

CHAPTER 2

Why We Need Critical Literacy

Dynamic Texts and Identity Formation

In this chapter we unpack two of the most compelling aspects of literacy and culture: the shifting role of texts in today's marketplaces and how we interact with texts to form our identities. We begin with a vignette that illustrates the dynamic nature of contemporary texts and their role in students' various in- and out-of-school identities. The proliferation of texts available on the Internet and other multimedia displays suggests an increasing need for critical literacy practices.

It is about 4:30 on Wednesday afternoon, and ninth graders Samantha and Jordyn are hanging out after school at Jordyn's house, enjoying time away from the watchful eyes of their parents and teachers. They are in Jordyn's room and have been surfing the Net without any particular purpose. They spend a few minutes IMing¹ other friends who are similarly spending time after school. Then they log on to the Web site of a popular teen magazine for girls, *Young Miss*.² As the Web site loads, Samantha closes several pop-up windows that contain advertisements for the magazine, cosmetics, and clothing lines. She chooses to leave open a pop-up window for clothes from Abercrombie & Fitch, one of the girls' favorite stores. They browse at the online special for a few minutes and then return to the *Young Miss* Web site.

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Samantha: Hey, look! They have a new quiz online today. It will tell you if you are more of a Britney [Spears], a Christina [Aguilera], or a Mandy [Moore]. Do you want to take it?

Jordyn: Nah, you go ahead.

Samantha: OK, let's see here.

As Samantha navigates her way through each of the four screens that asks her a series of multiple-choice questions, she and Jordyn vacillate between taking the questions seriously and poking fun at the quiz.

Samantha: OK, next question. On a first date, would you rather (a) have a nice dinner with your parents and potential boyfriend—yeah, right! (b) sneak out after your parents have gone to bed to go clubbing, or (c) both (a) and (b).

Jordyn: OK, so all the A's are Britney answers and the B's are Christina?

Samantha: I'm not sure. I think the A's are Mandy, like all prissy and Goody Two-shoes. The B's are Christina, like right to the point, slutty kind of . . .

Jordyn: [interrupting] Yeah, that's it!

Samantha: And the C's are Britney. All sweetness and innocence outside but a little nasty on the inside.

Jordyn: OK, so what's your score?

Samantha: I scored 25 on the Britney—can you believe that?!

Jordyn: [laughing] Oh, yeah, that's you, totally. They nailed you!

While Samantha's and Jordyn's teachers and parents might dismiss their after-school Web surfing as little more than killing time, the girls have actually engaged in a fairly sophisticated series of literacy practices. Amid these events are congruent and overlapping issues of expanded definitions of text, wider examples of **text genres**, and active negotiation and performance of identity.

LITERACY PROFICIENCY AND NEW TEXTS: A MOVING TARGET

As we discussed in Chapter 1, one of the key reasons why critical literacy should occupy a central position in literacy education is the overwhelming nature and

amount of text in today's world. Without the ability to negotiate and critically examine multiple forms of text, a "proficient" reader might only be proficient enough to superficially understand these **texts**. Different from reading between the lines, reading inferentially, or the oft-touted "higher-order thinking skills," critical literacy demands reading texts and filtering them for positionalities, agendas, and purposes. In such explorations of text, we should expect to hear dissenting opinions, many plausible interpretations, and discussions of the larger social, historical, cultural, and political contexts. For an example of such a critical discussion, review the textbook-based critical literacy approach provided in Chapter 1. Schooling has tended, in its use of textbooks and other print-based texts, to privilege superficial, factual-level comprehension while leaving questions of power and representation unexplored.

Typically, texts that are sanctioned in schools and used to promote students' literacy levels are fairly similar in format and presentation. They are printed on paper and follow linear formats, with either a fiction sequence of plot development or a nonfiction organization of facts and details. In both of these types of text, explicit text genres, or identifiable patterns of text, can be labeled. In fact, identification of text genres such as compare/contrast, main idea/detail, and the five-act play has been taught explicitly to students since the 1980s as part of **content area literacy** and secondary English curricula (e.g., Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 2004). While these types of activities are valuable, they are not sufficient in being literate with **digitally mediated texts**, which might well be organized nonlinearly. In addition, the kinds of texts we now encounter in an information age, both through sheer volume and varying formats, demand sharper uses of critical lenses. In fact, considering recent research on students' efforts to navigate digital texts of various forms on the Internet, McNabb (2006), studying middle-level students' Internet needs, noted: "Reading hyper-text is a different experience than reading linear print" (p. 20). In particular, navigating digital text departs dramatically from more linear-established text patterns of organization. Students must negotiate bundled masses of text through layers of links that may be idiosyncratic to the Web site's creator. More important for critical literacy, students need instruction and scaffolding in critical literacy stances precisely because Internet sites vary in authenticity, biases, and accurate information. McNabb suggested: "Many of today's middle-level classrooms were designed to prepare students with the literacy skills needed in nonnetworked cultures of the 20th century" (p. 122).

