Democracy and Its Discontents
Critical Literacy across Global Contexts
Robert E. White
St. Francis Xavier University, Canada
and
Karyn Cooper
University of Toronto, OISE, Canada

This volume brings together important voices regarding constraints and potential possibilities for democracy in action. The book addresses various understandings of democracy and provides specific critiques. Connections between critique, critical literacy, and its potential for society and education are presented and organized smoothly and accessibly, facilitating easy engagement with the ideas within. These ideas have been carefully thought through so that the text becomes accessible, comprehensible and logical. Readers may benefit from this work through its synthetic, international and comparative approach to issues surrounding critical literacy and its relationship with the democratic process. Complementing the text with audio-visual content allows readers to engage with some of the foremost professionals in the field of critical literacy. Videos of Noam Chomsky add to this a definitive view of democratic practice. The authors have striven to make this “video-text” appropriate, interesting and innovative. Moreover, readers may particularly appreciate the informative summary at the end of every chapter, which is presented in more accessible terms for the uninitiated who may be interested in ways of dealing with critical literacy practices in social, political and educational contexts. This is a very personal book that surprises, represents a unique view of the interrelationship between democracy and literacy, reinterprets significant academic writings in critical pedagogy, offers an analysis of theoretical and empirical research, and provides in-depth narratives and portraits of stimulating scholars in education who have worked towards development of an engaged and empowered electorate.
Democracy and Its Discontents
CULTURAL PLURALISM DEMOCRACY, SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE & EDUCATION

Volume 1

Series Editors:

Paul R. Carr, Université du Québec en Outaouais
Gina Thésée, Université du Québec à Montréal

International Editorial Board:

Ali Abdi, University of British Columbia
Antonia Darder, Loyola Marymount University
George Dei, OISE at the University of Toronto
Walter Gershon, Kent State University
David Lefrançois, Université du Québec en Outaouais
Darren Lund, University of Calgary
Handel Kashope Wright, University of British Columbia
Peter McLaren, Chapman University
Dave Sangha, University of Northern British Columbia
Lynette Shultz, University of Alberta
Christine Sleeter, California State University Monterey Bay
Suzanne SooHoo, Chapman University
Dalene Swanson, University of Stirling
Njoke Wane, OISE at the University of Toronto
Joel Westheimer, University of Ottawa

This book series aims to develop a field of overlapping research that crosses and integrates the domains, disciplines, subjects and themes of cultural pluralism, democracy and social justice. Each theme is taken up individually in many debates but our focus is to bring together advanced and critical analyses that transcend boundaries, languages, disciplines and theoretical and conceptual approaches. We are interested in books that can problematize cultural pluralism in relation to, with and around democracy and socio-environmental justice, especially in relation to education. Our focus on cultural pluralism is intentional, and we aim to move the debate on identity, difference and lived experience forward within a critical lens, seeking to create new, varied and meaningful discussions that go beyond the normative labels of multiculturalism and interculturalism. The literature around education for democracy that underscores political literacy, critical engagement and transformative education is also highly relevant here as is the field of social justice, which examines power relations, laws and policies, structures and experiences at myriad levels. The guiding principles for books in this series include: critical analysis; interdisciplinary; nuanced and complexified thinking; epistemological interrogation; varied research approaches; innovation; openness to international and comparative studies. The books in this series will include case studies, comparative analyses, and collaborations across linguistic, social, ethnic, racial, national, religious and gender boundaries, which may include empirical, conceptual and theoretical frameworks and analysis.

While not an exhaustive or exclusive list, some of the areas that will be of interest for this book series include: Migration, immigration and displacement; Identity and power; Globalization, neoliberalism and cultural pluralism; Critical epistemology; Democracy and diversity; Social justice and environmental justice; Media analyses and studies; Macrosociological studies; Political ecology; Cultural diversity; Educational change.
Democracy and Its Discontents

Critical Literacy across Global Contexts

Robert E. White
St. Francis Xavier University, Canada

and

Karyn Cooper
University of Toronto, OISE, Canada
Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, “Why, why, why?”
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.

