



**Critical Media Literacy:  
A Pedagogy for New Literacies and Urban Youth**

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**Abstract:**

Using new literacies critically can be an excellent pedagogy for motivating and empowering students who feel alienated from their school and society. This article describes how one middle school teacher engaged his inner-city English language learners with critical media literacy as a way of making their learning more meaningful and motivating. The students interviewed and photographed community members, analyzed portrayals in the media of themselves and their neighborhood, and created their own alternative representations of their concerns and findings. Not only did the students increase their self-esteem and sense of pride in their community, they also demonstrated substantial academic gains in their English language development.

# Critical Media Literacy: A Pedagogy for New Literacies and Urban Youth

*We only talk about things, but we don't see them. We don't actually experience them like what they are going through. It gets boring in school like 'cause you don't have like nothing to bring in and really show that they are really suffering. We're just talking about, not really doing anything about it.*

—Sixth-grade ESL student

**W**e live in a media-saturated, technologically dependent, and globally connected world, and yet most of our schools are still teaching traditional literacy, focusing only on reading and writing words on a page. The old days of print literacy are no longer sufficient in this age of countless communication systems and increasing linguistic and cultural diversity (The New London Group, 1996).

The psychological model of reading and writing as individual cognitive skills needs to evolve into a deeper sociological understanding of literacy as a social practice “tied up in the politics and power relations of everyday life in literate cultures” (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 185).

Using a critical media literacy framework to teach sixth-grade English as a Second Language (ESL), Mohammed Choudhury transformed his inner-city classroom into a laboratory of new literacies and democratic empowerment. He based his theoretical approach on critical media literacy pedagogy to make his lessons more inclusive of all types of communication and to guide his students to address the relationships between information and power. Mohammed used a me-

dia literacy framework consisting of a handful of concepts and questions assembled by the Center for Media Literacy (concepts and questions can be found online at [http://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/14A\\_CCKQposter.pdf](http://www.medialit.org/sites/default/files/14A_CCKQposter.pdf)) along with critical pedagogy based on Paulo Freire's ideas about problem-posing education (Freire, 1970). By combining principles of critical pedagogy with the framework of media literacy, Mohammed created a critical media literacy pedagogy that engaged his students in new literacies with a critical perspective (Share, 2009).

## Critical Questions

Since media and technology are now playing more prominent roles in society than ever before, new literacies must address these changes with educational approaches based more on empowerment than protection (Kellner & Share, 2009). Mohammed used a critical inquiry approach involving the following five key ideas that require students to question the social construction of messages:

1. Students need to question who created the message as a way to understand that all messages are constructed by people. This knowledge can be empowering when students realize that in the construction process, people make decisions that could

- have been made differently or can still be changed.
2. Questioning *how* messages are created helps students learn about different types of codes and languages, such as visuals, sounds, and multimedia.
  3. For a pluralistic society, it is essential that students understand that everyone can interpret media messages differently based on the many human differences we bring with us. While certain readings of texts dominate, there are many ways any message can be understood (Hall, 1980).
  4. Through questioning the bias, values, and points of view of media messages, students recognize that messages can never be completely objective and neutral; they always involve relationships of power.
  5. Students are encouraged to ask why a message was created and/or sent in order to examine the motivation behind the message. When most media messages are created by profit-driven corporations, it is important for students to understand the economic structures that shape the majority of their entertainment and news.

### Inner-City Educational Realities

Mohammed had just earned his teaching credential from UCLA's Teacher Education Program when he began working at John Liechty Middle School in downtown Los Angeles. This school was built to relieve the overcrowding of the densely populated schools in the city's center. With a dropout rate of 40% and some of the highest levels of crime and poverty in the city, teaching at Liechty Middle School was a challenge for new and veteran teachers alike. According to Los Angeles Unified School District statistics (Los Angeles, 2011), 95.5% of the students at Liechty that first year were Hispanic, and over one-third were labeled English Language Learners (Los Angeles Unified School District).

Mohammed reflects on his first year of teaching as one of the most taxing and insight-

ful experiences of his life. He was assigned to teach a sixth-grade intermediate ESL class using the district-adopted Hampton-Brown High Point curriculum. He knew that the traditional model of schooling, especially for English Language Learners (ELLs) coming from working class communities, often limits student learning potential and creates a divide between learning and the everyday reality of their lives. While the adopted texts provided a structured approach for teaching ESL, Mohammed and his students found the lessons boring. His students often challenged him, asking, "Why does this matter?" They had no voice in their learning process, and the sociocultural capital they brought with them was ignored as holding potential for academic growth. Mohammed wanted to actively engage his students in their learning by applying the state standards within the context of their everyday lives.

### Classroom Discussions

Though Mohammed's students were a complex group of individuals with varied lifestyles and family backgrounds, a common thread that ran through his classroom was their negative assessment of their own abilities. This realization prompted Mohammed to start regular classroom meetings based on the *council* format from the Ojai Foundation (see the Ojai Foundation for a more in-depth explanation of *council*: <http://www.ojaifoundation.org/Council>). Acknowledging the variety of individual attitudes and perspectives, he wanted everyone to have a structured manner, time, and space to talk and listen to each other.