The texts that Samantha and Jordyn negotiated in the few minutes of their surfing hardly fit within the typical texts found in schools, particularly economically disadvantaged schools. Instead of using paper, Samantha and Jordyn solely negotiated electronic texts, including words, moving and still images, and sounds. They identified several different text genres, including the pop-up

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advertisements and the format and sequence of an online quiz to determine personality. They moved deftly between texts, breaking linear progression of activity, and adequately sifting through dynamic organization of the Web site's links, features, and associated texts. They certainly were reading, but it would not look similar to the kind of reading that they might do sitting with a single textbook.

The essence of any definition of literacy is meaning. We read, write, talk, and listen in order to understand and to be understood, in myriad ways. While this focus on the processes and skills involved in deriving and projecting meaning through text has remained constant, the contexts and tasks of literacy have morphed, expanded, and proliferated rapidly recently. In addition to the printed and oral word, images are intertwined with text, in relentless fashion. Hypertext, e-books, pop-up boxes, streaming video, instant messaging, cell phones, smart phones that mimic larger devices like laptop computers, digital music devices, pagers, digital video recorders, personal desk assistants (PDAs), and video games are but a few of the tools that have left their mark on shifting and burgeoning definitions of text.

Numerous Web sites, including Myspace.com, Facebook.com, as well as popular reality television shows like *Survivor*, *Lost*, and *Real World TV*, offer sites for critique and are in marked contrast to more traditional forms of narrative. Each of these sites positions people in a fashion open to critique around gender, ethnic, and socioeconomic issues, to mention a few. Thus, all forms of text, including digital, film, and television productions, can be powerful sites for the practice of critical literacy.

In addition to the processes and skills of literacy, we must now also think about practices, that is to say, what the particular literacy event is and how the parameters and context of that event play a role in how we use literacy skills and processes to decode, comprehend, and critique texts (Gee, 1996; McNabb, 2006). To be literate means being able to engage in a range of literacy practices, drawing upon different sets of skills and processes suited to those particular practices.

The consideration of literacy practices helps to underscore the need to be a critical reader. For example, if you approached reading your daily mail with the same detail and attention that you use following directions to hook up your new computer, you would quickly find yourself obeying advertisements demanding immediate responses to take advantage of low-interest mortgage rates. Being able to negotiate contexts that involve digital literacies and tools such as computers, PDAs, smartphones, and interactive television is not a simple matter of following a linear progression of decoding and factual comprehension skills. Rather, the need to be a critical reader of the bombardment of text, in all its various and dynamic forms, is at an unprecedented high. Samantha and Jordyn

deftly screened and dismissed the various pop-up advertisements screaming for their attention. They critically chose to pay attention to one that resonated with their preferences and deleted the rest. Furthermore, Samantha and Jordyn were able to shuttle between mocking the text genre and predictability of the online quiz and taking up certain aspects that defined them in certain ways as young American girls. Their textual practice reflects a complex weaving of purpose, tone, and readers' approach.

However, at the same time, Samantha and Jordyn are clearly regular visitors of the teen magazine's Web site. In what ways do their regular visits to this Web site reinforce media-sanctioned ideas that the optimal image of a female teenager is skinny, Caucasian, and endlessly happy? To what extent are the regular visits to the Abercrombie & Fitch Web site reinforcing overly thin ideals of the human body, exposing these young girls to a site critiqued for its hypersexuality and latent racism (Moje & Van Helden, 2004)?

These are complicated questions, and our exploration of them is not without ethical considerations of impinging on the fandom pleasure that Samantha and Jordyn gain from them and also not assuming Samantha and Jordyn to be guileless innocents, capable of facile following. However, what we can tell from this brief scenario is that text, meaning, and context are at the heart of Samantha's and Jordyn's literacy events. Clearly, this is not the type of literacy event we would likely encounter in a school setting. In that sense, literacies, how we interact with text, are plural. At times, using the dominant discourse found in mainstream news shows is appropriate, whereas other situations would call for completely different patterns of interaction and content. How we learn to modify our literacy skills and processes to the practice at hand is through engaging in a variety of literacy practices. Samantha and Jordyn are arguably multiliterate readers, able to demonstrate proficiency in linear and nonlinear literacy practices, but these proficiencies have been developed through access to a variety of literacy practices. The demands of a global networked culture far exceed the old literacies and expectations for reading and comprehending static texts (McNabb, 2006). Critical literacy is imperative, but clearly, access to advanced technology influences students' experience and success with deconstructing non-networked and nontraditional text forms. Samantha and Jordyn are fortunate to have access to digitally mediated literacies, but the same cannot be said for all the students in the United States (McNabb, 2006). Not being able to negotiate heightened and diverse literacies will certainly prevent our students from accessing a full array of life choices.

