

Renegotiating the place of fiction in libraries through critical literacy

1. Introduction

As many of the chapters in this book indicate, within information studies, critical literacy is usually linked to information literacy and is most often focused on the use of non-fiction texts. Outside libraries, however, critical literacy is commonly explored through various forms of fiction. This chapter considers how, by adopting critical literacy approaches, librarians across all sectors may find opportunities to encourage readers to read fictional texts from a critical stance, and thus find new ways to explore the different notions of 'truth' presented, as well as widening their range of reading strategies.

This chapter starts by describing how critical literacy forms part of wider literary theory and relates to other approaches to reading. It then describes approaches to promoting fiction in libraries in the light of this theory before considering the potential of critical literacy in this respect, particularly within reading groups and as part of libraries' work to promote social inclusion.

2. Reader response and critical literacy

Critical literacy can be seen as forming part of a wider literary theory that explores different ways in which texts can be read. The following section sets critical literacy within the framework of reader response theory before considering critical forms of reading more specifically.

2.1 Reader response theory

Reader response theory is a form of literary theory that focuses on the experiences of the reader and their engagement with a text. It differs from many other forms of literary theory which tend to focus on the form and content of the text, or on the role of the author. For scholars who work within a reader response framework, the reader plays an active role in shaping a text, to the extent that an active reader might be described as a co-author. Rosenblatt's (1994a; 1994b) transactional theory of reading is a key idea in reader response criticism. In this approach, a literary work is conceived not as an object, but as an experience to

be shaped by the reader, based on guidance provided by the author through the text. This guidance takes the form of 'clues' (Allen, 1998) or reading 'instructions' (Iser, 1989). Rosenblatt (1994a, 25) proposed that a 'literary work exists in a live circuit set up between reader and text'. Each person has their own reaction to a text based on personal experience and background (Iser, 1989), and so they create an overall meaning by relating the author's words to their own experiences. As Walsh (1993, 16) describes in her work on picture books, a book requires 'the creative imagination of the reader...to fill the gaps in the framework and so complete the work of the writer'. Just like authors, all readers have different experiences and knowledge which helps them to make meaning from the text. As a result, there is no single 'correct', or absolute, meaning, but a series of more or less equally valid alternative interpretations. Furthermore, for the reader, meaning is not fixed; it can change during the course of reading and can be modified after the work has been read. The relationship between reader and text is therefore not fixed, but can be thought of as a series of events.

2.2 Reading and stance

Rosenblatt (1994a) describes reading as having two stances, efferent and aesthetic, positioned at each end of a continuum. A stance defines the ways that a reader interacts with a text and it reflects their purpose for reading; their attitudes towards a particular text; their expectations of that text; and the ways in which they interact with it. An efferent stance signifies a factual perspective, while an aesthetic stance represents a more emotional focus. As they engage with a text, readers are constantly making meaning using both stances and, although they may make greater use one than the other, they often adopt different stances during the reading of a single text. Typically, an efferent stance involves a more literal reading, with the goal of extracting information. An efferent reading can be thought of as factual, analytical, and cognitive. A reader who is reading primarily from an efferent stance directs their attention outward, focusing on the knowledge they expect to take from the reading event. The reader concentrates on 'the information, the concepts, the guides to action' (Rosenblatt, 1994a, 27) that are contained within the text in order to create public, rather than private, meanings. The aesthetic stance, on the other hand, is a more emotional reading, and frequently focuses on the personal journey a reader takes during the act of reading. An aesthetic stance is characterized by a

reader focusing on their immediate participation in the reading event as he or she 'participates in the tensions, conflicts, and resolutions of the images, ideas, and scenes as they unfold' (Rosenblatt, 1994b, 1067). This involves a 'distancing from "reality"' (Rosenblatt, 1994a, 31) when the reader focuses their attention on the 'associations, feelings, attitudes and ideas' (Rosenblatt, 1994a, 25) that are aroused by the text and 'savors the qualities of the feelings, ideas, situations, scenes, personalities, and emotions that are called forth' (Rosenblatt, 2006, 1373) to create their own, private, meanings.

