Critical Literacies in Action
Social Perspectives and Teaching Practices

Karyn Cooper and Robert E. White (Eds.)

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Critical Literacies in Action: Social Perspectives and Teaching Practices
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation. Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity—youth identity in particular—the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant. But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference. If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfulfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce—literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
Critical Literacies in Action: Social Perspectives and Teaching Practices

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The term “literacy” has been around for a very long time. Although in the past one who was considered to be literate was one who was able to read and write, society no longer allows for such a simplistic definition. Literacy today means much more than functionality, particularly in terms of its characterization, its variety and its importance to global citizenry. The very meaning of “literacy” has become increasingly more complex due to a number of factors, including the expanding notion of what constitutes modern literacy as well as the need for greater understanding of the increasingly technological nature of the world within which individuals live and learn. As such, a new horizon in literacy research has appeared, promising to renegotiate traditional meanings of the term “literate” and what is required to be literate in this increasingly complex world.

In essence, this book asks how educators can become more experienced in order to truly support literacy, particularly for children of poverty or for those who have been labeled “at-risk”. This is important in current times, especially since a literate person is one who is able to involve him- or herself within a continuum of lifelong learning to achieve personal goals and to participate fully in the wider society.

Definitions of literacy have also evolved along with the evolution of the computer. Currently, the term “literacy” describes a commitment to and participation in a multiplicity of meaning making systems, many of which are exhibiting ever-greater degrees of interdependence with one another. The term “Critical Literacy” has come into use relatively recently and is generally regarded as a sub-category of Critical Pedagogy – Critical because it promotes an agenda for positive social change.

This book is divided into three sections. The first section, entitled “Critical Literacies in Society” establishes Critical Literacy as a driving force within the society at large. Section II, entitled “Critical Literacies in Action”, describes how Critical Literacy is being used in schooling today’s youth. The third and final section of this book is entitled “Critical Literacies in Practice” and delves into the theory and practice of Critical Literacy.

“Critical Literacies in Society”, the first section of this volume describes some of the larger considerations that educators and researchers may wish to consider as they embark on a study of what it is that makes literacy “critical”. The first chapter, written by John Willinsky, entitled “Of critical theory and Critical Literacy: Connections to the legacy of Critical Theory”, reminds us of the rich connections that Critical Literacy has to the Frankfurt School. This valuable lesson in history takes note of the enormous contributions of Theodor Adorno, as well as those of Herbert Marcuse. Professor Willinsky’s work provides an important background to the chapters that follow.

In the second chapter of this work, Robert E. White introduces the connections between Critical Thinking, Critical Pedagogy and Critical Literacy before embarking upon a tour of literacies, which have the potential to be Critical Literacies. In this chapter, entitled “Above and beyond: Critical literacies for the
new millennium’, Professor White notes that literacies do not become ‘critical’ by default, but depend upon how they are utilized to promote positive social change.

The next chapter, “Critical alternatives: Solutions to ease discrimination, oppression, and youth violence”, written by Wendy M. Pullin and Karyn Cooper makes a timely connection between youth violence and the need for greater literacy strategies that can be termed ‘critical’. Professors Pullin and Cooper suggest that in order to meet the needs of disenfranchised youth, society needs to assume the responsibility for determining the causes and providing solutions to this growing epidemic. They claim that it is easier to portray violent youth as ‘dangerous others’ than to accept that society has failed to address conditions of social injustice that such youth endure. One solution is for critical educators to provide adequate opportunities for youth living in socially toxic environments to read, speak, and write their authentic points of view. Critical psychologists can also provide solutions by working more effectively in communities to create more communication and support networks with students, schools, and communities.

The final chapter in this section, written by Kelly and Peter Freebody, entitled “Engaging and critiquing challenge in the process drama classroom: Socio-economic status as topic and resource”, follows two groups of students through an improvisational drama class as they discuss their ideas around happiness, sadness and the connections between these states of being to one’s economic situation. Not surprisingly, students had varying views on the advantage of being born into an upper socio-economic status household and how this may or may not influence one’s choice of future careers.

