely, it seems, do children experience the use of covert contexts used by authors in print to disguise their intended meaning and "sway" the reader. It is one thing to expect students to recognize propaganda when the teacher has made that a specific goal for a limited number of prose selections. It may be quite another thing to expect students to sense propaganda when they are sitting at home reading a magazine or when they are reading an assigned chapter from a social studies text.

The current status of critical reading instruction appears to respond to the question, what does one do to teach students how to read critically? An equally salient, but less frequently asked question is, what does one do to create in students an attitude which allows them to read critically on a regular basis?

Recent research (Baldwin and Readence, 1978) suggests that even intelligent adults who are quite "capable" of critical thinking frequently fail to "employ" their talents for critical thinking when they are confronted with written materials which appear authoritative to them. If asked whether or not they believe everything they read, few adults or older children will answer in the affirmative; the "power of print" is far more subtle than that and operates below the reader's threshold of conscious awareness. Right justified margins, tidy print, perfect spelling and perfect grammar make a page of print "appear" flawless. In addition, the teacher's authority, the prestige of the textbook and a grading system which is most responsive to the assimilation of raw content may cause students at all educational levels to memorize facts and search out main ideas without questioning the author's intent or the validity of what is being said.

The present authors are convinced that teachers need to assist students in becoming independent critical readers under all conditions. The teacher's primary goal in teaching critical reading should be to instill students with an intelligent attitude toward print, an attitude which will allow them to exercise their talents for critical thinking even in the face of teacher authority, textbook prestige and the commanding appearance of published materials.

Teachers can accomplish this task by using an instructional strategy which demonstrates to students how to evaluate and make decisions concerning the validity and importance of statements in daily reading assignments. However, prerequisite to any instructional strategy teachers might employ, is the creation of the proper instructional atmosphere for that to be undertaken. Teachers must communicate to students that they have the "right to be wrong" and the "right to be actively involved" in their reading. Once students realize that it is permissible to take risks as they interact with print or with the teacher, that they have a freedom to respond in the classroom without fear of reprisal, or any form of negative reinforcement, by the teacher, and that it is permitted to disagree with an author or with the teacher, the necessary climate has been established to begin instruction in critical reading.

Some variation of the following four-step strategy is recommended. Materials to be used for instruction could include many content area textbooks, e.g, English, social studies or something as simple as the daily newspaper.

1. **Self-monitoring questions.** Teach students that they should constantly monitor their own reading behavior by asking themselves certain questions pertinent to the reading task asked of them. Such questions would include: a) Do I understand what I am to do in reading this material? b) Is there anything I must do before I begin to read this material? c) What do I already know that will help me in reading this material?
2. **Evaluation and critique.** Ask students to ascertain the author's point of view and opinions and have them record what **they** think are the important ideas contained in the reading material. At this point it should be communicated to students that they are not supposed to second-guess the teacher; rather, they are to evaluate the author's ideas in juxtaposition to their own ideas and beliefs. The important thing is to stress that students should react to what the **author** has to say.
3. **Summarize.** When the previous step has been completed, the teacher should summarize in writing the student responses. It is recommended that the chalkboard or a transparency be used so students may view the composite as the final step of the strategy is undertaken.
4. **Comparison and discussion.** Teachers should now compare their evaluation/responses of the material with that of the students. Teachers should justify their positions and richly reinforce all legitimate criticisms made by students. Teachers should be

careful to praise the process rather than the product of critical reading. Merely rewarding those student perceptions which agree with their own viewpoint is a self-defeating exercise. Central to the successful implementation of this strategy is for students to witness that their perceptions and criticisms have merit even if they may contradict teachers' beliefs.

Techniques which tell students how to read critically should be combined with techniques which let them know that critical reading is not an ephemeral classroom task. Rather, students will understand that they should be constantly monitoring their reading. If this can be accomplished, students at all educational levels will stand a better chance of becoming something more than passive recipients of written language.

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