

A Tale of Differences: Comparing the Traditions, Perspectives, and Educational Goals of Critical Reading and Critical Literacy

Gina Cervetti
Michael J. Pardales
James S. Damico

Abstract

Classroom literacy practices are necessarily grounded in historical and philosophical traditions, and these traditions provide a lens for distinguishing those practices. Our goal in this article is to examine the assumptions that underlie two pedagogical approaches to literacy -- one grounded in liberal humanism, and the other within critical perspectives. We argue that there are fundamental philosophical distinctions between liberal-humanist critical reading and critical literacy, and we hope to demonstrate why educators need to acknowledge and understand these differences. We believe that these two approaches to critical reading are often conflated or mistaken for one another, with the result that practices associated with critical literacy are often inappropriately adopted by individuals who are committed to liberal-humanist forms of critical reading.

By tracing the lines of development of these different approaches to literacy, we hope to show that they work within very different, and perhaps incompatible, views on knowledge, reality, authorship, and discourse -- and on the goals of education. Along with illuminating philosophical and historical distinctions, we incorporate instructional examples to demonstrate the ways these distinctions play out in classrooms.

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Critical Reading in the Liberal-Humanist Tradition

The empiricist belief that the world can be directly experienced and known through the senses is at the root of [liberal-humanist](#) approaches to reading. These approaches rely on the notion that a reader can comprehend the “correct” meaning of an author’s text through decoding.

While liberal-humanist views of reading rest on the understanding that individuals can encode their thoughts and intentions in texts which can be understood by readers and which reflect a directly knowable reality, they also hold that, as rational thinkers, we can make inferences and judgments about those meanings. In this way, there is a separation between facts about the world and the inferences and judgments a reader can make about those facts. This leads to a further distinction between truth and rhetoric -- that is, there are ways of talking about the world that use a language of truth and objectivity (usually the language of science and mathematics), and there are ways of talking about the world that use language intended to persuade, evoke emotions, or provide aesthetic experiences (ordinary language, rhetoric, literature, etc.). When liberal humanists talk about critical thinking, they often mean the kind of thinking that is eminently rational in origin: it is deliberate, orderly, critical, and purposeful. Critical thought is to be distinguished from ordinary, everyday thinking, which is informal, casual, and less deliberate ([Stauffer, 1969](#)).

Between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, several influential literacy texts that promoted critical reading were published. A consideration of these texts is important for this article for three reasons:

1. The notion of critical reading gained prominence in literacy instruction and research during this period.
2. By examining these texts we can consider liberal-humanist approaches over time.
3. Although current iterations of critical reading in a liberal-humanist tradition may differ from earlier examples, we argue that they share assumptions about knowledge, existence, authorship, and discourse that differ significantly from those associated with critical literacy approaches.

In his influential book *Reading in the Elementary School*, [Spache \(1964\)](#) writes about critical reading as a set of skills that extends beyond both functional literacy and higher levels of comprehension and analysis. These critical reading skills include investigating sources, recognizing an author’s purpose, distinguishing opinion and fact, making inferences, forming judgments, and detecting propaganda devices. Other literacy researchers in the liberal-humanist tradition similarly emphasize the importance of differentiating fact from opinion or truth from fantasy (e.g., [Durr, 1965](#); [Flamond, 1962](#); [Lundsteen, 1970](#); [Painter, 1965](#)), making inferences ([Huus, 1965](#); [Shotka, 1960](#)), analyzing literary elements such as setting, plot, and theme ([Howards, 1965](#); Huus), making predictions and testing hypothesis while reading ([Lee, 1968](#)), and suspending judgment until the evidence is considered ([Russell, 1961](#)). These scholars also argue that critical reading involves distinctive practices that do not necessarily develop naturally. The necessary skills must be taught explicitly (or at least actively promoted by teachers) and, contrary to common perceptions, Spache asserted that this training can begin in elementary school.