Schools must begin to reflect expanded definitions of both text and literacies to more closely reflect the multiple literacies used in contexts outside of classrooms. Currently, most of our classrooms more strongly reflect the technology and texts of the 1950s rather than contemporary texts that are hybridized

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across format and purpose. Furthermore, a few recent studies (Hagood, 2002; Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking, 2002; McNabb, 2006) indicate that the ways in which we interact with printed texts (e.g., the reading and writing processes as traditionally taught as a sequence of a handful of steps) are not the same or even transferable to those literacy practices with digitally mediated texts.

Transforming the very texts we use in schools is a first step to reconsidering the processes, skills, and practices that fall under the large umbrellas of reading and literacy. By increasing the types, formats, and text genres included in schools, we will also be changing and expanding the textual practices traditionally sanctioned in school spaces. Increasing the amount and type of texts is a companion characteristic to engaging students in critical literacy. While critique can be engaged with a single text, being a text critic can also be enacted through the comparison and juxtaposition of differing texts. In keeping with a reconsideration of the skills and processes demanded in today's information age, a reconceptualization of what kinds of texts should be included is similarly timely and relevant. Just as the landscape of texts has changed, so too must our work in it.

Now that we have laid the foundation for understanding how the nature, format, amount, and genre of texts and textual practices have changed and require a more critical approach to literacy, we turn our attention to theoretical reasons why critical literacy is crucial. In addition to our contextual need to be skilled readers and writers, critical literacy also arises from the nature of texts as attention seekers and tools of **identity formation**. In the next section of this chapter, we raise still more complex issues of how texts interact with our attention and the intricate ways that identity construction is wrapped up in texts and literacy practices.

TEXTS, ATTENTION, AND IDENTITY?

You are sitting in the airport terminal, waiting to board your flight and people watching as the minutes tick by. As you glance around the terminal, you notice one middle-aged woman glancing at the tourist products displayed, wearing a sweatshirt saying, "Grandmas rule." A young man walks by swiftly in his Ralph Lauren suit, talking into the earpiece of his Sprint cell phone while checking his Palm pilot PDA for his itinerary that day. A teenaged girl ambles by, listening to her iPod and adjusting her FUBU sweatshirt. All of these people have chosen particular items of clothing that work as textual markers of who they are. No doubt, just as the middle-aged woman was browsing through the coffee cups that used southwestern art to loudly proclaim "San Antonio!," they all, as you have, chosen brands, clothing, and other texts that have first

captured their attention and reflected their senses of self. Simply put, they have chosen certain attention-garnering texts that resonate with their identities.

We argue that this understanding of information, text, and attention should be at the forefront of our thinking and pedagogical planning for literacy, along with a strong foundation in understanding contemporary identity theories. Critical literacy becomes crucial in contemporary culture, in part, because of the “[m]edia culture of spectacle that has normalized the notion that entertainment is news and news is entertainment” (Goodman, 2003, p. 6). In essence, a multitude of “texts,” many of them visual in nature and grappling for our attention via flashy colors and movement, cry out for **deconstruction** and critique. In teaching students the art of deconstruction, we open the world to critique and thoughtful examination. “Deconstruction turns a text against itself, multiplying its meanings” (Lynn, 2001, p. 97). But why, given the rapid pace of our lives and those of our students, should we take the time to slow down and notice both the form and function of the texts that enter our lives?

THE TRANSFORMATION OF TEXTS AND READERS’ ATTENTION

A great deal of attention has been devoted to compelling us to prepare students for the information age and today’s knowledge-based economy, but, as educators, we need to better understand and conceptualize how this information age uses texts. A useful framework for our consideration is Goldhaber’s notion of an **attention economy** (as cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2002, p. 1). Critical theorists Lankshear and Knobel have applied this sociological concept to digitally mediated literacies, and it is useful here as a way of understanding how texts work and to what purposes in an information age. Within this theory, we are, as consumers and potential buyers, first bombarded by images that seek to gain, keep, and direct our attention to particular purchases, often through digitally mediated modes and effects. To get us to purchase a good, service, or commodity, advertisers, companies, and even public agencies use print and digital texts to gain our attention. While this has arguably been the case for the duration of advertising, what makes it an economic system is the volume of texts competing with each other to first gain this attention.