Texts do offer clues to the reader about what stance to adopt, for instance, it is usual to expect that a poem will be read from an aesthetic stance and a car repair manual from an efferent one. However, stance is not tied exclusively to particular kinds of texts. In other words, a reader can choose to read any given text aesthetically or efferently, or using a combination of both approaches. For example, a reader may read a novel in one way for pleasure reading and a very different way if they are being examined on the same novel as part of a literature course.

Although librarians support readers in the working with both stances, the reading of fiction materials is most usually aligned with an aesthetic stance (reading for pleasure), while an efferent stance is adopted with non-fiction resources (reading for information). Information literacy instruction has, therefore, most frequently adopted an efferent stance as readers are encouraged to focus on finding useful information to take away from a text. In much of their work with fiction texts on the other hand, librarians most often encourage an aesthetic stance in which the reader's attention is focused on the more personal or emotive elements of the text. There is, however, an alternative, the critical stance. This stance encourages the reader to respond to a text in a different way: by questioning the version of 'truth' it presents.

2.3 A critical stance

While the aesthetic stance offers an emotional perspective and the efferent stance a more factual approach, the notion of critical literacy builds on Rosenblatt's ideas and adds a third stance. This alternative, the critical stance, was introduced by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004). The critical stance differs from the other two stances because it does not accept what is printed as truth, but questions who has the power in a text; whose viewpoint is being presented;

and what the author appears to want the reader to think. This stance also considers whose voices are missing from the text and how these alternative perspectives might be represented. Reader response theory is highly significant here as, when reading from a critical stance, readers use their background knowledge and experiences to make sense of relationships between their ideas and those presented by the author of the text. In this process, they play the role of text critics (Luke and Freebody, 1999) who have the power to envision alternate ways of viewing the text. Lewison, et al (2008) describe different behaviours which can define a critical stance, for example, readers may question the everyday world around them; interrogate the relationship between language and power; analyse popular culture and media; examine how power relationships are socially constructed; or consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice.

Fundamental to a critical literacy approach is the understanding that a reader does not read texts in isolation, but develops an understanding of the cultural, ideological and sociolinguistic contexts in which they are created and read. A fundamental notion of critical literacy is that all texts are constructed and serve particular interests. This means it is important to consider who constructed a text and for what purpose. Furthermore, texts contain value messages; as texts are constructed by authors who all have their own views of the world, no text is completely neutral and objective. Critical literacy theorists therefore view texts as social, cultural, and political constructions. This means that texts do not have a single, fixed meaning, but can mean different things to different people. As each person interprets a text differently, there is no single 'correct' way to read and respond to a text. Rather, multiple ways of reading a single text are not just possible, but inevitable. When they write, an author makes conscious and unconscious choices about what to include and exclude and how to represent the things or people they depict. However, it is not only the author who has an important role; equally, the reader is an active participant in creating meaning from the text and reflecting on the ways in which different viewpoints and power relationships are represented in the text.

Crucially, the use of critical literacy involves a commitment to equity and social justice, for example through the explicit inclusion of those marginalised on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class or other forms of difference. In learning to engage with a text critically, readers are empowered to challenge the

assumptions made in texts and to reconsider their own responses in light of such social justice considerations. This approach can be applied to any genre. To give an example from the reading of picture books, Walsh (1993, 18) describes how the reader of Anthony Brown's *Piggybook*, 'must carefully scrutinize the detailed pictures and must decide whether to take up Browne's challenge of examining an exposé of stereotypical gender roles, or simply to enjoy the book for its humour'. Critical literacy approaches, therefore, invite readers to explore the power issues that exist in texts. They also stress the importance of reading against the text by looking for what the text omits and for contradictions within the text (McLaughlin and DeVogd, 2004). Readers are encouraged to question the assumptions made within texts; to discuss different possible meanings; and to examine how authors can attempt to influence readers. A critical reading therefore becomes an inherently reflexive activity that encourages readers to recognize and question their own assumptions.