Overall, these components of critical reading rest on the understanding that interpretation of text involves the unearthing of authorial intention. The philosophical assumption here is that correct interpretation can be distinguished from incorrect, truth can be distinguished from fiction, and texts are imbued with authorial intention or meaning that can and should be the basis for understanding. According to [Bond and Wagner \(1966\)](#),

Critical reading is the process of evaluating the authenticity and validity of material and of formulating an opinion about it. It is essential for anyone dealing with controversial issues to be able to read critically.... [The reader] must understand the meanings implied as well as stated. He must evaluate the source from which he is reading. He must differentiate the important from the unimportant facts.... He must be able to detect treatments warped by prejudice. He must keep in mind the authors' precepts and intentions and judge whether in drawing his conclusions the author considered all the facts presented. (p. 283)

The last two of Spache's six dimensions of critical reading -- forming judgments and detecting propaganda devices -- also highlight the importance of closely examining authorial intentions. We focus on these two dimensions of critical reading because they move furthest away from simple author-based interpretation and ask students to look for meanings that are intended to be hidden. Like Spache, [Smith \(1965\)](#) emphasizes the importance of recognizing propaganda in texts. She argues that readers need not only understand meanings embedded in print, but also those that "lurk behind the black and white symbols" (p. 12). This reading "between" or "beyond" the lines is exemplified in efforts to read and critique propaganda devices in newspapers, magazines, and radio and television advertisements ([Agrast, 1970](#); [Burris, 1970](#); [Flamond, 1962](#)) and in focusing on how an author uses words to convey points ([Wolf, 1965](#)). In such activities, children learn to use elements of logical analysis -- that is, they examine claims of validity and reliability to better understand how these texts function in society.

These examples of liberal-humanist critical reading emphasize approaches that encourage skepticism and analysis of text verging on social critique. As such, of all the possible liberal-humanist approaches to text, they come closest to critical literacy -- though they still differ significantly from it, as we discuss later. First, however, we want to elaborate upon liberal-humanist approaches by describing classroom examples, discussing some contemporary iterations, and tracing the philosophical roots of critical reading.

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Moving into Critical Reading Classrooms

In an example of liberal-humanist critical reading instruction, [Flamond \(1962\)](#) outlines a set of guiding questions that students of various ages can use to critique the form and function of newspaper advertisements. These include asking the following:

- To whom is the ad addressed?
- To what need or desire does it appeal (health, popularity, comfort, security, etc.)?
- What claims are not substantiated?
- What attention-getting devices are used?
- How is actual cost disguised or minimized?
- Why are testimonials used?
- What words or ideas are used to create a particular impression?

These questions encourage students to investigate authors' motives, and they constitute a critique of these motives. They highlight issues of valid interpretation (Does the ad come with strong support in the form of argument and evidence?) and reliability (Are the

statements dependable and trustworthy?) -- both central concerns of liberal-humanist approaches.

In another classroom example, [Shotka \(1960\)](#) leads a group of first graders to pursue two central questions -- what is a home and what is a community -- through an eight-step outline that emphasizes recognizing and defining the problem, recognizing assumptions, formulating hypotheses, reasoning from hypotheses, gathering evidence, evaluating evidence (detecting bias, determining validity and reliability), organizing evidence, and generalizing and deciding (p. 298). In the lesson or set of lessons, the children compare and contrast their own home experiences with the experiences of children in their school textbooks. The children notice similarities (e.g., children play with one another and go to school, mothers stay at home and do the housework while fathers go out to work, and the families have people who help them) and point out differences (e.g., the children in the textbooks are always clean and happy, and their houses are bigger and prettier than their own).

The first graders are then encouraged to ask why these differences might exist. Their explanations include that the author or illustrator "couldn't think of making the children look dirty...and wanted the pictures and the stories to be happy [because] children don't like sad stories" ([Shotka, 1960](#), p. 301). Although these children begin to examine why authors and illustrators choose certain representations of the world, they do not explicitly engage in social critique.

Connecting Critical Reading to Contemporary Classrooms

One interesting parallel between the developing import assigned to critical reading in the 1950s and 1960s and the significance of critical thinking or critical reading today stems from similarities in sociopolitical concerns across the two periods. In Western countries in the 1950s, postwar fears of communism in conjunction with rapidly increasing technological advancements and the "strong threat from mass communication" (i.e., radio and television) spawned the view that teaching critical reading skills was necessary to prepare children to live in a more complex world ([Smith, 1986](#)). Today, we live in a booming postindustrial information age and compete in a global marketplace in what [Luke, Comber, and O'Brien \(1996\)](#) call "fast capitalist" societies. Critical reading and critical thinking, as a result, are considered essential commodities for individual and collective survival (i.e., individuals and groups need them to compete effectively) in our rapidly expanding info-world ([Paul, 1990](#)).