While we realize we are bombarded with information via conventional texts, the Internet, media saturation, billboards, electronic billboards, and a host of other older communications means (e.g., skywriting and small planes towing banners), these media are strangely ignored in policy conversations about what counts as literacy proficiencies. Some thinkers believe this is a huge gap in our

literacy curriculum and pedagogy. Estimates suggest that we and our students spend somewhere in the vicinity of 60% of our waking hours consuming media in some form (Lankshear & Knobel, 2002). Television, film, recordings, and the Internet rank at the top of this consumption list, but we can be sure that newer media yet to hit the scene will be vying for our attention as well. The media-driven charisma of star power and their fans (often our students) consumes a significant portion of the information economy and celebrity-conscious culture. While information is in large supply, human attention, and its associated monetary resources, is limited. Thus, an endless array of display devices, including computerized jackets with digitized images and messages, attention-grabbing pop art, outrageous Super Bowl media spots, and even journalism that uses fear headlines, jar us into paying attention to their messages.

The attention economy is fueled by attempts at ever-greater originality and provocation in design and display of texts and images (Lankshear & Knobel, 2002). Privacy is often replaced in this fluid, Internet, and media-based medium with identities forged through sharing one's thoughts and experiences. Sharing minicam video images, voice recordings, blogs, interviews, podcasts, and autobiographical information is now the norm, offering even the most mundane individuals a forum for their ideas via chat rooms and interest groups. While the detailed debates about a textually mediated celebrity culture are outside the scope of this book, we bring up these images to show the dissonance between contemporary literacy policies and practices and the textual practices found in other social spaces. While we are not necessarily advocating that reality shows become the new fad in curriculum design, we are suggesting that educational policy and practice would do well to consider the skills, process, and practices needed by our students to mediate current and future lifeworlds.

With rare exceptions (e.g., Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Goodman, 2003; Kist, 2005; Stevens, 2001), curriculum planning in the United States has remained firmly rooted in an older era of traditional texts, low-level comprehension questions, and narrow assessments. Not surprisingly, the fast-moving worlds of business and advertising have devoted significant resources to designing and purchasing media spots that acknowledge consumers' limited economies of attention.

Clothing ads aimed at middle-class, suburban teens typically feature rail-thin males and females with blond hair. These images weigh in peoples' views of acceptable and unacceptable identities. Staying in the flow in a consumer society means having the right clothes and looking the part that goes with the clothes. In essence, ads are texts, constructed and aimed specifically at a particular demographic. They work in conjunction with other texts to provide us with options for performing ourselves, our identities. In this way, texts act as constitutive forces, creating and enacting possibilities for ways of being, doing, and

acting. Of course, the problem with solely relying upon and/or critically taking up such texts is that there are capitalist interests behind these texts, and their goal is profit, not personal fulfillment, **agency**, or social justice. As an alternative to passive consumption of consumer-driven texts, students in some high school settings have undertaken the development of video documentaries and other media dealing with local issues and problems (Goodman, 2003; Kist, 2005). Topics center on critical community issues such as gun violence and gang affiliation. After-school programs offer space for innovative curricular efforts where creativity is less restricted. The audiences for this media-based student work moves beyond the narrower realm of the school site to include community leaders in positions where they can impact social change. In all cases, reading the world through the various forms of texts that students encounter becomes the launching pad for creative deconstruction and critique by students using videos, podcasts, music, and a host of other media.

Texts can and should be critically evaluated based on how they envision and position people in various roles, how we use them to construct aspects of our identity. Just as these advertisements work to persuade us to buy the sharpest and most compact high-definition television or sleekest refrigerator with brushed steel doors, they are constructing a certain kind of person, with a certain way of being, doing, and acting. In short, these texts, along with the other less overt but still commodified spaces of print-based texts, take up dialectic positions as we mediate our senses of ourselves, our identities. Within a world that is increasingly driven by corporations and economically based interests, the use of texts persuades us to buy but also offer potential discourses, or ways of being ourselves.