Bishop (2014) synthesized the components which have been consistently articulated as 'core principles' (Comber & Simpson, 2001) or 'transformative elements' (Lewison, et al, 2002) in critical literacy pedagogy. Reviewing the literature, she identified these concepts as: (a) mobilizing learners as social actors with knowledge and skills to disrupt the commonplace; (b) conducting research, analysis and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue; (c) identifying issues focused on socio-political realities in the context of the lives of the learners; (d) designing and undertaking actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom; and (e) reflecting upon actions taken and creating vision(s) for future project(s). As these elements indicate, critical literacy is not simply a theoretical exercise, but is explicitly connected to practical actions. It is not sufficient for people to gain abstract knowledge of their social reality through reading texts; they also need to reflect on this knowledge and transform it through action based on critical reflection. Freire (1970) described this as praxis, informed concrete action linked to certain values. While the elements described by Bishop (2014) relate to critical literacy within a formal education context, they can equally be applied to a library, or other non-formal or informal learning experiences where people come together to interrogate and discuss texts; relate these to their own life experiences; and use these reflections as the basis for actions within their local communities. The possibilities of this structure will be developed further below with regard to reading groups in libraries.

3. Approaches to promoting fiction reading in libraries

The importance of promoting recreational reading, and in particular fiction, has long been recognized as an important part of the library's role in society. There are numerous initiatives and events designed to promote the act of reading, in particular reading for pleasure, in libraries. Some of these take place at an international level, for example, World Book Day and World Book Night. There are also national events and activities, which in the UK include Chatterbooks reading clubs, *Bookstart*, *the Summer Reading Challenge*, *the Young Readers Programme* and *Children's Book Week*. *There are similar initiatives elsewhere; to name just a few: the Russian National Programme for reading promotion; Banned Books Week and Picture Book Month in the United States; National Simultaneous Storytime in Australia; Nal'ibali national reading-for-enjoyment campaign in South Africa; and Denmark is Reading. These, of course, occur in addition to regular events such as reading groups and storytimes that are run in many libraries, and local and regional events like author visits and literature festivals. Considering these activities from a reading stance perspective, these types of approaches can usually be thought of as promoting an aesthetic stance as they place emphasis on emotional responses to texts and to the reader's reading journey.*

As Train (2003) comments, whereas children's and young people's librarians in public libraries commonly offer advice on fiction reading, traditionally adult fiction librarians have tended not to intervene in their users' choice of fiction and, perhaps, even questioned the ethics of intervening in an adult's selection of fiction reading. It is therefore unsurprising that there has, in general, been more attention paid to fiction reading promotion for children and young people in libraries. While reading promotion is often thought of as a public library activity, encouraging reading for pleasure is also a crucial element of the work of school libraries. In a recent research project, school librarians detailed the many ways in which they support and promote reading for pleasure including: author visits; one-to-one support; posters around the school and in the library; notes in registers announcing new titles; information in student planners; use of the school website or intranet; social media; displays and activities; inclusion in newsletters; and competitions (McNicol and Duggan, 2015). However, the fact remains that, among children's and school librarians, emphasis is usually placed

on promoting reading for enjoyment and to support literacy development rather than to support more critical perspectives.

Moving through the education system, although encouraging reading for pleasure has rarely been considered a key role for academic libraries (Mahaffy, 2009), examples of reading promotion can be found. In Elliott's (2007) survey, 71.4% of participating United States libraries had a recreational reading or browsing collection and Sanders' (2009) survey of academic libraries in three south-eastern states found that 64% of respondents offered a separate collection of books for users' leisure or recreational reading. Furthermore, Gladwin and Goulding (2012) found instances of book swaps, displays and author events in UK university libraries. However, while in theory, Gladwin and Goulding's respondents supported recreational reading for the benefits it provides for the students, in practice, few believed it was the university library's role to facilitate fiction reading (outside course requirements); 59% of their questionnaire respondents felt recreational reading collections did not belong in an academic library. So, while, in theory, academic librarians might be considered to be in the strongest position to promote a critical approach, fiction is rarely considered an important focus of their work.