In addition to these sociopolitical influences, past and current conceptions of critical reading share similar approaches to textual interpretation and understanding. Critical reading has long been equated with critical thinking with its emphasis on clear, logical analysis, and this connection is no less significant in current times. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of liberal humanism, the conception of reading as a thinking process dominated educational research and pedagogy (see, e.g., [Bond & Wagner, 1966](#); [Russell, 1961](#); [Stauffer, 1969](#)). Clear thinking was thought to engender clear reading and prevent what Stauffer called "bungling": "Muddled thinking ends in bungled doing...or ends in bungled verbalisms...[so] reading should be taught as a thinking process" (p. 15).

Refraining from "bungling" retains importance today. Current iterations of critical thinking and critical reading in a liberal-humanist tradition share striking similarities with their predecessors. For example, [Paul \(1990\)](#) helps an elementary school teacher "remodel" a lesson to include the following critical reading skills or strategies: evaluating arguments, making inferences, using critical vocabulary, exercising reciprocity (having students state

one another's positions), and supplying evidence for a conclusion (p. 363). As in the earlier classroom examples, these skills, as well as other strategies Paul mentions (he lists 35 in all), assume that correct interpretation can be distinguished from incorrect interpretation, that fiction can be distinguished from truth, and that texts represent an author's intentions.

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Charting the Assumptions of Critical Reading

As the previous sections suggest, conceptions of critical reading in a liberal-humanist tradition rest on assumptions about knowledge, reality, authorship, discourse, and goals for education. Reading in the liberal-humanist tradition is an activity that can help a person learn about the world, understand an author's intention, and decipher whether information is valid or worthy of skepticism. As a result, knowledge is gained through a process of sense making, deduction, or rational analysis of reality. Reality is the supreme referent for interpretation (and serves as the basis for judgments about the value or correctness of competing interpretations), and there is a separation between facts, inferences, and reader judgments.

Reading is also an activity that can be approached when one has determined what genre (objective or subjective) a text embodies. One implication of the liberal-humanist approach may be that a text written in the objective language of science is to be considered truth, in the sense that it will inform the reader about the world. If a text is literary (fiction, poetry) or written in an "ordinary" voice (as in the newspaper), the reader may assume that it is not to be trusted as a source of true and valid information, but is to be questioned or merely enjoyed.

Table 1 summarizes the assumptions of liberal-humanist critical reading in four areas.

Table 1
Assumptions of Liberal-Humanist Critical Reading

Area	Liberal-Humanist Interpretation
Knowledge (epistemology)	Knowledge is gained through sensory experience in the world or through rational thought; separation between facts, inferences, and reader judgments is assumed.
Reality (ontology)	Reality is directly knowable and can, therefore, serve as a referent for interpretation.
Authorship	Detecting the author's intentions is the basis for higher levels of interpretation of text.
Goals of literacy instruction	Development of "higher" level skills of comprehension and interpretation.

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Critical Literacy Approaches

Critical literacy involves a fundamentally different stance toward reading. In essence, students of critical literacy approach textual meaning making as a process of construction, not exegesis; one imbues a text with meaning rather than extracting meaning from it. More important, textual meaning is understood in the context of social, historic, and power relations, not solely as the product or intention of an author. Further, reading is an act of coming to know the world (as well as the word) and a means to social transformation.

Critical literacy has a complicated philosophical history, and for the purposes of this article, we have selected only a few key influences that help distinguish it from other traditions of literacy theory and instruction. Critical theories of literacy are derived, in part, from critical social theory, particularly its concern with the alleviation of human suffering and the formation of a more just world through the critique of existing social and political problems and the posing of alternatives. "Critique" from this perspective involves "criticism of oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society" ([Kellner, 1989](#), p. 46). Critical theories of literacy have been greatly influenced by critical social theory's view that meanings are always contested (never givens), and are related to ongoing struggles in society for the possession of knowledge, power, status, and material resources. These struggles over meaning and resources are undertaken by unequal groups. That is, certain groups have the advantage in such struggles because they have maintained control over society's ideologies, institutions, and practices ([Morgan, 1997](#)). Critical social theorists believe that these inequalities can be exposed through critique and can be reconstructed, in part, through language.

This aspect of critical social theory has influenced critical literacy's focus on the ideological assumptions that underwrite texts. Therefore, teachers of critical literacy investigate issues of representation. They ask the following questions:

Who constructs the texts whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; whose interests are served by such representations and such readings; and when such texts and readings are inequitable in their effects, how these could be constructed otherwise. ([Morgan, 1997](#), pp. 1-2)

In doing so, critical teachers promote a new and different kind of textual practice, one that examines the nature of literacy itself -- particularly the ways that current conceptions of literacy create and preserve certain social, economic, and political interests.

