

# CRITICAL LITERACY in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

## *My take on the issue*

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It is impossible to avoid an avalanche coming your way, and even more so when there's nowhere else to run! And in today's world, no matter where you search, or where you're headed, there is an avalanche of information at racing at great speed. Some of this is 'good' while others might cause either disbelief or disregard. We have reached the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and along with it, the apparent need to spread messages and ideas from an ocean of platforms where anyone from anywhere can publish their thoughts, or report happenings that reach out to millions within seconds. This is both fascinating and alarming to many, and to me it is a call for caution.

The power to inform is not something to be overlooked. When one feels empowered to share a message, he is taking a stand. He is making a claim, a statement. And depending on how that statement is read, it can bring on disastrous results. Due to the possibility that educators in today's world remain reluctant about discussing texts in their classrooms, we may be leading our students to believe that what is written is always factual. That the written word might be 'written in stone,' therefore, a type of *axiom*.

Readers nowadays need to look at things from more than one perspective. It is important to reconsider the written word. And fortunately, there is evidence that this is happening; as it should. The human mind is capable of retaining an incalculable amount of information and we are all aware that this is not the problem – by virtue, increasing opportunities for learning and information acquisition is something we should always aim towards, and applaud. However, when I mention the word 'caution' it is because it is important to reflect on what exactly is being taken in, and how this will affect us as individuals, and as part of a society. This cannot be done blindly. Thus, as educators, it is vital that we realize just how important it is to bring in opportunities for discussion within our classrooms. It is necessary to view opposing arguments and why they have come about, when interacting with a text. Questions such as "why is the author stating this?" "what sort of a context is s/he a part of?" "is that context similar to ours?" "who are the participants?" "whose identities are in focus?" and "do we see things the same way? ... *should* we?" are key to advocating and practicing critical literacy in our lessons.

Fortunately for us, student behavior today is no longer what it used to be. Nor is how they see the world. Due to an ever-constant exposure to information online and off, it is a relief to witness a change in how they approach their education. Though some may argue, I find it not only important that they question what is being addressed to them, but opportune. It is now time for the teacher to exchange his posture and sole 'knower' of information and guide

students towards discovery and autonomy. It is a wonderful thing that education has evolved, toward the acceptance of allowing students to have a voice. Our role is now to facilitate, to guide, and to mediate while they develop and construct their learning, through tolerance, respect and participation in a society that is not blindly manipulated by messages that they feel they have no control over.

Note I use the word 'control' cautiously. It may hold true that being in control over what is said and done in a classroom is what some educators may consider to be appropriate. They may not be comfortable with the idea of letting go of their authority in the classroom for fear of chaos, or rebellious behavior – or the exposure of their own weaknesses. In the past, traditional classrooms displayed the teacher at the front of the class, while students – seated in rows – passively wrote down what was written on the blackboard and did as they were told. And this worked, for quite a while. After all they didn't know any better. Nor there was any other way of doing things. And so on it went.

When we visit a contemporary classroom, we witness change (I hope!) The actual layout of the room is no longer the same; where we used to see rows and rows of chairs, now we see an open space where everyone is (or should be) free to step in and share information. Students are no longer looking at their classmate's back, but their faces. This is huge progress. Anyone is now welcome to share whatever it is they wish, and question it, either the students or the teacher him/herself.

When the setting becomes real, you can almost visualize ideas and opinions come to life. And I was eager to experiment with Critical Literacy with an upper-intermediate group I had last year. All because back in 2009 I took part in the Braz-TESOL Conference, held in Fortaleza, Ceara, and had the privilege of meeting **Chris Lima, Della de la Fonte, Jose Antonio da Silva** and Inez Woortman, all of whom were actively involved in the Special Interest Group (SIG) and Critical Literacy in ELT Project for the British Council<sup>1</sup>. During the conference, Jose Antonio and Inez presented us a magnificent set of resources designed to lend a critical eye to what we call 'tall stories' – stories which exaggerate the feats of famous characters in a given context, and are attributed with having almost inhumanly strength and bravery to serve and protect the weak or under-privileged. The focus of our discussion was on the American folk hero, Davy Crockett, "king of the wild frontier," who single-handedly killed a wild beast, shattered a huge boulder to pieces, and even unfroze the Earth<sup>2</sup>!

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, please visit: [www.britishcouncil.org.br/elt](http://www.britishcouncil.org.br/elt) [www.osdemethodology.org.uk](http://www.osdemethodology.org.uk)  
[www.criticalliteracy.org.uk/elt](http://www.criticalliteracy.org.uk/elt)

<sup>2</sup> Davy Crockett and the Frozen Dawn – Schlosser, S. E. Available at <http://americanfolklore.net/folktales/tn1.html> retrieved on November 18, 2007.

Davy Crockett – Available at:  
<http://americantalltales.net/index.html> retrieved on November 18, 2007.

Needless to say, I was flabbergasted by how wonderful our discussion carried on, and felt anxious to bring in an added feature: compare Davy to a well-know (anti?) hero in Brazil: Virgulino Ferreira da Silva, better known as **Lampiao, o Rei do 'Cangaco'** (a type of wild frontier, similar to that of Davy's). The activity involved questioning Lampiao's reign over the 'less-fortunate'. Was he a hero or a villain? What was happening in the northeastern part of Brazil at the time, and why did he decide to act? What crimes did he commit, and why? Are there unheard voices? What if he were alive today?? As part of our discussion, even Robin Hood came up.

Since then, I have become an advocate for Critical Literacy, and recommend it to educators who want to fully delve into a text, exploring multiple perspectives – instead of the usual unilateral interpretation that we are expected (though sometimes reluctant) to make. If we move towards advocating the acceptance of conflicting opinions, while building and maintaining a non-threatening environment in our classrooms, students will feel free to express their opinions as well as learn to respect those of their peers which, in turn, will result in an enriching classroom experience that everyone will share and grow with.

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