3.1 Changing approaches to reading promotion

It is interesting to reflect on the history of reading promotion and reader development in libraries from a critical literacy perspective. The readers' advisory interview originated in United States in the 1920s. In this approach, the librarian was positioned as an educator, 'leading the reader in a particular direction that they felt would be beneficial to them' (Train, 2003, 37), as they offered suggestions based on information provided by the reader about their reading tastes. Such approaches, in essence, can be seen as replicating what Freire (1970) described as the 'banking model' of education in which students are viewed as empty containers into which educators must deposit knowledge. In contrast, Freire's ideas of critical pedagogy position students as active agents capable of the type of dialogue and critical thinking which are central to critical literacy. Although highly structured methods of reading promotion such as readers' advisory are no longer commonplace, fiction librarians may still emphasize the importance of a 'neutral stance, giving information rather than advice on reading' (Kinnell and Shepherd, 1998, 103). In this respect, they might be thought of as aligning themselves with colleagues from non-fiction reference

services and, to some extent, promoting an efferent reading stance by emphasizing objectivity and information rather than emotional reactions to literature. Furthermore, it is important to note potential tension here as critical literacy does not accept the possibility of such a 'neutral stance'. For example, decisions the librarian makes about which book to select or omit from this information-giving process inevitably have implications for power relationships.

Approaches to reading promotion have changed significantly in more recent years. For example, reader development has had a high profile in public libraries in the UK and elsewhere for several decades. Through reader development work, librarians have developed innovative methods of encouraging readers to widen their reading horizons. In whatever setting they take place, reader development initiatives, as described by Van Reil (1992), focus on reading as a creative act that can increase confidence in reading and bring isolated readers together. The aim is to ensure reading is more enjoyable and more satisfying for the reader. Although there is a social and collective aspect to reader development, the focus is on the experience of reading rather than its wider implications within society. At first glance, therefore, reader development might appear to be closely aligned with an aesthetic stance and focused on the reader's emotional response to a text. However, reader development activities do not preclude a critical approach. Indeed, reader development proponents insist that as well as a reader's journey being personally 'transformational' (Weibel, 1992), it can enable them to form a stronger 'connection to the world' (Kendrick, 2001, 81) through new experiences and interactions with people resulting, in some cases, in changes in the way in which individuals perceive and view the world (Weibel, 1992), an important component of critical literacy.

In summary, reading promotion and reader development activities in libraries have tended to support the development of an aesthetic stance; while critical approaches are certainly possible within these types of activities, even in libraries in educational institutions, supporting a critical stance in relation to fiction reading is not commonplace.

4. Critical literacy and fiction reading in libraries

As described above, in librarianship and information studies literature, critical literacy is usually discussed in relation to non-fiction resources, particularly focusing on the links between critical literacy and information literacy. In

educational studies, however, ideas of critical literacy are more frequently conceived in relation to fictional texts. This takes advantage of the fact that, while fiction can have a powerful impact, it can also act as a 'safe' arena to explore challenging ideas. To give just a few examples, Borsheim-Black et al (2014) engage with critical literacy through canonical texts such as *Of Mice and Men*; Chun (2009) describes how the graphic novel *Maus* that foregrounds racism and immigrant otherness can be used as a teaching resource to facilitate critical literacy; and Simmons (2012) explores ways to utilize students' interest in fantasy literature to support critical literacy by focusing on Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series to address how elements of the trilogy relate to violent acts in the real world, including hunger, forced labour, child soldiers, and the sex trade. As these examples illustrate, critical literacy is an approach that can be applicable across a wide range of genres.

4.1 Linking social inclusion and critical literacy

Social inclusion has been an important aspect of reader development initiatives in libraries for a number of years. For example, *Framework for the Future* (DCMS, 2003) and *A National Public Library Development Programme for Reading* (MLA, 2004) in the UK recognised the value of reading groups in helping libraries to deliver on social inclusion agendas. As critical literacy is concerned with issues of social justice and critical reflection leading to social change, applying a critical stance to reading is likely to offer opportunities to address social inclusion issues. In this context, reading groups and other reader development activities may present ways to reconsider fiction reading within a critical literacy context.

Reader development, and in particular reading groups, have often been seen as ways to reach groups who are some way marginalized, for example, looked after children, prisoners, people with English as an Additional Language or people with health conditions or disabilities. One organization currently working in this field is The Reader Organization which runs a number of projects in the UK including Reading in a Secure Environment (RISE) which brings readers in mental health care and criminal justice sites into contact with authors, and Wirral National Model Project that includes over 100 weekly reading groups in care homes, day care centres, women's centres and other community locations. Of course, the majority of public library authorities run reading groups; many are general groups, but others are aimed at particular age groups (e.g. teenagers); genres

(e.g. poetry, science fiction, crime); or social or cultural groups (e.g. Asian women, adults with low literacy levels). Reading groups are also a common activity within school libraries and are occasionally held within academic libraries and other types of libraries such as prison libraries.

