

Reluctantly Recognizing Resistance: An Analysis of Representations of Critical Literacy in *English Journal*

The authors examine six years of English Journal articles (2005–10) to explore how English educators represent and discuss student resistance to critical literacy.

In addition to the successes I (Robert) experienced as a high school English teacher, I faced many challenges and frustrations, including student motivation and attendance, “helicopter parents,” finding time and energy to grade papers, and limited resources. However, as an educator committed to teaching English to help students develop and use literacy not only to appreciate language and literature but also to raise awareness of social issues and affect positive change in the world—or what is often referred to as “critical literacy”—perhaps the most difficult challenge I faced in the classroom was student resistance.¹

Thankfully, I had a mentor at the time, Diane, who, also committed to teaching English for the goals of critical literacy, would talk with me about these challenges. In our conversations we tried to make sense of students’ resistance and how to work with it in our classrooms. Years later, I worked with a high school English teacher, Kate (pseudonym), to develop and implement a curriculum for her tenth-grade English classes designed to engage her students in critical literacy. While experiencing a great deal of success, we also encountered a significant degree of student resistance to critical literacy. Similar to those discussions with Diane, Kate and I spent a great deal of time trying to understand the student resistance and figure out how to handle it productively.

To this day, the conversations I had with Diane and Kate remain some of the most powerful and useful I have had as an educator. Ironically, it was not the discussions about our “successes” that most stimulated my thinking as an educator—it

was those discussions about our seeming “failure” that did so. Since then, I have become interested in how we, as English educators, discuss and represent teaching English for critical literacy, and more specifically, how we represent and discuss student resistance to critical literacy.

To explore how English educators represent critical literacy, particularly student resistance to it, I teamed up with another English educator interested in critical literacy (Lisa), and we analyzed the peer-reviewed articles published over six years (2005–10) in *English Journal*. The following questions guided our analysis:

1. To what extent does critical literacy appear as a practice and/or goal within peer-reviewed articles in *English Journal*?
2. How do the authors that address critical literacy represent it in their articles?
3. To what extent and how is student resistance to critical literacy represented in these articles?

In addressing these questions, we found that (a) critical literacy constitutes a major issue in English education; (b) critical literacy is overwhelmingly represented as successful; and (c) student resistance to critical literacy is mentioned in a substantial number of these representations but rarely receives any degree of sustained attention.

In sharing these findings in *English Journal*, our overarching goal is twofold. First, we want to encourage readers of *English Journal* to engage in more dialogue about student resistance related to their teaching English for critical literacy. Second, we want to encourage (potential) teacher-authors to

write about and share their experiences of student resistance—what it looks like, why and when it occurs, how it was worked through—so that other educators may be more attuned to possible, often unintended, student responses to critical literacy, and be better equipped with more strategies for addressing student resistance productively. Underlying both of these goals is the belief that examining student resistance may actually facilitate the teaching of critical literacy. In providing this analysis, we want to be clear that we are not critiquing the teachers or the lessons being written about in these articles but rather how, as a field, we represent student resistance to critical literacy.

We acknowledge that by focusing on *English Journal* articles from 2005 to 2010, we have focused only on one particular way of capturing the phenomenon of critical literacy in secondary English. We also recognize that our claims are not based on our observations of actual classrooms; that they are limited by issues of authority including who publishes in and serves as peer reviewers for *English Journal*, and the publication preference of the editorial teams; and that we have not analyzed scholarship published in other venues interested in examining teaching and learning within secondary English classrooms. Despite these limitations, our study does highlight how student resistance to critical literacy is and is not examined within an important professional context, and in doing so, we hope it establishes a need for increased attention to how these approaches are examined and represented.

Defining Critical Literacy

In 2000, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) named *critical literacy* one of three “vital” current trends and issues in secondary English (Allender iii). Since then, many English educators have advocated for increased attention to critical literacy, arguing that teaching for critical literacy helps students achieve academically, promotes social justice, and facilitates personal empowerment. For example, English educators have demonstrated how using Disney films helps students observe how seemingly innocent media texts promote troubling perspectives on gender (Wallowitz), literary texts help students question racism around the world (Qureshi), and hip-hop texts help students critique

and transform systems of oppression in the United States (Morrell and Duncan-Andrade).

In educational contexts, the term *critical* often refers to “high-order” thinking skills, such as reasoning, synthesis, and analysis. However, educators who use the term *critical* in relation to *critical literacy* do so to draw attention to issues of representation and normativity, relations of power and ideology, and practices of oppression, resistance, and/or liberation. Critical perspectives generally consist of a process whereby educators and students together (a) call into question and name what is constructed as “normal” or “natural”; (b) examine how these normalized social arrangements produce systems of oppression, domination, inequities, and injustices; and (c) promote social action designed both to expose oppressive social relations and to create more equitable and humane ones.

