



Critical Issues in Literacy Pedagogy

Notes From the Trenches

Revised Edition

Written & Edited by Eurvine Williams

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- Introduction

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Sneak Preview

Critical Issues in Literacy Pedagogy

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REVISED EDITION

Written and Edited by Eurvine Williams

Illinois State University



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Foreword

This book clearly presents teachers as masters of their own practice. The list of topics addressed provides real-world examples of how real teachers incorporate a wide repertoire of pedagogical approaches to teaching literacy.

Eurvine Williams wrote *Critical Issues in Literacy Pedagogy—Notes From The Trenches* to help recognize and affirm the valuable knowledge that teachers who are in the “eye of the storm” of a high-stakes testing era in U.S. public education have to contribute to teaching reading and literacy. Their knowledge, skill, and artistry merit such recognition and dissemination.

The myriad of issues presented in this text provides comprehensive, multi-cultural and, multifaceted perspectives that include early childhood, pre-service and adolescent teacher education. Readers are given insight into the thinking and decision-making of those who are closest to the work—teachers. The author underscores this point, emphasizing that this “... is a book for teachers by teachers ...” This is one of the distinctive features about *Critical Issues* that makes it beneficial to K–12 educators and teacher educators engaged in preparing the next generation of teachers for our public school classrooms. It successfully dispels the myth that practicing teachers cannot and do not examine their own practice. Rather, this text presents in-depth analysis and discussion about some of the most daunting challenges that pre-k–12 teachers navigate on a daily basis in an effort to engage students with diverse aspects of literacy learning. These teachers effectively demonstrate how to integrate various instructional approaches to increase student interest and engagement in reading and literacy. The authenticity of how they think when using an interdisciplinary approach to teach critical literacy as a way to enhance learners’ understanding about how racism is depicted in reading material is just one vivid example. Other important pedagogical examples include the presentation of how linguistic and cultural differences are variables that are critical to the motivation and engagement of adolescent learners. They show us how to help the learner make connections, synthesize, and comprehend making visible what effective pedagogy looks like.

I have always believed that teachers are at the core of all education reform. This book eradicates any doubt about their ability to deliver effective instruction

in teaching reading and explain how others may do the same. It is inspiring and important work. Please enjoy and learn from it. You won't regret it.

Phyllis Metcalf-Turner, PhD
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Introduction

By Eurvine J. Williams

There are many issues regarding literacy and literacy instruction that have crucial implications for understanding and developing operational frameworks for teachers and teacher educators. The current discourse involving the socio-psycholinguistics approach to literacy on one hand and on the other, the so called, scientific based research agenda that emphasizes systematic phonics instruction ensures that literacy is placed on the social agenda with each side vying for credibility. It was indicated that the literacy war was over but it seems that a cold war wages on. The profusion of this dichotomy resounding across the education landscape has, in many ways, created a situation of alienation and incomprehension where teachers are concerned. Alienation in the sense that the differing schools of thought have metaphorically drawn swords and retreated to their own battle camp to develop strategic plans for domination while the students that they purport to serve are not considered in the final analysis. This has resulted in a situation where students are left alone and more importantly, the social knowledge of the child is not employed in understanding and designing a literacy program that adequately meets his/her needs. Incomprehension is primarily based on the understanding that the underlying assumption of all concerned is to better student learning, improve instructional strategies and provide accountability to the societal structure. These claims though necessary and laudable are false in the sense that the rhetoric does not match the practice.

To say that teachers are overwhelmed and confused is an understatement. Their confusion stems from a constant disbelief that pertinent information, authentic agencies, practical applications and genuine methodologies involving understanding and teaching literacy are discredited, abused or vilified. Teachers are hard pressed to keep up with the ever-changing new and improved “old” ideas that have been recycled with nice sounding hyperbole and colorful facelifts. They are ever changing in that school districts, in a desperate effort to meet state and

federal mandates, adopt new and improved versions of failed literacy instruction, intervention and assessment every two to three years. Before teachers are even familiar with one literacy program, it is thrown out and a “new” one is implemented. Teachers do not know if they are coming or going and, most critically, they have to steal time to teach with all of the time consuming mandated responsibilities that comes with these programs.

This state of affairs is primarily because secret agents of textbook and testing companies, ideology and reductionist skill-based advocates, manipulate what is accepted as literacy research and to a certain extent, determine the pedagogical practices that it informs. The result is narrow scripted curriculum that inhibits teacher creativity and undermines autonomy. The dynamic social interaction that is crucial in the teaching and learning environment is replaced by anxiety and assessment phobias. The classroom is no longer democratic and risk free in essence, it has evolved into trench warfare, with teachers fighting policies, programs and research that negates positive reinforcement and feedback on anything not related to “mandated” activities.