Reading groups may present significant opportunities to address social justice concerns. Such groups undoubtedly encourage and support reading from an aesthetic stance, emphasising the role of reading in personal development, but they can also lead to discussions from more critical perspectives as groups consider how a text relates to their experiences and those of other members of their community for instance. While an aesthetic stance can be thought of as relating to the individual's private response to a text, critical literacy more readily lends itself to group or 'socially interactive' (Guthrie, 2004, 4) examinations of texts that occur within reading groups. In an example from a school setting, Taliaferro (2011) reports on a qualitative action research study examining high school students' aesthetic and efferent responses to a novel set in Afghanistan, and their development of critical stances. One of the findings was that class discussions provided a context for students to adopt stances that were not evident in their individual written responses to the novel. In fact, it was precisely these discussions which provided scaffolding to help students to adopt critical stances.

However, while research has been conducted into how recruitment to library-based reading groups and their structure may, or may not, support social inclusion agendas (e.g. Hyder, 2013), considerations of how the texts read and the discussions that happen within reading groups may impact on these issues is less often considered. In particular, the role of reading groups in the development of a critical stance toward fiction reading has not been a focus of research.

4.2 Ways of developing a critical stance within reading groups

As Bishop (2014) notes, the context of formal schooling is frequently seen as a limitation hindering the possibility of social action as a result of critical readings. Failure to put principles into practice and to fully enact learning through active interventions in authentic spaces extending outside the classroom can limit the impact of critical literacy approaches within formal education. In this context, reading groups run in libraries and elsewhere in communities, especially those

with a focus on inclusion, offer interesting opportunities to introduce a more engaged critical stance to people's reading experiences.

There are many approaches to teaching critical literacy which might be applied in a library, and in particular a reading group, context. Some possible ways to structure reading group discussions that support a critical stance are described below.

1. Interrogating a text

Critical literacy encourages readers to go beyond passively accepting a text's message however reliable or credible the author might be considered to be. One useful structure for actively interrogating a text is Sandretto's (2011) set of 'critical literacy questions'. Although this was produced for use in a classroom, it could be equally be relevant to reading group discussions. This resource divides the critique of a text into the following themes: textual purposes; textual structures and features; construction of characters; gaps and silences; power and interest; whose view/reality; interrogating the composer; and multiple meanings. Readers are encouraged to consider questions such as, 'What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed the text?'; 'What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?'; and 'How else could the text have been written?'. This resource can be used in various ways, for example, to interrogate a single text or to compare two or more texts under one of the sets of themes presented. Of course, the wording of questions could also be adapted to meet the needs of different types of readers, such as those who are younger or with low literacy levels.

2. Juxtaposing texts

A common, and fairly straightforward, way to introduce readers to critical literacy is to present them with two juxtaposing texts on the same topic to consider, for example, texts by authors with different political viewpoints. By comparing how the authors present characters and situations, readers can develop an awareness of how similar stories can be understood differently depending on the ways in which they are selected and presented. Reading two biographies of the same individual or two novels or accounts describing the same historical events are

examples of ways in which texts might be juxtaposed and discussed in a reading group.

3. Contextualising

Asking readers to interpret a text without any contextual clues can help to illustrate the ways in which texts can have many meanings. An example might be presenting a poem or individual account of an event with no geographical or cultural details to help to situate it. When readers are asked to consider what they think it is about, the different knowledge and memories they bring can become apparent, affecting how they relate to, and interpret, the same account. A short extract could be used for this purpose, perhaps as an introduction before the group starts to read a longer novel.

4. Alternative endings

Asking readers to provide alternative endings to a novel read in a reading group is another activity that may support the development of a critical stance. Another possibility for works that have been adapted or reworked (as other novels or in alternative media such as film) is to consider the reasons why authors or scriptwriters may choose to change the ending of a well-known text. What messages do they want to send to the audience by doing so?

