

Study Guide: “Literacy and the Politics of Education” by C. H. Knoblauch

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Thesis:

“The labels literate and illiterate almost always imply more than a degree or deficiency of skill. They are, grossly or subtly, socio-cultural judgments laden with approbation, disapproval, or pity about the character and place, the worthiness and prospects, of persons and groups” (Knoblauch 1).

Types of Literacy:

Functional Literacy

This is the most familiar of the common literacy types. Literacy is an aspect of being able to function and complete everyday tasks and/or “technical proficiency, a minimal ability to make one's way in the world” (3).

- Examples would be filling out forms, following procedures, and being able to use common computer/software like a cellphone, ATM, etc.
- Emphasis is not on higher levels of thinking but more on accepting what people tell you and following orders.
- Those that favor functional literacy see it as ensuring the status quo continues and that there is a divide between those with higher literacy (who have economic opportunities and the ability to question and change society) and a lower class of workers who will serve them and not challenge the status quo.
- They often champion functional literacy campaigns as a moral stance to help improve the lives of the illiterate, but in reality they usually only want to give people enough skills to serve in menial jobs.

Cultural Literacy

In this form of literacy, the focus is on preserving and advancing one group's set of culture values and heritage. It promotes critical thinking and a little artistic judgment.

- Language is “a repository of cultural values and to that extent a source of social cohesion” (3).
- This literacy often assumes and promotes racism, cultural superiority, and the marginalization of other cultures in order to preserve its own traditions.
- The most common cultural literacy movement in America prefers the Western canon of literature and art, sees English as the only true American language, and looks longingly to a mythic or idealized past where Judeo-Christian, white culture dominated. They believe that “unless heritage is protected, the former purity of language reconstituted, the past life of art and philosophy retrieved, we risk imminent cultural decay people where more cultured (4).

Functional and Cultural literacy often spring from the same, historically conservative, agenda: “They reveal in different ways the means of using an ideal of literacy to preserve and advance the world as it is, a world in which the interests of traditionally privileged groups dominate the interests of the traditionally less privileged” (4).

If functional and cultural literacies reflect a more conservative view of preserving traditions and hierarchies of power, then the next two types, personal growth and critical literacies, come from a more liberal view.

Personal Growth Literacy

Usually as a means to empower people through education and enact social change, personal growth literacy argues “that language expresses the power of the individual imagination, so that nurturing a person’s reading and writing abilities enables the development of that power, thereby promoting the progress of society through the progress of the individual learner” (4).

- Students should choose their own readings rather than be forced to read from the traditional canon of literature
- Students should read works that feature people like them and not just white males
- Seeks to empower all voices rather than stick with the status quo
- Is often associated with the myth of the American Dream
- Those in power who want to maintain the status quo (and their own power), often allow personal growth literacy in the classroom because these “freedoms” create an illusion of change and empowerment. This in turn releases some of the social tensions that otherwise might lead to activism and rebellion as people demand their rights. Ultimately, changes that occur in social conditions are usually minor because people feel empowered but really aren’t (5).

Critical Literacy

This type of literacy comes from another type of social change agenda, but it is more aggressive and political than personal growth literacy. In this view, literacy is about obtaining power in order to make society more equal.

- “Proponents of critical literacy believe that the general public should become literate solely to bring power to individuals and away from the elite – obviously this carries political motivation” (5).
- If people cannot speak for themselves, then they must rely on others to advocate for them, and these others may not always have their best interests at heart.
- The word “critical” refers to the need for people to develop a critical consciousness in order to “identify reading and writing abilities” that will help them see how the status quo literacy put in place by those in authority objectifies and excuses the social conditions of the powerless and oppressed.
- It believes that power lies in the ability to “name the world” and therefore shape the reality of others.
- The more people can compete with those in power, the more they can help change society to reflect a diversity of viewpoints and needs.

Important Conclusions

- The value of traditional literacy (being able to read and write) is not a universal one. Many cultures have rich oral traditions and lack a written language (1).
- Cultures that value traditional literacy see themselves as more developed and civilized than those without it (1).
- Literacy is only important in contexts where those in power have made it important. Literacy is not necessary for most requirements of life, and it is not a measure of someone's competency or value as a human.
- Most literacy is always tied to a political or social agenda: "it is always literacy for something--for professional competence in a technological world, for civic responsibility and the preservation of heritage, for personal growth and self-fulfillment, for social and political change" (2).
- Knoblauch finishes his essay with the acknowledgment that many more types of literacy exists, but the most important takeaway is that "no definition tells, with ontological or objective reliability, what literacy is; definitions only tell what some person or group--motivated by political commitment--wants or needs literacy to be" (6).
- People use literacy as a weapon of social change and conformity, and it works if they can keep their motives secret or at least only show the aspects of their agenda that make them look good.
- Having done so, they only worry about how to enact their version of literacy.
- The true defense against being manipulated is in developing a critical awareness. This is why it is crucial that people develop a critical awareness of these agendas, "the only safeguard people have if they are to be free of the designs of others" (6).
- "To the extent that literacy advocates of one stripe or another remain unconscious of or too comfortable with those designs, their offerings of skills...rationalizes the control of others by representing it as a means of liberation. To the extent that the nonliterate allow themselves to be objects of someone else's 'kindness,' they will find no power in literacy, however it is defined, but only altered terms of dispossession" (6).

Work Cited

Knoblauch, C. H. "Literacy and the Politics of Education." *The Power of Language eReader*, edited by Kelli McBride, SSC Writing Program, pp. 1-7, 10 July 2019, pol.kmcb.site/pol_ereader/pol_knoblauch.pdf. Accessed 10 July 2019.