In contrast, this book proposes an understanding of literacy and literacy instruction through a philosophical context where choices are made by the reader based on interests in and intellectual pursuit of a variety of genres and complex levels of literacy interaction. Thus, the learner makes choices as to what to read based on personal interests, meanings and purposes. There are no absolute standards here for the student to achieve. Flexibility based on instructional strategies where theory and practice come together is a key concept that is emphasized in this conceptualization of literacy learning. Continuous progress is based on a structure that is from within and not imposed on the student from without. The learner selects and transforms information, constructs hypotheses, and makes decisions, relying on cognitive structures to do so. Cognitive structure (i.e., schema, mental models) provides meaning and organization to experiences and allows the individual to go beyond the information given. This presupposes that literacy and literacy learning function to enable individuals to have a voice and as such establish a structure of empowerment for all members of the social environment. In so doing, the individuals can see that their actions and language are validated and the environment is one of knowledge and justice because it allows for members to equally participate in the democratic process of education

Undergirding this framework is a social structure where the members are safe to take risks because there is a shift in control of knowledge to a process oriented model in which individuals are responsible for their learning and they seek to understand and apply their knowledge in such a way that it makes a difference. This notion underlies the agency of social change. This agency is a transformative one in that it involves the process of learning and re-learning by carefully

examining practices and beliefs that speak to teaching and learning as well as interactions in that environment. This environment values the individual and allows them to be genuine participants in a risk free and supportive environment. Understanding this social environment is extremely important in understanding literacy and how it impacts lives. The formal teaching and learning environment should be a reflection of that type of social organization in that it assures all learners access to educational academic resources and the power structures of the social environment. The reader without these basic social structures is left without the tools to be active and engaged members of the social structure.

Literacy and literacy learning, as participatory democratic practices, are about empowering individuals to enable social change and positively impact the environment that surrounds them. Both the concept and context of literacy implies a communal structure that impinges on the act itself. Literacy in turn re-addresses this structure in a continuous intellectual, social and dynamic interaction that effects positive change with the understanding that the world can be shaped by individuals in a collective effort.

The proposal for educators then is that literacy's primary function is to enable the individual to have a voice and as such establish a structure of empowerment for all members of the social environment. In so doing, the individuals can see that their actions and language are validated and the environment is one of knowledge and justice. This type of approach seeks to place emphasis on the individual learner. Individual endeavors are continually in evidence in the literacy curriculum and holism in literacy content is emphasized, not isolating the literacy curriculum with systematic segmented instruction.

Students' individuality are heavily involved in the literacy process as well as self-evaluation within a nonthreatening setting with teacher leadership as facilitators in that, the student is the decision maker in selecting and sequencing his/her very own literacy learning. This context does not support precise, measurable standards for student attainment. This does not indicate that standards are not present, flexible standards are there in that the learner reveals levels of fluency in oral literacy, comprehension and interaction within the social structure. He/she also indicates degrees of vital comprehension abilities within the instructional setting.

Undoubtedly literacy assessment is a critical and legitimate exercise but an understanding of the complexities of literacy itself makes this extremely difficult. A systematic approach to assessment that breaks down literacy and literacy learning into measurable components does not seem to be consistent with what literacy is and its significance to the social structure. It is well understood that individuals with books or have access to books usually do well in terms

of literacy. These individuals have a far better chance of learning to read and making meaning of their environment.

If this is understood and accepted then breaking down literacy into measurable parts seems defeatist. It does not stand to reason that states and school districts are adopting mandates that advocate only one way of literacy assessment. That this type of literacy assessment reflects the production and presentation of a myriad of insignificant parts that when viewed, only serve the purpose of creating confusion and the whole structure disappears within a mass of disconnected ambiguities. The consequence of this is far reaching because educational policy and laws are made based on assessments that do not truly reflect an individual's literacy ability. In addition, individuals are very wary of an assessment structure that actively alienates them from what the desired outcomes should be.

There is also the question of validity. What are these (assessment assessing), how are these tests interpreted and what does that signify for teachers, students and society? These questions are among the many that this book brings to our consciousness as we struggle to comprehend the complexities of literacy and literacy instruction, comprehension, assessment and their implications for everyone concerned.

Teachers should examine the methods for gathering information to determine student performance in literacy. There is need to discuss how to assess fluency, comprehension and writing that goes beyond national and other tests and measures connected to curriculum, to others that are meaningful sources of information and should be considered and evaluated as evidence of effective instruction and student learning. There is a need to examine what is already done to determine what needs to be accomplished.

The need to gather data is important in this consideration. School profiles are invaluable in determining instructional strategies and assessments. Simple, common assessments such as graded passages from informal literacy inventories or benchmark texts can be used to assess fluency or comprehension. First-draft writing samples from common prompts can be used to assess writing.

Consistency in the selection and administration of these assessments is crucial, if there is a need for teachers to use assessment to guide instruction. Administrators and literacy specialists must be willing to jump in and give a hand—not only with the development of these assessments but also with the administration of them.

Teacher preparation is a dynamic and fluid entity and is constantly being subject to transformation. Literacy teaching and learning should reflect a reconstruction of policy and practice, that provides flexibility as teachers seek to anticipate the diverse needs of students by advocating reflection, integration of technology, authentic research, and accurate standards. These reconstructions

have numerous challenges as they seek to better meet the needs of a changing society that called for renewed accountability for students, teachers, public schools and universities, as well as the overall need for quality teachers in our nation's school. Compounding these challenges is the emergence of streamlined certification programs that are offered through school districts, private companies and cyberspace universities. Consequently, many colleges of education have become more competitive in their offerings for teacher certification programs, and have re-examined the process of preparing effective teachers.

In more ways than one, the difficulties that lie ahead may not be all bad. Reform challenges the existing structures and cultures of public education where the stakeholders must constantly review and reassess the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies and procedures. This reflective process helps to pave the way for newer and better programs, and assists in the evolution of teacher education from the more traditional structures of training teachers to one more in tune with the complexity of teaching literacy in today's schools.