In focusing on *critical literacy*, educators explore the roles that *texts* and *textual practices* play within the project of exposing, promoting, and/or resisting dominant social, cultural, and political power relations. Specifically, emphasis is given to developing textual practices designed to “deconstruct dominant texts carefully (i.e., canonical literature, media texts) while also instructing them [students] in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice” (Morrell 313). In this way, critical literacy consists of consuming (reading, listening, viewing), producing (speaking, writing, designing), and distributing texts “in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations; and promoting individual freedom and expression” (314).

Defining Our Study

In reading the 414 peer-reviewed articles published in *English Journal* from 2005 to 2010, we determined whether or not an article constituted one that focused on critical literacy based on how well its content aligned with the aims of critical literacy described above—regardless of whether or not authors explicitly labeled the work as “critical.” Once cataloged, we reread the articles that explored critical

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literacy, this time focusing on *how* these articles represented critical literacy.

We quickly recognized that the majority of these articles represented critical literacy as successful, while some of the authors briefly discussed student resistance to critical literacy. As this pattern emerged, we reread and further cataloged the articles, this time separating out those articles that dealt with—or at least mentioned—student resistance from those that did not. From there, we reread the articles that explored student resistance to note *how* authors represented this phenomenon.²

Critical Literacy as a Significant Goal and Successful Practice

Ninety-eight of the 414 articles (or approximately 24% of the total) explored the phenomenon of critical literacy in secondary English. Nearly all of the 98 articles that talked about critical literacy were constructed as narratives of success, meaning that the authors wrote about the benefits, reasons, and tactics for critical literacy without mentioning many or any difficulties or challenges. In general, these narratives of success represent the teaching of secondary English for the goal of critical literacy as involving (a) student unity and agreement; (b) harmonious, triumphant outcomes; and (c) broad promises for future development and applications of students' newfound beliefs and behaviors.

One of the salient features of the articles that discussed the success of teaching for critical literacy is that the students are generally represented as a unified group of people who are in agreement with one another. There is little, if any, sense of differentiation among the students. For example, in their explanation of a class that focused on helping students to deconstruct stereotypes, Cheryl Gomes and James Bucky Carter write the following:

The class came to the conclusion that all stereotypes—even those that appear to have nice connotations—can be harmful. This discussion set the groundwork for the honest self-reflection in which I asked students to participate later. Moreover, this exercise enabled students to see how their beliefs about and actions toward people of other cultures directly affect individuals. (70)

In addition to characteristically focusing on success in general, this excerpt more specifically

reveals how “the class” is depicted as a singular entity, one that came to a certain conclusion seemingly without contention of any sort. In another article, John A. Poole explains how multicultural literature helped his students understand different points of view; he writes, “Lindsay and the other students were given a glimpse of life from another perspective. . . . It helped them be more open-minded in relating to others” (70). Despite the fact that the author focuses on the experiences of one student, her experience is generalized to all the students.

In addition to the singularity of and agreement among the students in classes that characterizes how critical literacy is represented, these articles also showcase harmonious and triumphant outcomes and endings. In other words, these articles represented how benevolent these approaches and the outcomes are for the students and society as a whole. In the aforementioned article, for example, one of the outcomes of critical literacy is that it helped all the students to “be more open-minded in relating to others” (Poole 70). In another example, Cynthia Messer, in explaining a project she did with students on learning about disability, writes the following: “Some of the most gripping essays I have read have been from students without disabilities who have interviewed an individual with a disability. In many cases, their insights have been profound because they have recognized and begun to overcome their biases” (38–39).

In this excerpt, we see how the project has worked to help students “overcome” their previously held ideas about a topic and bring about inner transformation for the students. All of the articles that explore critical literacy—even those that mention some student resistance—contain similar accounts of striking successes.

A third central feature of these success narratives involves promises for how the work of critical literacy is going to have future impact. For example, Jesse S. Gainer and Diane Lapp explain how by examining the Harlem Renaissance, secondary students will “expand [their] understandings about race, history, society, and their participation as members of society” (60). Similarly, I (Robert), along with my colleague, Carlin Borsheim, conclude our discussion of a research assignment in the following way: “Experiences with this project

helped students to realize their voice, as well as their role, in their community” (83).

Overall, these articles offer a picture of triumph and hope when it comes to the enactment and promises of critical literacy. In doing so, they leave little room to examine concerns related to implementing curriculum designed to facilitate students’ critical literacy or to mention students who did not demonstrate exemplary or “critical” thinking or action.

Resistance May Happen, But . . .