Section II, entitled “Critical Literacies in action” refocuses the view of the society at large and brings it to bear on the classroom. Chapter 5, written by Kate Pahl and Jennifer Rowsell, entitled “Traveling objects and reconfiguring identities: Meaning-Making and multi-modalities” describes two studies, one in Princeton New Jersey, and the other in a school in South Yorkshire, UK. In both studies, using ethnographic approaches, attention was paid to multimodality and how transformations across modes enhance children’s literacy learning. In one study, the researcher observed a grade two teacher implement an environmental box project as part of ongoing action research into her practice. In the second study, Professors Pahl and Rowsell look at how a secondary teacher uses multimodal teaching to foreground identity in literacy work.

In “Uncomfortable positionings: Critical Literacy and identity in a post-apartheid university classroom”, Carolyn McKinney presents classroom-based research conducted in a first year English and Cultural Studies course at a South African university in an attempt to answer what it means to take student identity seriously in Critical Literacy practice and how one engages productively with student resistance to critical pedagogy? Professor McKinney considers how students are represented and positioned in and by the local curriculum materials representing the apartheid past that are on offer in the course as well as how they respond to and often resist such positionings. She uses classroom data to illustrate that such resistance does not necessarily prevent productive engagement; on the contrary, it can provide powerful teaching moments. She argues that resistance is a
complex, rather than homogenous process and is uneven – that is, students can resist different texts in different ways, and can return to accept texts that they previously resisted. While not part of a linear progression, resistance may be a necessary process for some students and may be the only way that they can engage with particular texts at particular moments. She concludes that Critical Literacy should not be used to overcome resistance, but rather to engage with it.

In “Outside more common spaces for Critical Literacy: Exploring issues of language and power”, Chapter 7 in this volume, Vivian Vasquez and Sarah Vander Zanden take readers outside more common spaces to locate Critical Literacy work along Critical Literacy paths less traveled or talked about. The researchers work from the position that classroom are frequently populated by people who have migrated from somewhere else. In their diversity, they bring with them multiple identities and multiple perspectives. In this chapter those diverse perspectives come to life as students and teachers together work to understand how texts, both social and written, work to position them in particular ways as they explore the relationship between language and power. Throughout the chapter, the researchers bring to life classroom conversations and literacy events where students and teachers act as active designers of both print based and technologically based text.

In Chapter 8, entitled “Countering the rhetoric of warfare: A framework for practical media criticism and curriculum on the war in Iraq”, Jonathan Arendt discusses how he used a variety of texts and representational material to ensure that his students were able to develop a greater capacity for thinking critically. He attempts to broaden their horizons and, in the process, recognizes that his strategies are not only encouraging students to question biases and the sources of information that they are consuming, he also realizes that this is not necessarily safe terrain. His reflections on the rhetoric of war allow a recognition that the topic of warfare raises serious emotional and ethical issues.

The third section of the book, entitled “Critical Literacies in Practice” combines a theoretical and a practical perspective on the topic of Critical Literacy. The first chapter in this section, Chapter 9, Written by James Paul Gee and entitled “Basic Information Structure’ and ‘Academic Language’: An approach to discourse analysis”, attempts to show how an approach to Critical Literacy would apply to a specific piece of research on children. The piece of research focused on is a well-received study of abused children’s responses to anger, published in major journal. Professor Gee’s analysis has implications for how we think about research and human subjects, the place of research in institutions, and how we read research when we care about children. This chapter ties in to education primarily around the issue of how teachers, researchers, and educators ought to think about the “hard” research data they consume in regard to children, as well as how they ought to think about academic forms of language connected to schooling and research. This chapter reveals how at one level—a fairly deep level of linguistic analysis—there is a sense in which even the researchers know that what they did was unethical. This, of course, raises the question of why they did it and why the paper is widely accepted by people in its field. This issue is particularly important now with the current focus on and interest in the connections between “academic language” and school success.
In Chapter 10, “Critical Literacy: Methods, models and motivation”, Hilary Janks puts into practice some of the discourse analysis procedures used by James Gee. Her chapter focuses on three key concepts that underpin a critical approach to language education; dominance, diversity and access. Professor Janks notes that Critical Literacy requires that we simultaneously engage with and distance ourselves from texts; reading with a text and reading against a text. Such a procedure is bound to produce contestation and change. Reconstruction needs deconstruction in order to understand the many relationships that take shape and come into play when such a process is applied as a teaching and learning strategy. Professor Janks tries to show how these concepts can assist in constructing lively classroom activities.