Given that all of us are potential consumers to be swayed by highly creative, shocking, and powerful media messages designed to get our attention, and ultimately to persuade us to purchase products, the need for critical literacy could not be more timely. Helping students develop well-honed critical filters to evaluate how they are being positioned by text messages and, equally important, how to design their own text messages is markedly absent from our systemic discussions of curriculum standards and assessments. In essence, this leaves schools and classrooms, particularly public schools in lower socioeconomic areas, in the role of creaking institutions badly out of sync with the information flow of new texts, transmitted globally and without conventional regard to the time and space constraints of traditional print-based texts.

Global markets, global manufacturers and purveyors of knowledge, and global consumers, already either horizontal in shape or lacking any physical shape at all, have arrived as new participants, stirring like a rising mist on a summer's morning round the soaring trunks of the trees in

an old wood. They move inexorably across global space and time without respect to physical geography, political frontiers, or night and day. (Langhorne, 2001, p. 39)

Within the world of Web-based design, songs, icons, and catch statements compete to grab viewers' limited attention (Lankshear & Knobel, 2002). Arguably, the United States, with its overabundance of commercial space, both literal and figurative, may well offer more commercially based texts vying for consumers' attention than many other countries in the world. For example, the familiar Nike Swoosh works because of its simplicity and eye-catching design, along with numerous star performer associations like Tiger Woods. The use of virtually any surface to grab a potential customer's attention has become a commonplace advertising strategy. For example, if you purchase a cup of coffee in a coffee shop, you are likely to have a coffee sleeve advertising high-speed Internet connections in bright, eye-catching colors. It is no accident that large phone companies and cable television firms would view the clientele of suburban coffee shops as potential customers, given their willingness to plunk down something in the vicinity of \$5 for a cup of coffee and milk. However, we tend to take these attention-grabbing devices for granted, rarely considering them "texts" for critical literacy discussions. If we are truly interested in developing an informed, aware, and critical citizenry, the variety of texts vying for our attention needs to become part of our curriculum design.

For example, having students collect attention-grabbing icons, ads, and multimedia forms of text from their neighborhood surroundings is one way to start developing their critical literacy. Although texts of all varieties need to be framed as representations (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of overemphasis on popular culture texts), tapping into texts of high interest may yield space for students to share their already existing critical literacy practices.

In addition, engaging students in creating their own digital and print-based designs that recognize how texts work to gain and maximize the attention of particular audiences moves the students into a high-level **metacognitive awareness** of how this form of text functions in the information age (Luke & Elkins, 1998). In fact, while it may seem at first that raising awarenesses of the potential impact of texts would be a disheartening venture, this is also what brings about agency.

In Chapter 4, we introduce various snapshots of classroom-based critical literacy practices aimed at engaging students at various levels in becoming conscious participants in critical literacy. Before moving to specific strategies, we want to continue situating our understandings of texts, the various elements of critical literacy, and one of the most important elements: the interaction between texts and identity formation.

TEXTS AS TOOLS OF IDENTITY FORMATION

In the past, through the fields of psychology and psychiatry, we have understood and theorized identity as basically internally contained. When peoples' personalities are discussed, they are often discussed in a way that connotes a static or constant feature to their personhood. For example, if we describe a man as being bossy, commanding, or statuesque, we don't often pause to think about how those features might only be performed and seem salient in relation to a particular context, with other participants, and interacting with particular kinds of texts.

Contemporary definitions of identity, however, reject unitary, simplistic notions of a static, autonomous self. Rather, our senses of identity contain two important aspects of fluidity. One, we shift how we act and behave from context to context. As we've mentioned, part and parcel of being a critical reader is being able to recognize the various discourses, or ways of being, doing, and acting (Gee, 1996) that are communicated via texts. Similarly and relationally, we shift our linguistic registers, behaviors, and tones when we move from context to context. Two, we use texts and textual markers as key ways of constructing and communicating our identities, particularly in relation to others. In the opening scenario, differing identities were suggested by the grandmother, the young businessman, and the teenager, all through use of textual markers.

We can think of identity as fluid and shifting based on contextual feedback and individual interpretation. That is, how we understand ourselves is, in large part, informed by where we find ourselves, with whom, and engaged in what practices. This is an important aspect of the classroom that often gets reduced to faculty room discussions of children and young adults from stereotypical stances. As a social context, the classroom is marked by participants interacting with each other, performing their senses of selves, and interpreting others' actions and practices. As we read texts together, we are engaged in **socially situated literacy practice**, with implications of identity construction and power. For example, in an in-depth ethnography of a fifth- and sixth-grade classroom, Lewis (2001) found that the teacher had a marked tendency to favor girls over boys in reader response discussions. The boys in class dealt with this inequity by acting out and viewing the reading discussions as manifestations of feminine literacy practice.