A second important influence on critical literacy is the work of Paulo Freire. Freire, like the critical theorists of the [Frankfurt School](#), was troubled by the economic exploitation that he first witnessed in his native Brazil. Also like the critical social theorists, Freire saw language and literacy as key mechanisms for social reconstruction. He responded by working to develop an approach to adult literacy education that would serve as a vehicle for social and economic transformation. For Freire, the very pedagogy of literacy had to be transformed to make central issues of justice and the struggle for emancipation. Freire's pedagogy "has as much to do with the teachable heart as the teachable mind" ([McLaren, 1999](#), p. 50).

Freire's pedagogy was a comprehensive one, directed at the development of word-level reading skills within the context of dialogic critical interrogations of the world. In a typical example of Freirean pedagogy, instruction begins with a set of generative words selected both for their pragmatic value in the lives of the students and for their phonetic characteristics ([Freire, 1985](#)). The educator then works dialogically with students to codify these words into existential situations that involve them. Teacher and students then engage in reading, writing, and continued critical dialogue related to these generative themes, and learn the words in the context of themes that relate directly to their worlds and felt needs. For example, in Freire's work with adult Brazilian peasants, he used the generative word *well* to consider how words operated in their lives. Using this word, students and teachers can confront questions such as "Who owns the wells in our town? Who does not? How does well ownership reflect existing social and economic inequities? How can we work to transform these conditions?"

What is important for [Freire \(1985, p. 56\)](#) is that "the person learning words be concomitantly engaged in a critical analysis of the social framework in which men exist." The preceding example is too brief, but Freire talks extensively about pedagogical dialogue and the selection and use of generative themes in his writing.

The pedagogical goal of a critical education was for Freire (and remains for many critical theorists) the development of critical consciousness. In critical consciousness, students read texts (and the world) critically, and they move beyond critical readings of texts to become actors against oppressive situations. It is an assumption of critical literacy that "to become ever more critically aware of one's world leads to one's greater creative control of it" ([Hall, 1998, p. 186](#)). Through critical consciousness, students should come to recognize and feel disposed to remake their own identities and sociopolitical realities through their own meaning-making processes and through their actions in the world.

Both critical social theory and Freirean pedagogy involve a commitment to justice and equity, and both promote critique of texts and the world as an important (initial) mechanism for social change. Freire's emphasis on action, his commitment to literacy education, and his development of a comprehensive literacy pedagogy moved the concerns of critical social theory from philosophy to education. Choices that teachers make in classrooms are always, in part, decisions about what students and, hence, the nation, should become ([Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993](#)). The influence of Freire and critical theory is evident in the goals of critical teaching, which presumes that

American citizens [and citizens of many other countries] should understand, accept, and live amicably amidst the realities of cultural diversity -- along axes of gender, race, class, and ethnicity -- that are the hallmarks of...society. It presumes that people are entitled to fairness in their social and economic lives. It presumes that a critical citizenry, willing as well as able to take responsibility for the nation's future, is preferable to a passive, unengaged citizenry that lets government, business, and mass media do its thinking. Finally, it presumes that no one group is exclusively entitled to the privilege of representation, but that each has a right to tell its story, critique other stories, and participate in forming a community responsive to the needs of all its members. ([Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 6](#))

More recently, critical literacy has been influenced by poststructuralism, particularly its belief that texts do not possess any meaning in and of themselves, that meanings emerge only in relation to other meanings and practices within specific sociopolitical contexts. From this perspective, authors create texts and individuals interpret them within discursive

systems that regulate what it means to know in a particular setting. Statements (and interpretations) are judged as true or false according to the logic of these discursive systems. Within the discursive system of science, for example, only certain kinds of statements are considered valid and only certain kinds of evidence count as proof. From a poststructural perspective, the criteria used to make these judgments are neither natural nor neutral, but are instead constructed by particular institutions and communities of practice -- in this instance, scientific institutions and the community of scientists. The discourse of science is a powerful one in our culture, and therefore has the advantage in contests among potential meanings: the scientific explanation is often taken as superior for a variety of phenomena. For poststructuralists, the validity of scientific interpretations is dependent on this power rather than on any truth value ([McLaren, 1992](#), p. 322). Further, this power is associated with access to resources.

Poststructuralism's attention to discourse, power, and the context dependency of meaning undermines any assumption of neutrality or truth in judging the value of interpretations, as the basis for decision making, and so on ([Peters & Lankshear, 1996](#)). For poststructuralists and critical educators, language is bound up with producing and maintaining unequal arrangements of power ([Lankshear, 1997](#)). In this sense, texts and their associated meanings are ideological, rather than simply descriptive or factual.