Of the 98 articles that explored critical literacy, 23 (approximately 23%) made at least a mention of students’ resistance. In some instances, authors explain how students exercised resistance passively through their lack of interest in the subject matter being studied, their silence, and/or their general refusal to engage in class activities. More commonly, however, the authors represented student resistance in more active ways. One representation is that they explain how students discounted the object of critique, particularly on the grounds that the students could not relate personally to it. Authors also explained how students denied the reality of the issue or object of critique or became “defensive” and offered “rationalizations.”

Similarly, authors described students as developing “resentments” toward the teacher, texts, or other students. For instance, Simao J. A. Drew and Brenda G. Bosnic explain how approaching texts through feminist theory with their AP English students leads to “a small measure of resentment. As one male student said, ‘Is this a post office being demolished? Because there certainly is a lot of male bashing going on’” (95). Other authors explain how students display resistance by complaining that the teacher is making more of something than necessary, or “over-analyzing.” For instance, Patricia Zumhagen asked her students to critique the way the author referred to women as a ball and chain, and a student replied, “the ball and chain label for women still works in our society. Everybody gets it but you” (83).

Overall, few of these authors provide any sustained discussion of this phenomenon or of ways to handle this issue in the classroom. In fact, nearly all of these articles only mention resistance in a sentence or a part of a sentence and then quickly go on

to explain how the lesson or activity was successful. For example, Barbara Bennett explains how when teaching an Ursula K. Le Guin story through an eco-feminism lens, she asks her students the following question: “How does our good life in this country depend on the suffering of others?” She then writes: “Understandably, young adults are resistant to questioning that confronts their lifestyle as they have always known it, and silence usually ensues. Slowly, though, thoughtful students will begin to offer suggestions” (66).

In this instance, Bennett mentions students’ resistance, but then quickly progresses to how the lesson moves past this. Also, Bennett’s explanation of the students’ resistance is found in normalized understandings of “young adults” who “are resistant to questioning that confronts their lifestyle”; in this way, student resistance is further removed from the particular context and placed within a general, normalized understanding of secondary-aged people. Bennett’s representation of student resistance to critical approaches is typical—both quantitatively and qualitatively—of most of the other 22 articles that mention resistance.

However, some articles did provide more than just a sentence or two. In fact, two authors framed student resistance or “discomfort” as evidence of learning. They suggest that “tension” and “discomfort” were natural aspects of learning and that, in part, their goals in teaching were to “bother” students and produce in them “the kind of dissonance that pushes re-seeing and rethinking” (Michell 71). Amanda Haertling Thein, Richard Beach, and Daryl Parks explore resistance by examining a student who had trouble accepting a viewpoint that poverty and abuse caused a character difficulty:

Corey applied beliefs and perspectives that worked well for him in understanding his life experiences, but they made less sense when he tried to understand the experiences of characters living in the text’s worlds of generational poverty and abuse. The tension that occurred for Corey in this discussion caused him, if only momentarily, to “try on” and consider a new perspective. (57)

Though this article spends more time discussing resistance than most, it still quickly moves from a student’s “tension” to the positive impact of developing alternate perspectives.

Why Focus on Resistance?

Teaching secondary English is not easy, particularly when it involves teaching for critical literacy. And yet, reading through the *English Journal* articles of the past six years, one can easily get the sense that teaching for critical literacy is, in fact, a neat and orderly endeavor that leads to a sense of triumph. This concerns us.

In no way opposed to celebrating successful classroom practices, we wonder how these representations of critical literacy might raise problems for other teachers interested in taking up these approaches in their own classrooms. Specifically, we are concerned that by reading success story after success story related to critical literacy, one could easily get the impression that teaching for the goal of critical literacy can be as simple as, say, choosing the right curriculum. Similarly, in his analysis of “sharing stories” in *English Journal*, Jonathan Bush points out that a lack of “negatives” in these articles leaves teachers who try these practices and “fail” at them with two options: blame themselves or blame their students.

Therefore, we are arguing that representations of critical literacy in *English Journal* include more sustained attention to issues of student resistance and difficulties as they engage these challenging

curricula. By examining these tensions and challenges—as well as times of success—educators interested in critical literacy will have a better chance at deepening their understandings of these potentially rich teachable moments. Ironically, it is the more complicated and nuanced representations of classroom practice that Mark Dressman found were actually more useful for teachers; in

other words, representations of practice that focused solely on success were less useful to teachers than representations that illustrate “the twists and turns of practice” (50).