Texts, in a critical literacy-based classroom, become sites for explicit conversations that take into account our shifting identities and make students aware of potential imbalances in agency and voice. That is, who gets to speak and control the flow of discussion is problematic and worthy of consideration just as the content of what students say in a literature circle of nonfiction text discussion is also worthy of careful consideration. In this way, the participants in this

classroom would discuss not only the content of the text but also how the text does its work, what language choices are made and why. This is what is known as **metalinguage**, or language about language. These conversations about meta-language and discourse are crucial to aiding students to critically use texts as mediational tools—interactional tactics between themselves and the world around them.

One of the best ways to first develop this critical literacy stance and, ultimately, to infuse this perspective in your classroom is to adopt the practice of questioning texts in your own reading. Thus, when you pick up a magazine or newspaper, or watch television, consciously give some thought to who is not represented in these texts. In addition, who has voice and agency and who is silenced by this presentation? This is a crucial foundation for productive, critical citizenship in a democracy (Cherland & Harper, 2007; Harper & Bean, 2006).

Both texts and the classroom social contexts in which they are discussed become sites for critical literacy. Texts, from this viewpoint, are “cultural tools for establishing belongingness, identity, personhood, and ways of knowing” (Moje, Dillon, & O’Brien, 2000, p. 167). Figures in nonfiction accounts of history, as well as characters in novels, are depicted and positioned based on perceived identity, gender, ethnicity, and culture. “When fiction and non-fiction texts are carefully considered from a critical literacy perspective, silenced voices and marginalized groups come into sharper focus” (Stevens & Bean, 2003).

Multicultural literature offers a particularly powerful vehicle for incorporating critical literacy practices (Bean & Moni, 2003; Harper & Bean, 2006). For example, issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice feature heavily in young adult and children’s literature, and these works lend themselves to critical literacy questions and discussion. Award-winning young adult novels like Beverly Naidoo’s (2000), *The Other Side of Truth*, about Sade and her family’s exile from war-torn Nigeria to London deals with racism and social justice issues. Critical literacy questions concerning how Sade as a Nigerian is positioned in London go to the heart of understanding racist posturing. In addition, the novel deals with political coups, persecution of free speech, and a host of other issues. Numerous other young adult novels and children’s literature selections can be found at the American Library Association Web site, as well as award-winning works listed each year by the International Reading Association at its Web site, along with resources through the National Council of Teachers of English and other organizations. Commercial bookstore sites and Amazon.com offer searchable collections of young adult and children’s literature.

Activity: Take a look at Sharon Flake’s (2001) award-winning young adult novel, *Money Hungry*.

The novel chronicles Raspberry, the main character's entrepreneurial spirit, driven largely by her desire to keep herself and her mother from becoming homeless. To do so, Raspberry sells items at school and, unbeknownst to her mom, amasses a substantial stash of cash in her bedroom. But the larger problem is her side business in school, which detracts from her work and, in one instance, results in students becoming ill after buying and eating old M&M's Raspberry sells to them. She gets into constant trouble with the school administration and her mom, but she is often operating out of fear after a bout of living on the street in an old car.

- How does the main character, Raspberry, construct her in-school identity in her middle school?
- How does the school principal position Raspberry when he meets with her?
- What systemic elements of society contribute to Raspberry's predicament?

TEXTS: MEDIATING IDENTITY AND CULTURE

When someone describes you as a soccer mom, gourmet cook, guitar player, artist, member of Generation X, or jogger, they have captured one tiny element of your identity. Similarly, if we describe a student as motivated, achievement oriented, lazy, or irresponsible, we have produced a limited, **essentialist label** that misses the complexity of any person's identity. In most contemporary discussions of identity, the social context and related discourse, coupled with an individual's subjective interpretation of others' language and actions, lead to a particular conception of the self within various contexts (Lewis, 2001). For example, a beginning surfer paddling out to Waikiki for the first time is potentially subject to ridicule if he or she inadvertently paddles in the way of an experienced surfer's ride on a wave. The experienced surfer, through language and gestures, positions the neophyte as an outsider, unworthy of membership in the advanced level of this sport. Back on the beach, our surfer is an accomplished symphonic musician, playing the cello in the local Honolulu Symphony, where being a hotshot surfer doesn't count. Thus, identity is intertwined with culture and the discourse of people performing in that culture. Identity from this standpoint is fluid and often contradictory (Lewis, 2001). Figure 2.1 displays the elements of identity as a dynamic process, heavily influenced by the social context and cultural dimensions of this context.

The culture of particular groups like surfers and symphonic musicians guides discourse in such a way that individuals come to regard themselves as insiders, outsiders, or actors temporarily getting by in an uncomfortable setting.