Although there are several versions of critical literacy, they share the belief that literacy is a "social and political practice rather than a set of neutral, psychological skills" ([Siegel & Fernandez, 2000](#), p. 18). Critical literacy involves an understanding of the way ideology and textual practices shape the representation of realities in texts. That is, helping students become critically literate has to do, in part, with "enabling them to detect and handle the inherently ideological dimension" of language and literacy ([Lankshear, 1997](#), p. 46). Hence, while the word *literacy* to many people means little more than the ability to decode and encode oral language symbolically or to seek an author's meaning in a text, critical pedagogists concern themselves with questions such as "Read and write what? How? Under what conditions? For what purpose(s)?" ([Kelly, 1995](#), p. 99). Students of critical literacy are generally encouraged to take a critical attitude toward texts, asking what view of the world they advance and whether these views should be accepted ([Scholes, 1995](#)). In doing so, learners begin to reflect critically on the nature of literacy and literacies as social practices. Once they recognize that texts are representations of reality and that these representations are social constructions, they have a greater opportunity to take a more powerful position with respect to these texts -- to reject them or reconstruct them in ways that are more consistent with their own experiences in the world.

Critical approaches to text involve not only different approaches to textual interpretation, but also an understanding of how literacies are created and related to particular discursive communities that create, shape, and bound social life ([Lankshear & McLaren, 1993](#)). Students should come to recognize the nature of all literacies, discourses, and associated social practices as "historically contingent, socially constructed and, to that extent, transformable" (p. 44). If these practices are constructed by particular discourse communities, they can be altered. Further, readers should consider the ways that they have in part been formed -- literally constructed -- through their interactions with texts, through participation in particular discourse communities, and through the representations that they have encountered in texts. Critical readers should understand the ways that texts "portray a view of the world and position the readers to read and interpret that portrayed world in particular ways" ([Lankshear, 1997](#), p. 45), so they can resist or revise these representations (and the subject positions created by texts), as appropriate.

In its pedagogy, critical literacy combines poststructuralist, critical, and Freirean understandings. From poststructuralism, critical literacy understands texts as ideological constructions embedded within discursive systems and has borrowed methods of critique. From critical social theory, critical literacy understands that texts, being products of ideological and sociopolitical forces, must be continually subjected to methods of social critique. Finally, from Freire, critical literacy understands that literacy practices must always have social justice, freedom, and equity as central concerns.

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Considering a Pedagogical Example of Critical Literacy

Critical teachers ask students to consider questions such as the following as they read and interpret texts:

- How are the meanings assigned to a certain figure or events in a text?
- How does it attempt to get readers to accept its constructs?
- What is the purpose of the text?
- Whose interests are served by the dissemination of this text? Whose interests are not served?
- What view of the world is put forth by the ideas in this text? What views are not?
- What are other possible constructions of the world?

In one pedagogical example, [Luke, Comber, and O'Brien \(1996\)](#) discuss how a first-grade teacher utilizes questions such as these to help the 6-year-olds in her class learn to read and analyze how mothers are constructed in catalogs that promote and sell Mother's Day gifts. The children read and interrogate the catalogs with the help of some of the following guiding questions from the teacher:

- How are the mothers in the catalogs like real mothers? How are they not?
- What mothers are not included in the catalogs?
- Who are the people giving presents to the mothers?
- Where do children get the money to buy presents?
- Who produces these catalogs?
- Why do the catalog producers go through all this trouble to make sure you know what is available?

After this critical examining, the children realize that the mothers represented in the catalogs only represent aspects of mothers' lives connected to consumerism. This example also highlights an explicit social-action component as the first graders not only learn to critique texts, but also engage in some social action stemming from their new understandings. The children realize their mothers (and their corresponding cultural and social-class perspectives) are not represented, so they engage in a community research project. After the students research their mothers and other mothers in the community, they reconceptualize what Mother's Day means to them; the day becomes less about the buying of gifts and more about children being and sharing with their mothers.

Other teacher attempts to incorporate critical literacy goals with social action in classrooms include helping students acknowledge their own racism ([Michalove, 1999](#)), grapple with the

role of religion in public schools ([Hankins, 1999](#)), study their own privilege in a middle school class for gifted learners ([Blackburn, 1999](#)), examine historical “givens” ([Bigelow, 1995](#)), and critique whose standard is represented by standard English ([Christensen, 1995](#)).