Many of his students hesitated at first to open up, but he persisted. His determination paid off when one of the council meetings led to a passionate discussion about community issues. After listening to their stories of loss, doubts, and fears, he realized that the majority of his students carried a sense of cynicism about their lives and surroundings, thinking "this is the way it is here, and not much can be done to change it."

From this point on, the council meeting discussions shifted to specific community chal-

allenges, such as gangs, violence, pollution, racism, “messed-up homes,” and drugs. Students wrote their ideas and questions related to these issues in their journals and then decided to create a group project. It wasn’t until Mohammed prompted them to think about other people’s perceptions of them and their community that, as a class, they knew what their project would focus on. During council, one of the students challenged the rest of her classmates to stop thinking about the “bad” and shift their focus to the positive aspects of their community. She argued convincingly that the good outweighs the bad, and that it should be their responsibility to make sure those good things continue. This led to an insightful discussion about how others perceive them and their community.

### Analyzing Media

Mohammed guided the discussion to another level by delving into mainstream media portrayals of minority groups and what that meant for them as students of color. To deepen their critical thinking about the messages they were discussing, Mohammed taught his students critical media literacy concepts and skills. To apply these ideas, students undertook a newspaper photo analysis activity in which they researched

images of minority groups being depicted in the mass media. Students quantitatively analyzed the number of negative portrayals of people of color versus portrayals of whites in the local newspaper. They also applied a qualitative analysis to the pictures by questioning the representations with the media literacy framework. For example, students considered the various people responsible for creating a specific image and the implications that came with that. Students also analyzed specific camera techniques that may have been used to influence perception and thought. Most important, students examined the ideas a certain image conveyed and the questions that were left unanswered.

The media analysis activities were accompanied by first-person accounts of the community from guest speakers and family members. Students were first taught interviewing techniques and practiced with their families and school staff. Then Mohammed invited former gang members, community organizers, and police officers to the class for his students to interview.

### Creating Media

The heart of the project occurred outside of the classroom when the students and teacher set out on organized walks through the community in

## CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

### History with a Twist

Students in the article critically investigated their community and started to think of it in a different way. In the lesson plan “**Connecting Past and Present: A Local Research Project**,” students research a decade in their school’s history, with small groups researching specific topics. Within each group, students take on specific roles, such as archivist, manager, techie, or researcher. Students become active archivists, gathering photos, artifacts, interviews, and stories for a museum exhibit that highlights one decade in their school’s history. The final project can be shared and displayed in your classroom, in the school auditorium, or in the library.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/connecting-past-present-local-1027.html?tab=1>

In the lesson, “**Not Your Usual History Lesson: Writing Historical Markers**,” students will develop their understanding of writing and local history by creating their own historical markers. They begin by studying historical markers in their own communities and then draft content for an unmarked historical location.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/your-usual-history-lesson-30810.html>

**Students also discussed how the community could go about overcoming specific challenges. These discussions became educational opportunities for ESL students to use English in meaningful contexts.**

order to gather data and document their findings. With walking field trip permission from administration and parents, the students used the principles of asset mapping to explore the blocks surrounding their school. Asset mapping involves looking closely at the strengths of a community, such as its resources and its members, in order to shift the focus away from the deficiencies of a community and toward its positive attributes (Beaulieu, 2008).

Though some students were well aware that the community had a wide variety of resources, the community walks helped highlight this reality for the rest. As ethnographers exploring their own neighborhood, the students took photographs, interviewed people, and wrote notes. Back in the classroom, they analyzed their data and were surprised by all the photographs of the various community resources, ranging from podiatry clinics to legal services. Pictures of street vendors and small businesses helped highlight the strong work ethic found among community members. In fact, many of the students' family members were street vendors who expressed their concerns about gang violence and stressed the importance of their children's education.

### Continuous Reflection

After each walk, students participated in classroom discussions and councils where they shared and reflected on various community issues. Before the project began, the council meetings involved only a few individuals speaking on negative aspects of their community. Over time, more students participated, sharing a wide array of views and opinions. Their conversations focused on more than just the negative aspects of the community; students also discussed how the community could go about overcoming specific

challenges. These discussions became educational opportunities for ESL students to use English in meaningful contexts.

As students undertook this ambitious and relevant project, Mohammed's role shifted from "expert" to "guide." Using a *partnering pedagogy* (Prensky, 2010), the teacher became the facilitator, posing probing questions to help the students build on the knowledge they were acquiring from their interviews, research, and exploration. They were using all aspects of language—formal and informal, written and oral, visual and audio—to document and express their ideas. Language lessons from the High Point curriculum now had a practical use and a meaningful context in which the content could be applied. Mohammed modified the High Point lessons and pacing plan in order to better meet his students' academic needs and integrate the grade-level standards with the community project. The grammar lessons about specific language conventions and rules were learned as students worked on their projects and applied the literacy skills throughout the writing process.