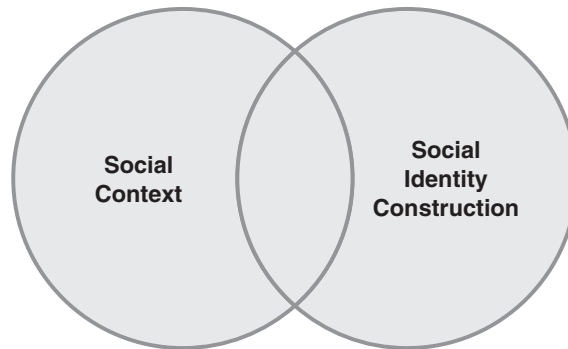


Figure 2.1 Identity as a Dynamic Process

When we consider identities to be social constructions, and therefore always open for change and conflict depending on the social interaction we find ourselves in, we open possibilities for rethinking the labels we so easily use to identify students. (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 230)

In a similar fashion, Lewis (2001) defined culture as “a dynamic system within which social relations and identities are continuously negotiated and power is asymmetrical” (p. 12).

If the readings students encounter in the culture of the classroom are divorced from their experiences and interests, literacy becomes a school exercise to endure or resist. For example, Broughton and Fairbanks (2002) observed and interviewed Jessica, a sixth-grade Latina student in Texas. The classroom curriculum was heavily weighted toward passing the high-stakes state test in literacy. Jessica did not see any relationship between her journal writing and Internet reading at home and school learning. She was often bored in class and daydreamed to survive. The inclusion of multicultural literature that connected with Jessica’s life would have enlivened her school experiences and, perhaps, caused her to forge a deeper connection with the classroom. Instead, she survived by feigning attention in sustained silent reading and making sure she appeared to the teacher to be “doing school” appropriately.

Viewing identity as a process rather than a unified category helps us look more closely at social practices in the classroom we often overlook (McCarthy, 2002). For example, small group and literature circle discussions are social contexts where discussions of texts are negotiated based upon gender and social power issues. This is an important element to consider, as we often assume that if we include high-interest books in a classroom, all will be well. Yet social context and asymmetrical power relations will ultimately determine how these

books are discussed and how students regard themselves in this process. In case studies of elementary students' responses to classroom texts, particularly highly structured kits and leveled texts, there is compelling evidence that students define themselves as readers in relation to these materials. For example, McCarthy found that students in color-coded programs often aligned their view of their reading identity with the predetermined categories or colors of the reading series they were using. The danger here is that students will opt for a narrow, testable level of literacy. As we mentioned earlier, in a global, fast-track society, reading at the most mundane, minimal level simply is not good enough. From an identity construction and critical literacy standpoint, classroom discussions should span both meanings that are specific to the text as well as meanings that go to the heart of critical literacy. Thus, questions of who has power and voice, how people or characters are positioned, and what gaps and silences exist in the text should be explored.

To summarize this section, the following are key elements of identity construction:

- Social context
- Individual interpretation of where one stands in a social context
- Dynamic construction
- Nonessentialist nature

The most promising element of both textual interaction and identity construction is its dynamic nature, offering the hope of agency, self-realization, and change. By developing an understanding of contemporary views of identity construction, you can modify your curriculum to accommodate the need for critical literacy, thereby creating for your students a discursive space where they can consciously use texts to mediate the world and their senses of self.

Am I “Doing” Critical Literacy?

As with any type of pedagogical practice that is named and studied, much debate exists about what “counts” as critical literacy. This type of debate is actually quite productive. Talking about our practices, the benefits, the drawbacks, including the unexpected, helps to keep critical literacy an appropriately complicated, contextualized, and transformative practice. In other words, critical literacy is not just one type of practice with similar kinds of results. It should look and sound different, based on different contexts, participants, and practices.

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How, Then, Can I Know If I Am Engaging in Critical Literacy?

Critical literacy, as a label, can often be ascribed to literacy practices that, while valuable, don't engage students in critical stances. For example, asking students to compare two different versions of Cinderella fairy tales, although a higher-order thinking activity, does not include a critical perspective (Knobel & Healy, 1998). For that, questions about representation, benefit, and effects must come into the conversation. While static definitions are not desirable, there are some characteristics that we can point to that mark most critical literacy practices, including, but not limited to, combinations of the following:

- Approaching *all* texts as representational, including some aspects while leaving others out
- Situating a text within particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts
- Determining what "work" (results, consequences, effects) the text does with certain kinds of readers
- Juxtaposing different texts for differing representations and comparing what work each text is doing
- Engaging in contested and rigorous discussions about a text's representations
- Finding, creating, and promoting alternative textual representations

For example, if you engage students in the development of a community video or podcast documentary,

- To what extent does this form of representation question social practices (e.g., around issues of children's health and welfare, gangs, youth violence, youth opportunities)?
- How do these issues position youth as all the same, different, complex, or stereotypical?