Given the current climate of teacher-proofing curricula and bashing public schools, it is understandable that success stories would serve as a dominant mode of transmitting professional knowledge and the more messy “failure” stories

might not seem to be as politically sensible. However, we understand failure as not only an inevitable aspect of teaching and learning but also as the essence of learning and sharing about practice. Our hope, then, is that by exposing the lack of representations of failures within discussions of critical literacy in secondary English classrooms, we might encourage others to more deliberately and courageously expose those aspects of classroom practice that might not normally be deemed successful. In fact, we have to come to believe that it is these moments of resistance or difficulty that reveal critical literacy in action.

An Example of Sustained Attention to Student Resistance to Critical Literacy

Perhaps the best example of the kind of representation of student resistance we are arguing for is from Kelly Sassi and Ebony Elizabeth Thomas’s 2008 article, “Walking the Talk: Examining Privilege and Race in a Ninth-Grade Classroom.” In their piece, the authors explain how their attempt to explore issues of social justice in a ninth-grade English class brought with it many conflicts, what they describe as a “powder keg” going off in their classroom. In reference to a class discussion focused on a novel that discussed slavery, they write: “Several White male students asserted that slavery benefited African Americans and was not ‘evil’ like other human tragedies such as the Holocaust. According to them, slavery was a purely economic decision on the part of the Southern planters. The other students in the classroom were silent” (26). In addition to explaining the tensions and conflicts in the classroom, the article also explains the concerns Ebony, the teacher, experienced. They write, “Ebony believed she had done the right thing by choosing to teach *Wymena* . . . But how could she expand students’ notions of diversity to include Native American issues while also dealing with the layers of interracial tension already present in her classroom?” (26).

The article goes on to describe an intervention that the teacher used to address her students’ resistance, which included bringing into the classroom a “cultural sensitivity” expert who facilitated a “privilege walk” for the students. The authors explain how the privilege walk helped to desegregate the classroom, realign power relations within the classroom, and promote more open dialogue about

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issues of oppression and diversity. However, even in discussing this intervention, the authors point out that not all of the students' responses were positive.

Sassi and Thomas conclude with some of the characteristics of the narratives of success but not before taking readers on a detailed journey of ups and downs. It is clear from reading this article that teaching for critical literacy has the potential to provoke student resistance and when handled skillfully can lead to important teachable moments. The article's representation of these tensions and conflicts, as well as the educator's uncertainties about them, makes it trustworthy and especially useful for fellow educators.

Some Tips for Thinking about Student Resistance to Critical Literacy

Although we do not offer specific teaching practices in this article, we do have a few ideas to share about student resistance to critical literacy.


Normalize Resistance. It is important to keep in mind that critical literacy demands much from students and teachers—intellectually and emotionally.

The critique and questioning required by critical literacy may bring about intense feelings of vulnerability, anger, even rage, defensiveness, and denial. (It may also bring about intense feelings of pleasure, affirmation, and joy.) If these feelings emerge in the classroom, they may actually be indicators of engagement and learning as opposed to failure. In many respects, a teacher might anticipate or expect student resistance and actually plan for it.

Get Curious about Resistance. Given the intensity of emotions often related to critical work, resistance from students actually makes sense. Therefore, we encourage teachers to take a stance of inquiry and curiosity toward student resistance—to try to understand the motivations inherent in the resistance. You may ask when you sense student resistance: "What is going on here? What function might this resistance be serving (this student) right now?" Often, student resistance is seen negatively—as a barrier or inconvenience. We are suggesting the opposite: within critical literacy, student resistance may actually be generative.

Hold Space for and Work with Resistance. As evidenced by Sassi and Thomas's representation,

student resistance may, in fact, lead to powerful teachable moments. Therefore, we suggest developing strategies to allow students space to examine their resistances individually and collectively. One way to approach this might be to establish and maintain an ongoing classroom dialogue with the students about resistance. Another approach might be to discuss the issues with students or have them do some writing *in the moments* that resistance occurs.

Overall, our hope is that the findings of this study will encourage English educators to reflect more deeply on and represent in their writing of future *English Journal* articles their struggles and difficulties with teaching English for the goals of critical literacy.³ 

Notes

1. We use *resistance* as a blanket phrase to group together a variety of ways that educators describe how and why students do not engage in critical literacy.

2. It is important to note that when we looked for instances of resistance, we looked for more than the use of the words *resistance* or *resistant*; we looked for instances where authors made some mention of students refusing to engage in textual practices involving critical literacy, explicitly vocalizing disapproval or dismissal of the practices, and/or behaving defensively.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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One component of critical literacy is higher order thinking. The ReadWriteThink.org tip "How to Encourage Higher Order Thinking" shares ways in which students can get the tools that they need to understand, infer, connect, categorize, synthesize, evaluate, and apply the information they know to find solutions to new and existing problems. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/encourage-higher-order-thinking-30624.html>