### Sharing Their Work

Their research, interviews, discussions, and excursions into the community led to writing formal essays as well as to creating presentations that focused on specific challenges facing their community. Most important, the students developed ideas for overcoming these problems. Along with creating a PowerPoint presentation, students wrote expository essays with a thesis that focused on one challenge facing their community and suggestions for solving the problem. The following is an excerpt from a student essay that was recorded and included in the final presentation:

Our community also needs support from the government and the media. The media should stop showing Pico Union as a dirty, negative place. Instead they should high light [sic] the positive things that people in the community are doing. Like the restaurant Mama's Hot Tamales that helps to train people who sale [sic] fruit or food to have their own business. The media also needs to talk about the positive aspects and places in Pico Union like

the neighborhood council. Also one of the media is the newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times* should take pictures of improved parts of Pico Union instead of the areas that are dirty. The government should put more trash cans and also they should make sure the trash cans and the trash should be picked up at the end of the day.

The most exciting undertaking for the students was to prepare their multimedia presentation for an educational conference at UCLA. As a class, various themes and topics were generated based on their notes, photos, and essays. Students worked in small groups of three to four to create their own PowerPoint presentations, with photos and captions focusing on different themes. Some of the topics the students explored were gangs, education, pollution, art, and community resources. Once all the groups finished, they combined their work to create a single presentation about the strengths and challenges in their community. Students also created an additional slide addressing mainstream media portrayals of minority groups and the implications of these stereotypes. The importance of this was highlighted when one student expressed to the whole class that “we are much more than what these photos are telling people.” All the students traveled to the university on the other side of town and presented together, united with a mission to tell their own story about their community.

## Conclusion

Throughout the year, these sixth-grade ESL students were learning English, social studies, and new literacies in meaningful and engaging ways. Mohammed observed many positive effects, such as increased self-esteem and sense of pride in their community, greater interest in school and their desire to learn, and deeper levels of critical thinking that they were applying regularly to other learning and the world around them. Even though Mohammed highly valued the social learning that was gained, it was especially rewarding to see that his students were also able to demonstrate considerable growth in meeting the academic standards. The test scores went up substantially, as three-fourths of the students im-

proved their performance levels on the California Standards Test in English–Language Arts.

At the beginning of the school year, 64% of Mohammed’s students were at the “far below basic” (FBB) level, but by the end of the year, only 21% of the students remained at the FBB level, and even those showed significant increases in their raw scores. In addition to this, more than half of his students, 47 out of 72 (65.3%), were reclassified as English-Fluent-Proficient (RFEP), well above the district norm of 13.4% for the sixth grade. This reclassification allows students to exit the ESL program and begin taking mainstream content courses, something researchers have found greatly increases their chances for academic success (Flores, Painter, Harlow-Nash, & Pachon, 2009).

The entire *process* was academic, and the *product* was an important contribution to society as urban youth created alternative representations of life in inner-city Los Angeles. After the UCLA presentation, the students continued to work on their PowerPoint presentation and added audio recordings so that their show could travel without them.

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## 2013 Call for Promising Researcher Award: Procedures, Deadlines and Eligibility

Candidates must submit a manuscript based on their research. Manuscripts should be written in format style and length appropriate for submission to a research journal such as *Research in the Teaching of English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Teaching and Teacher Education* or *Anthropology and Education*. Normal manuscripts range from 25–50 double-spaced, typewritten pages. (Tables, figures, references, and appendices are considered part of the manuscript.)

All manuscripts must have at least 1" margins at the top, bottom, and both sides, and must be in standard (12") Times New Roman or Arial font. Manuscripts in any other form (abstracts, dissertation reports, reprints, or published articles, etc.) cannot be considered in this competition. Although manuscripts should conform to the publication standard of the above-mentioned journals, selection as a Promising Researcher does not guarantee eventual publication in those journals.

**Important:** (1) Applicants should prepare a manuscript with all author references removed from document and file name for a blind, peer review process; (2) a separate cover sheet with title and author information should be supplied (the name, current address, position, and telephone number of the entrant should be transmitted along with the manuscript to facilitate communication between the selection committee and the entrant; *this information should be on the cover page only*). (3) Accompanying all manuscripts *must be a written statement verifying that the research was completed within the specified completion dates*. This signed original letter must come from someone other than the candidate (e.g., the major professor or a researcher knowledgeable in the field) who agrees to sponsor the candidate.

**Eligibility:** Established in 1970 and given by the NCTE Standing Committee on Research, the Promising Researcher Award Competition is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after the dissertations between December 1, 2010, and January 31, 2013. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts, e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc., and should have employed a recognized research approach, e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental, etc. In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

### Summary of Dates and Deadlines:

December 1, 2010–January 31, 2013 Completion dates for research entered

March 1 Deadline for receipt of manuscripts

May 15 Results of final judging will be available

**Manuscripts should be sent to:** Felisa Mann ([fmann@ncte.org](mailto:fmann@ncte.org)); subject line should read: *Promising Researcher Award 2013*. **Manuscripts must be received on or before March 1, 2013.**