Each of these bulleted items offers some of the ingredients of critical literacy, but as we will see in subsequent chapters, there is much more to this process.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In order to truly grasp the ideas in this chapter, it may be helpful to begin applying some of these notions of dynamic texts and identity formation to your own "reading" of various forms of texts you encounter. For example, as you watch television, explore the Internet, or read magazines you enjoy, ask

- How are various advertisements positioning you as a reader?
- Is the ad gender-specific or gender-biased in nature?
- How are various ethnic groups represented (or not represented)?
- What would change the nature of these ads if they were to be rewritten?

Discuss these findings with other teachers engaged in exploring and implementing critical literacy practices in their classrooms. In addition to texts you locate in your day-to-day environment, also look at contemporary young adult literature, particularly multicultural literature.

- How are characters constructed in terms of representations that essentialize or stereotype gender, race, and socioeconomic dimensions?
- How is the novel constructed to portray particular elements of characters and events, while leaving out others (i.e., gaps and silences)?
- Who has agency and power in the novel?
- Who lacks agency and power?

In summary, applying critical literacy practices to your own reading and moving these practices into your teaching will enable them to become familiar and offer a powerful antidote to lower-level questions.

KEY TERMS FROM THIS CHAPTER

Agency refers to students feeling like they have a voice in a classroom and their opinions and views are valued.

Attention economy is the use of print and digital texts to capture consumers' attention in order to sell products.

Content area literacy is teachers' efforts to guide students' understanding and critique of all forms of texts (print and digital) in subject areas like English, science, social studies, mathematics, art, music, and physical education.

Deconstruction is the analytical process of examining any form of text as non-neutral in terms of race, class, and gender issues, biases, hidden agendas, philosophical underpinnings, and other elements of power in discourse.

Digitally mediated texts are texts in hyperspace, on the Internet, on iPods, and on other nonlinear presentation modes that are typically more fluid than traditional static print.

Essentialist label is a narrow, often stereotypical view of a person reduced to a single term like *skater* that purports to identify and describe identity.

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Identity formation: Identity is more than some unified concept, because people have multiple identities in varying social contexts, thus challenging older, narrow definitions of identity.

Metacognitive awareness means literally thinking about thinking and being aware of how digital texts function in the information age.

Metalanguage is critical conversations with students about language in terms of what work texts accomplish through word choice, structure, and underlying elements that go beyond the content of the material.

Positionalities means looking closely at how a text “positions” a reader in terms of race, class, gender, perspective taking, and insider versus outsider perspectives (see the work on positioning theory [e.g., Harre, Lagenhove, & Berman, 1999]).

Socially situated literacy practice: All literacy events, including reading and discussing various forms of texts, are ultimately layered with power dimensions in a classroom so that some students have a presence in discussions while others are silenced due to varying social status, race, class, and gender perceptions and biases. Like a text, no social situation is neutral.

Texts are now broadly defined as cultural tools that include a host of print and digitized forms serving a multitude of purposes (e.g., instant messaging, text messaging, using a smartphone, viewing streaming video, listening to books).

Text genres are identifiable patterns of texts, including narration and expository text patterns (e.g., compare/contrast, problem-solution, chronological listing, pro-con)

In the section that follows, we list key resource texts and Web sites that should be helpful as you undertake incorporating critical literacy in your classroom.

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Dynamic Texts

Goodman, S. (2003). *Teaching youth media: A critical guide to literacy, video production, and social change*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Kist, W. (2005). *New literacies in action: Teaching and learning in multiple media*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2002). Do we have your attention? New literacies, digital technologies, and the education of adolescents. In D. E. Alvermann (Ed.), *Adolescents and literacies in a digital world* (pp. 19–39). New York: Peter Lang.

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Identity and Culture

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Resources: Podcasts and Wikipedia

Apple iTunes-Podcasts (www.apple.com/podcasting/)

Wikipedia: A constantly evolving digital encyclopedia that is free and based on the Hawaiian word *wiki wiki* for quick (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcasting)

NOTES

1. IMing: Instant messaging. An online chat feature that allows users to hold a written conversation by relaying rapid messages to each other.
2. A fictitious magazine.

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