Chapter 11, written by Jackie Marsh, is entitled “‘Am I a couch potato?’ blog: Blogging as a Critical Literacy practice”. Professor Marsh suggests that recent proliferation of social software and the emergence of a range of web products and services that enable user-generated content have given rise to a wide range of internet-based, Critical Literacy practices. Elementary and primary schools, consequently, have adopted some of these practices, but not always in ways which privilege pupils’ agency and voice. In this chapter, Professor Marsh draws from recent projects undertaken in primary schools in England in order to explore how teachers can develop productive strategies that create opportunities for critical engagement with new literacy practices and which, at the same time, foster social justice.

The final chapter in this volume is written by Peter Trifonas and Greg O’Leary and is entitled “The difference of Critical Literacy: A diverse discourse dialogue on ‘taken-for-granted practices’ in English education”. Theoretical underpinnings and reflections are interspersed with a study of how subject English has undergone a metamorphosis in Eastern Canada. Official curricula from different periods in subject English’s past involve problematizing taken-for-granted categories to show how they have helped to shape discourse in the past. This approach allows for multiplicity, openness, and new ways of thinking about the way we read texts and conduct research. It calls for active analysis of that which has been archived and accepted. A text is also defined by its underlying message and that which has been omitted. Thus, it is within the affirmative ethics of a “community of the question” and multiple sites of literacy that arise from within it that a synthesis of democratic education can occur. This may assist in providing both a philosophical and methodological means through which to rethink educational equity beyond the competing distinctions of dichotomous categories that separate us.

We, the co-editors of this volume hope that you, the reader, will enjoy and gain from these contributions. We hope that you will continue to benefit from these writings as we have benefited and that future studies will owe a debt, at least in part, to the analyses and discussions that occur between the covers of this book.

Karyn Cooper
Robert E. White
SECTION I
CRITICAL LITERACIES IN SOCIETY
CHAPTER 1

Of Critical Theory and Critical Literacy: Connections to the Legacy of Critical Theory

Among the approaches to teaching reading and writing, Critical Literacy offers connections to the larger world of ideas that are among the most impressive and challenging of any program that makes a claim on the school day. Even in its more innocuous forms, Critical Literacy can be said to owe a striking debt to the twentieth-century legacy of Critical Theory. Critical Theory represents a body of work that was produced, in large part, by the Frankfurt School or Frankfurt Circle associated most notably with Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Eric Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas (Jay, 1973). Critical Theory amounts to a philosophical take on social theory, informed by Marx and Freud. During the middle decades of last century it offered an unrelenting critique of contemporary sources and cause of oppression and repression. It was given to intellectual acts of resistance that were intended to undermine the increasing regulation of life, in an effort to create a counter-weight to what was seen as the mass deception fostered by political regimes that were sustained by the culture industry.

THE INFLUENCE OF CRITICAL THEORY

The educational influence of Critical Theory is most immediately present, and often openly acknowledged, in the Critical Literacy work associated with Shor (1999), Steinberg (2005a), Davies (1996), Luke (2000), Comber (2002), Knobel and Lankshear (2002), and others, while the larger educational influence of Critical Theory extends to the more broadly directed critical pedagogy that informs the work of Joe L. Kincheloe, bell hooks, Henry Giroux, Roger Simon, and others (Kincheloe, 2004). Kincheloe writes of how “critical theory forms the foundation of critical pedagogy” (2004, 45), while his chapter on “the foundations of critical pedagogy” devotes a section on Antonio Gramsci, among the figures most commonly associated with Critical Theory (Kincheloe, 64-66). See Lankshear and Knobel (2002) for distinctions to be made between critical pedagogy (focused on teaching) and Critical Literacy (on language), while acknowledging that Critical Literacy has formed at “the intersection of critical theory and pedagogy with literacy studies”. Leonard (1990) also credits critical pedagogy as a political practice of Critical Theory.

Through the 1990s, Critical Literacy emerged as a “coalition of educational interests committed to engaging with the possibilities that technologies of writing

and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement,” as Sandy Muspratt, Allan Luke and Peter Freebody put it, following a pair of conferences on Critical Literacy held at Griffith University in 1992 and 1993 (1997, 1).

How Critical Theory, as a thoroughly German philosophical school (think Kant, Hegel, and Marx) that first arose in the 1920s and 30s, came to have such a sustained influence on a number of education scholars who are now reaching their prime could be cast as a story of the 1960s. The more bookish, left-leaning elements of the generation that came of age during that decade found in Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), second perhaps only in back-pack popularity to Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1958), a new and invigorating way of making sense of the world. Marcuse opened this book by flatly declaring that “A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress” (1964, 1). Compare this to Kerouac’s opening line: “I had first met Dean after my wife and I split up” (1957, 1).