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Comparing Examples Across the Two Perspectives

On the surface, the preceding example of critical literacy in a first-grade classroom ([Luke, Comber, & O’Brien, 1996](#)) appears similar to the earlier [critical reading example](#) in which first graders explored notions of community and home ([Shotka, 1960](#)). Both position readers as active rather than passive meaning-makers, and both stress the importance of textual critique. In the critical reading example, the students examine how the depictions of children and homes in their school texts differ from their own lives and experiences; in the critical literacy example, the students analyze the differences between mothers in catalogs and their own mothers. Both also emphasize higher level analytic and evaluative skills.

Though the two examples do have similarities, they differ in important ways. For example, in the critical reading classroom scenario, representations and analyses of differences across race, class, and gender, and questions of who gains or loses in the various representations, are absent. Although these students begin to examine why authors and illustrators choose certain representations of the world, they do not explicitly engage in social critique. The teacher does not help students challenge social inequities by asking whose homes are represented and whose are not, who benefits from these conceptions of home and family and who does not, and whether some people are without homes and why. Had Shotka encouraged teachers to explore these sorts of questions, she would have been moving from a liberal-humanist critical reading to a critical literacy perspective.

A critical literacy approach places in the foreground issues of power and explicitly attends to differences across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. It is also essential to point out that critical literacy educators examine these differences not as isolated occurrences but rather as part of systemic inequities or injustices. Consequently, critical teachers consider “the ways systems (e.g., of race privilege, gender dominance, corporate interests) are implicated in specific actions, texts, or situations” ([Edelsky, 1999](#), p. 5). Furthermore, with critical consciousness as a prominent goal of literacy learning, students not only read texts critically, but they also become actors to transform society (e.g., the first graders reconceptualize what it means to celebrate Mother’s Day).

In addition to differing in terms of focus (or lack of focus) on social critique, other key distinctions between critical reading and critical literacy are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Distinctions Between Liberal-Humanist Critical Reading and Critical Literacy

Area	Critical Reading	Critical Literacy
Knowledge (epistemology)	Knowledge is gained through sensory experience in the world or through rational thought; a separation between facts,	What counts as knowledge is not natural or neutral; knowledge is always based on the discursive rules

	inferences, and reader judgments is assumed.	of a particular community, and is thus ideological.
Reality (ontology)	Reality is directly knowable and can, therefore, serve as a referent for interpretation.	Reality cannot be known definitively, and cannot be captured by language; decisions about truth, therefore, cannot be based on a theory of correspondence with reality, but must instead be made locally.
Authorship	Detecting the author's intentions is the basis for higher levels of textual interpretation.	Textual meaning is always multiple, contested, culturally and historically situated, and constructed within differential relations of power.
Instructional goals	Development of higher level skills of comprehension and interpretation	Development of critical consciousness

Critical literacy, compared with other approaches to literacy theory and instruction, involves a fundamentally different view of text and the world. We hope we have demonstrated the ways that these differences between liberal-humanist critical reading and critical literacy are related to philosophical distinctions: the two traditions derive from separate schools of thought that carry with them distinct epistemological and ontological assumptions and commitments. These distinctions become most visible when issues of knowledge, reality, authorship, textuality, and the goals of education are considered. In essence, these approaches educate through different means and to different ends. The adoption by educators in the liberal-humanist tradition of a few critical terms, questions, or even practices does not a critical literacy make.

This article is intended, in part, to contribute to the ongoing conversation about critical literacy -- what it necessarily is and is not, and how it looks in classrooms. While we do not want to essentialize critical literacy, we do fear that, in the absence of these kinds of conversations, critical literacy and teaching for social justice could essentially become meaningless and experience the fate of the whole language movement. As [Edelsky \(1999\)](#) points out, the whole language movement suffered when groups of educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers jumped on the bandwagon, appropriating its ideas and twisting its terms in ways that were radically different from and inconsistent with the tenets of whole language philosophy. Whole language advocates are currently working to revive and reconceptualize their movement, and their struggles offer invaluable lessons for critical literacy advocates.

The broader purpose of this article is to engage in a conversation about educational practice that is critical in spirit, as well as in content. In asking critical questions about curricular "texts" and examining some of the ideological assumptions that underlie particular approaches to classroom instruction, we suggest that there are no neutral, disinterested, or even naturally superior instructional practices. Instead, all practices are laden with assumptions about the world, society, and educational outcomes. We suggest further that these assumptions and implicit goals should play a more central role in educational conversations. It is important that we openly acknowledge that education is always a contextually situated, socially constructed, ideological practice.

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