5. Role reversal

Asking readers to retell a story by changing the age, sex, ethnicity or another significant characteristic of the main protagonist(s) helps to illustrate, and challenge, some of the assumptions which can be made about particular social groups. Unless we read a text critically and consider, perhaps less obvious, alternatives, it is all too easy to accept the version of social reality presented by the author without questioning. This exercise can also help to show who the author intended as the audience for their original text and to explore the question of whether the text might exclude or marginalise certain readers, intentionally or otherwise.

6. Retelling from another character's point of view

Asking members of a reading group to retell an event from another character's point of view can be a useful way to introduce readers to some of the ideas

underpinning critical literacy, especially power relations. Taking a minor character who is almost overlooked in the original version and considering the events described from their perspective can be illuminating. As an example, Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a famous example of a text that focuses minor characters from another text, in this case *Hamlet*. What differences become apparent when the focus is shifted away from the most powerful characters to those whose voices are less often heard? What gaps or silences in the original text does this exercise highlight?

7. **Alternative settings**

Changing the place and/or time in which a story is set can lead to greater understanding about the assumptions suggested by the author, especially about global inequality issues, cultural differences in power relations and the domination of particular ideologies.

Although this section has focused on the application of critical literacy to library reading groups, there are, of course, other ways in which a critical stance could be introduced to readers, for instance, displays highlighting power issues and focusing on voices usually missing from mainstream texts or competitions to produce insightful alternative endings to widely read novels.

4.3 Challenges of critical literacy and fiction promotion

Introducing critical approaches towards fiction reading in library setting is not without its problems. As Borsheim and Petrone (2006, 82) acknowledge in a formal education context, 'because of the nature of critical research, students are likely to ask questions that some people prefer they not ask about topics that some people prefer they not address'. The same could undoubtedly be said with regard to such activities in libraries, across all sectors and geographical locations. A crucial consideration for librarians who encourage readers to take a critical stance towards fiction is that this does not simply require them to bring books and readers together. Rather, critical literacy requires a deeper engagement from librarians as they work alongside the communities they support and, where appropriate, assist them in transforming their responses to a text into actions. Undeniably, moving beyond traditional, more apparently neutral, outreach and community engagement in this way can be politically, as well as personally, challenging.

There are other reasons why adopting a critical literacy approach in a library setting can be highly demanding. Giving readers the confidence to be comfortable with the notion that is no single 'correct' way to read a text requires considerable time and skill. Critical literacy enables readers to see connections between the texts they read and the 'real world' as they come to realise how the experiences and opinions of both the author and reader are integral in shaping any text. However, while these ideas can be powerful, they can also be unsettling for both readers and librarians.

5. Conclusions

The development of critical literacy can, therefore, be supported in libraries via methods similar to those used to promote reading for pleasure and to support social inclusion, in particular, the provision of reading groups. With considerable experience of such methods, librarians with expertise in reader development activities are well placed to support readers in adopting critical approaches to fiction. An emphasis on critical literacy may not only be useful in public libraries; it may also allow libraries within educational establishments and other sectors to introduce reading promotion activities in a form that may seem more closely aligned with their core mission.

However, while the basic methods may be familiar, it is important to remember that the ultimate goal of critical literacy activities is to foster a critical stance, rather than (or in addition to) an aesthetic one. Too little is currently known about the activities that take place within reading groups with regard to their possible impact on social justice issues. This chapter has suggested some ways in which reading group activities and discussions could be framed within a critical literacy context, but more research is needed into the possible benefits and challenges of implementing these in practice.

Although this chapter has focused on the library profession, it is important to remember that librarians are not alone in this endeavour. By working with radical educators, authors, poets and other artists to support a critical, as well as aesthetic, approach to fiction, librarians can potentially extend not only the types of texts readers engage with, but also the ways in which they engage with them. Using reading groups and other methods of reading promotion to support a critical literacy stance, as well as an aesthetic one, may be powerful in providing readers with skills and strategies to challenge social and political systems. This

approach may also result in practical social action within local communities, in addition to engaging readers in more active forms of reading and offering them more creative ways to critique texts.

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