Marcuse nailed the bankruptcy of suburban life in a way that *Time* and *Life* magazines managed to miss, giving sacred democracy no leeway (amid the cold war), and throwing in ironic punch-line tokens, at least in the case of this opening sentence. The book provided a relentless critique of the here and now for the industrialized world—“the totalitarian universe of technological rationality is the latest transmutation of Reason” (123) — and sold over 300,000 copies. One testimony to the receptivity of the readership at the time is the general accuracy of Michael Walzer’s critique that “Marcuse’s prose [in *One-Dimensional Man*] is cumbersome, harsh, repetitive, abstract, only sometimes compelling, never beautiful” (1988, 170). Paperback Marcuse gave the counter-culture a philosophically critical edge, in exchange for beads and flowers, and it cut through the smooth and comfortable lives of our parents’ generation like the wail of an over-amplified electric guitar. Marcuse’s opening lines at his talk at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London in 1967 were, “I am very happy to see so many flowers here and that is why I want to remind you that flowers, by themselves, have no power whatsoever, other than the power of men and women who protect them and take care of them against aggression and destruction”.

Some 40 years on, it may be tempting to wonder how far this critical sensibility has come since Marcuse first asked, “How can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions of freedom?” (6). What now of the harsh note on which Marcuse concluded *One-Dimensional Man*? In a final section entitled “The Chance of Alternatives,” and on the book’s final page, he saw no better path ahead than to give one’s life up to what he termed “the Great Refusal” (1964, 257). It was “just say no” in the biggest way. And why? Well, as Marcuse saw it, “the critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and the future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative” (Ibid.).

Today, one has to wonder if traces of the great refusal could possibly be stalking the hallways of “effective and productive” schools of education in the guise of *Critical Literacy*. I would have said yes and no, too (to stay true to Critical...
Chapter 1

Theory’s negative spirit). That is, Critical Literacy does carry forward this legacy, but not entirely and often for very good reason. This chapter offers a way to reconsider the balance between what is brought forward and what is left behind, just as it considers whether the value of Critical Theory can be so selectively retained. To pause over just what these difficult, relentlessly critical works demanded of readers and students is to reconsider the origins of what was critical at the root of Critical Literacy, as well as the mix and balance of critical and affirmative elements since the grateful refusal played so well to so many. Revisiting earlier work in Critical Theory, particularly that of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, remains a way to root about in the basic principles of Critical Literacy. To do so, you may have already realized, is to risk riding the current wave of 1960s nostalgia that tends to grip my generation at this time in our lives. I am writing this, for example, as the fiftieth anniversary of Kerouac publishing that generation-mobilizing *On the Road* is being celebrated, as are the 40 years that have passed since San Francisco’s Summer of Love, where all that mobilization seemed to converge at least for a moment. Less celebrated is the fact that, also 40 years ago, Theodor Adorno’s *Prisms* (1967) was published as his first book to be translated into English.

**THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL**

On the other hand, my intention is not to call anyone on the carpet for a lack of fealty to Adorno’s negative dialectic. Such dogmatic gestures are so obviously contrary to what Critical Theory is all about. If it was not always the case or ever enough, it was at least Marcuse’s boast that “critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its basis” (1968, p. 156). Certainly, the feminist take up of Critical Theory’s shortcomings on gender continues to follow in the best tradition of extending its own critical dialectic (Hebeale, 2006; Marcuso, 2006), as are more recent critiques of its Eurocentrism and other ethnocentricities that critical pedagogy seeks to move its critical work beyond (Kincheloe 2007). Marcuso, for example, uses the “emancipatory project of early Critical Theory” as a means of reminding feminists of the degree to which they have more recently “curbed its political aspirations and narrowed its theoretical field” with a goal of being able to “diagnose when and how critique loses its critical cast, when and how it reproduces the rationalities of power it purports to resist” (2006, 88–89).

Those who contributed to Critical Theory were attentive to history, even if historical developments promised no relief from the need for critique: “Critical thought… does not abandon its commitment even in the face of progress” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, ix). Marcuse speaks of how “critical theory concerns itself with preventing the loss of the truths which past knowledge labored to attain” (1968, 152). It “must concern itself to a hitherto unknown extent with the past – precisely insofar as it is concerned with the future” (158). Adorno, too, held to this sense of the past’s subtle persistence. He wrote toward the end of his life that “whatever was once thought, however, can be suppressed; it can be forgotten
and can even vanish,” only to affirm that despite this suppression, “it cannot be denied that something of it survives” (1991, 203).

Critical Theory itself bears the marks of its own rough history. The Frankfurt Circle was forged out of the experience of largely Jewish exiles forced to flee their imagined homeland under the threat of initially having their right to teach and then the very right to life denied (itself a great refusal). They then took various paths (tragically aborted in the case of Walter Benjamin in 1940) through Paris, Oxford, New York, California and then back to Frankfurt, with the Frankfurt’s homelessness itself becoming the ethical ground on which the critique is built, or as Adorno was to plainly put it: “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (1984, 39).

Another aspect of this remaining apart can be seen in the active pursuit of the Institute of Social Research’s independence, which gave rise to the Frankfurt School, as that independence was maintained through the philanthropic support of the Weil family and by means of affiliation with the University of Frankfurt (Jay, 1973, 3–9). Max Horkheimer, in his foreword to Martin Jay’s history of the Frankfurt School notes that with Weil’s support, “a group of men interested in social theory and from different scholarly background, came together with the belief that formulating the negative in the epoch of transition was more meaningful than academic careers” (Jay, 1973, xxv). In the course of this history, members of the Frankfurt School sought, as Habermas was to sum it up, “to think through the political disappointment at the absence of revolution in the West, the development of Stalinism in Soviet Russia, and the victory of fascism in Germany” (1995, 116).

How, then, does Critical Literacy, today, with its Critical Theory roots rarely showing, reveal more than a trace of this earlier history? It is so clearly and comfortably at home in the schools by this point that you can find Critical Literacy listed as one of the reading topics promoted by the International Reading Association (IRA), which represents tens of thousands of teachers in its promotion of professionalism among those involved in literacy instruction. Still, in the IRA’s coverage of Critical Literacy, something of a family resemblance can be found with Critical Theory’s earnest unmasking of consumer and economic ideologies. The IRA advises teachers that Critical Literacy entails encouraging “active, engaged reading” with students, which “means approaching texts with a critical eye—thinking about what they say about our world, why they say it, and whether the view they promote should be accepted” (Focus on Critical Literacy, 2007). The IRA then goes on to offer teachers a lesson on determining a writer’s “point of view” as an instance of Critical Literacy in practice. A closely related and no less popular approach to Critical Literacy is to teach students to “detect bias” with a focus on the news media: “Despite the journalistic ideal of ‘objectivity,’ every news story is influenced by the attitudes and background of its interviewers, writers, photographers and editors” (Media Awareness Network, 2007).

Identifying bias as the issue can make these acts of misrepresentation and distortion appear as no more than a passing prejudice, a slight unconscious tendency, among certain media people who should know better. Yet such lessons can also open the prospect of something more. A teacher who helps students make a habit out of considering, with each text they encounter, what does it say about the
world and why does it say it could lead the class into engaging with the same ideological issues around “mass deception” that Critical Theory so avidly pursued (to use part of a chapter title from *Dialectics of Enlightenment*; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). A few of the students may start to question the larger economic and ideological motives behind, say, newspaper editorials supporting America’s military actions in the name of freedom and democracy. From such a starting point, the endemic and repeated pattern of biases could become apparent for inspired teachers and students, who would realize something far more systemic and inherently ideological is at work in mainstream media, resulting in, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it, “the stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity” (1972, 126). The rise today of the blogosphere, as a large-scale alternative media with a substantial segment devoted to taking issue, from its own ideological positions, with this mainstream media, offers educators further opportunities to help students realize just what the culture industry would make of them.

**CRITICAL LITERACY**

If but the faintest trace of Critical Theory survives in what the IRA and Media Awareness Network make of Critical Literacy, its legacy is far more vibrant and alive among more progressive forces in education. Ira Shor, at the City University of New York, for example, has used Critical Literacy as a concept to apply and extend the work of Paulo Freire in post-secondary education. Freire’s (1985) rightly celebrated work on behalf of educating the oppressed has proven an inspiring point of departure for many working in Critical Literacy, with the step from Critical Theory’s interest in emancipation taking on the far more educational sensibility with Freire’s focus on empowerment (Lankshear and McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997; Shor and Pari, 1999).

When it comes to the question of “What is Critical Literacy?”, Shor treats it as a means by which we “can redefine ourselves and remake society, if we choose, through alternative rhetoric and dissident projects”; he holds that “this is where Critical Literacy begins, for questioning power relations, discourses, and identities in a world not yet finished, just, or humane” (Shor, 1999). It is also with the questioning of power relations, discourses and identities that Critical Theory begins in Shor’s work, and far more so than in his hopes of redefining lives and remaking society. In fact, if Critical Theory begins with such questioning, it is never quite clear where Critical Theory goes next, except on to further critical questioning. This is part of the dilemma of Critical Theory’s legacy for Critical Literacy. The IRA lessons on Critical Literacy may not go far enough in their pursuit of critique, or at least would take an inspired teacher, with Joe L. Kincheloe’s *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (2004) tucked under his or her arm, to push beyond the superficial identification of bias, and realize the more profound ravages of ideology that are affected by the media. But by the same token, Shor and others need to recognize the risk of assuming that this critical questioning will lead to the
remaking of societies. It can have the effect of undermining the value of the critique itself to which Critical Theory so closely held.

Horkheimer and Adorno offer repeated instances of this blunt refusal to step beyond the questioning; they were more than satisfied at leaving things upturned by their aggressive, no-holds-barred critique. They conclude their review of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, by noting the ultimate hollowing out of our lives in modern times, while not pausing for a moment over what was to be done as a result: “The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions” (1972, 167).

So at one level it makes sense that Shor, Steinberg, and others, inspired by the level of critique sustained by Critical Theory, have seen fit to carry the critical ball into the schools through the development of educational programs and by supporting “alternative rhetoric and dissident projects,” to cite Shor again (1999). To their credit, those working today with Critical Literacy have struck something of a balance, in which they have kept distinct both the surviving elements of Critical Theory, in Adorno’s sense, and the educational rhetoric of empowered alternatives and the equipping of students with needed skills. There are those who would blur distinctions between critical theory and pedagogical strategies, as suggested by Robert Young’s (1996) advice to teachers: “it makes it a little easier to remember that critical theory is more appropriately thought of as a critical method” (2) and by the book title *Critical Literacy/Critical Teaching: Tools for Preparing Responsive Teachers* (Dozier, Johnston, and Rogers, 2006).

Keeping these two aspects in peaceful coexistence amounts to an ongoing educational experiment, not just of working from within the institutions – as the Frankfurt Circle had little trouble with that aspect, even as they worked hard to maintain their intellectual and financial independence as an Institute of Social Research – but in how far the weight of this critique can be carried into the lives of teachers and children (something for which Adorno, at least, had something of an appreciation for, with further discussion of this to follow). This is why it is worthwhile reconsidering how themes of Critical Theory and education programs can be brought together in Critical Literacy.

To take one striking example, Shirley Steinberg, a professor at McGill University, provides an analysis of *critical (media) literacy* that in the course of a single paragraph carries with it this movement between the current rhetoric of student preparation and the spirit of Critical Theory. In the preface to a reader on media literacy, she first establishes the collection’s educational bona fides. She makes it clear that “our responsibility [is], then as educators, to prepare our students/citizens, to learn how to use [media], consume it, and to have personal power over it” (2007, xiv). That obligation out of the way, she decisively delivers a few sentences later the decisive Critical Theory line: “Media have been and can continue to become the ultimate hegemonic WMD [weapons of mass destruction] to a complacent or ignorant audience” (Ibid.). Horkheimer couldn’t have said it any
better. But then, Dewey might well subscribe to Steinberg’s earlier sense of educational responsibility. Certainly, I would. There is realpolitik and savvy to such a stance, as it is able to make what is critically subversive possible for so many more teachers and students than would otherwise be realized. There is, as well, a distinction to be made here between the practice of theory and the theory of practice, with the traditions of Critical Theory playing a greater role in her scholarly publishing (the practice of theory) than in her work with education students where the theory of necessary educational practices play a greater part in helping these students bring this Critical Literacy into the lives of the students. There are precedents within the Critical Theory legacy, at least in the case of Adorno, as I shall discuss below, for the material and institutional basis for these distinctions. A similar skills-based grounding for lessons inspired by Critical Theory is found when Davies (1997) defines “Critical Literacy” as a “capacity to make language live, to bring oneself to live through language and, at the same time, bring to bear on language a critique which makes visible the powerful forces of rationality and linear patterns of thought” (28); she then goes on to conclude that Critical Literacy (and critical social literacy) “are aimed at giving students some skill in catching language in the act of formation and in recognizing and assessing the effects of that formation” (29).

In terms of large-scale implementations of this two-sided approach to Critical Literacy, Allan Luke was able to bring such a program to Queensland, Australia, in his role at the time of Deputy Director General of Education for the state. For him the question was “What happens when a ‘radical’ idea [like Critical Literacy] moves from the political outlands to become a key concept in a state curriculum” (2000, 448). Under his leadership, Critical Literacy was to form part of a “semiotic ‘toolkit’” in a statewide curriculum (449). The idea was to enable students to use “their existing and new discourse resources for exchange in the social fields where texts and discourses matter” (449). His was “a vision of literacy as visible social practices with language, text, and discourse,” and he saw Critical Literacy as “an educational project that engages with critique of the worlds of work, community life, media and popular and traditional cultures” (459). Critical Literacy is again part of an instrumental skill-set, as well as the source of specific critiques, whether of “possessive individualism” or “gendered forms of social identity” or on behalf of “disadvantaged students” (452). However, Luke points out, these “‘critiques’ did not stay critiques for long,” and were soon “transformed into practical agendas and materials for teachers across Australia” (Ibid.). Luke again makes clear the back and forth motion of these ideas, the moving within and outside of Critical Theory’s particular legacy. The movement back into the sharper legacy of Critical Theory adding considerably, I would suggest, to the quality of this tool, while the moving outside of it, by turning it into skill and method giving it its hold on the classroom. Luke (2000) suggests that, “The accelerated attempts by teachers to transform contemporary academic theory… into classroom practice were and remain quite remarkable among Australian teachers” (452).
In the hands of these educators, teaching remains an act of hope and possibility that was otherwise missing from the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, even as its members continued to teach a distinguished second generation of critical theorists (including Jürgen Habermas, Angela Davis, Andrew Feenberg, and Axel Honneth among others). It might seem the perfect complement, if not the ultimate compliment, to give Critical Theory a bit of a second life in the pages of this work devoted to Critical Literacy. But something else has to be said as well, at this point of reflection. And that is, that Critical Theory’s disinclination to move beyond a theory of critique cannot be treated as entirely the result of difficult and dismal historical experiences or a lack of opportunity in exile. In America, rather, the ability to obtain research funding for empirical studies in prejudice became the best means of maintaining the intellectual independence of the Institute of Social Research (keeping it from being absorbed into Columbia University). But in all of that, the critique has its own special claim as a source of knowledge and understanding for Critical Theory. This claim rests on how it engages the gaps and contradictions within existing ideas (in a dialectic), rather than imagining that it has a grip on an external reality. What follows from the critique, whether in the form of educational programs, alternative or experimental models, systematic research projects was a concern to the Frankfurt School insofar as such practical and programmatic matters could, if they began to drive the work, place the theoretical value of critique at risk.

Members of the Institute of Social Research did undertake in Frankfurt and New York social science studies of authority and culture, Nazism and anti-Semitism. The Institute maintained an active publishing program, including a scholarly journal, which brought together theoretical work, intellectual historical studies, and survey results (e.g., German physicians’ attitudes toward sexual morality). In America, the Institute undertook a major program of research on the sources of prejudice that was financed by the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee in the 1940s. But still Horkheimer treated the empirical side of this research as itself an experiment, to be approached warily, and saw the challenge, as Director of the Institute, “to present examples of an approach especially aware of the necessity to integrate theoretical thinking with empirical analysis” (1941, p. 365). The degree to which that integration was successful or ultimately helpful to theoretical thinking (as it was for Institute funding) is an important question to ask, as part of what Critical Theory achieved, and what I am drawing attention to with this chapter in relation to the work of Critical Literacy advocates, is how integration may not be the principal issue in the relation between the theoretical and empirical, compared to more distinct forms of co-existence that are possible. The Frankfurt Circle had long rejected “the hypothesis-verification-conclusion model,” as Martin Jay points out in his history of the Institute, given how, in his words, “modern empiricism [was seen to have] capitulated before the authority of the status quo” in its positivist attempts to separate facts and values (1973, pp. 240, 62). Adorno, in a section of his book *Minima Moralia* (1951) that he later excised, wrote: “The procedure of the official social sciences is little more