From *The Books of Bokonon*

– *Cat’s Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut, 1963, p. 182
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xvii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Democracy and Its Discontents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What this Book is about</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social Value of Democracy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Interview with Noam Chomsky</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative Democracy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory Democracy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What’s Education Got to do with It?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Education like Today?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: What is Critical Literacy?</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy and Critical Literacy</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sick Rose</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Literacy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Autobiographical</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Autobiographical Context</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situating Ourselves</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert’s Story</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karyn’s Story</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Autobiographical Context (Continued)</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan Luke</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara Comber</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Freebody</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilary Janks</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Carolyn McKinney 48  
John Willinsky 49  
Valerie Kinloch 49  
Efstratia Karagrigoriou 51  
Summary 52  
References 53  

Chapter 4: The Historical 55  
The Historical Context 55  
Australia 56  
South Africa 63  
Canada 72  
References 77  

Chapter 5: The Political 79  
The Political Context 79  
Australia 80  
South Africa 85  
North America 89  
References 93  

Chapter 6: The Postmodern 95  
The Postmodern Context 95  
Australia 95  
South Africa 100  
North America 105  
References 107  

Chapter 7: The Philosophical 109  
The Philosophical Context 109  
Australia 109  
South Africa 119  
Canada and the United States 121  
References 128  

Chapter 8: Democracy Revisited 131  
Hellas 132  
Australia 134  
South Africa 134
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy Revisited</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rites and “Rights” of Passage</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in Interesting Times</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope for the Future</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Transcripts of Video-Cliips</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

The inspiration for this volume came from a variety of sources. In order to honour the somewhat linear nature of historical interpretation, we first must turn to work that was begun almost a decade ago. We had been working on a series of articles that had, as its main focus, the idea that critical literacy was a necessary component in the teaching of literacy. As this project germinated and eventually came to fruition, we began looking at other projects, and settled upon the innovative notion of video-interviewing some of the great names in qualitative research.

With the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, this project bore fruit in the form of a volume entitled *Qualitative Research in the Postmodern Era: Contexts of Qualitative Research* (Cooper & White, 2012). The relevance that this tome eventually had for our current project was enormous. Using the same idea of the video-interview and also employing the “Five Contexts,” a conceptual framework that had been developed in that book, we applied those to this volume. But, we get ahead of ourselves. These five contexts will be described below in greater detail.

No one would argue that literacy is not an important aspect of today’s society. In fact, many school improvement projects identify improved literacy as a key aspect of any educational improvement program. However, we had to ask the question – “What is literacy for?” After some time, we concluded that it was better to be literate than not, but there was still the nagging question – “Is that all there is?” Clearly, there was something more. Literacy may make life easier in terms of finding one’s way around, being able to read scripts and many other useful things, but there was also the problem of believing in what one was reading. Who gets to make the decisions about what is presented to the public eye? What is left out of the transmission? Are we to agree with the “word,” or is it allowable to disagree? And this is not limited to written scripts, but extends to other scripts, both oral and visual, that have been marginalized over the course of colonialism.

Critical literacy demands a skeptical, if not cynical, approach to all things, including the written word. Critical literacy, in at least some permutations, asks who is the author, what right does the author have to the opinions presented in the script, or text, if you will, and where and what are the biases hidden within the text? Thus, the implicit nature of being critically literate is an essential feature of being able to navigate the new modernities of this postmodern era. It is necessary to question all texts, whether they be linear, two-dimensional or three-dimensional, whether they are readable, observable or subliminal.

What is a text, then, you may wonder? Texts can be any vehicle that is used as a system for the making of meaning. A text can be as simple as a book, a work of art, a computer application or it can move beyond this to incorporate a variety of
different texts within any observable phenomenon. For example, as Helene Cixous contends, the world itself can be viewed as a text. As such, then, we can “perform” critical literacy by becoming invested in understanding the text, not as it is spoken or “written,” but as it is interpreted.

Roland Barthes (2004) in his book, Elements of Semiology, made the distinction between readerly and writerly texts. The readerly text asks very little of the reader as it requires little work in terms of interpretation. Many novels operate as readerly texts and, once finished, are promptly forgotten. Writerly texts demand more of the reader and require interaction. These texts may not be so easily forgotten, as they demand a certain input in terms of thinking through ideas and possibilities. The notion of critical literacy falls well within the parameters of the writerly text.

It is not the intent of this book to create the impression that there is a single pathway towards critical attention to literacy and its relationship to democratic processes. Rather, it is hoped that this current volume, along with interviews of noted scholars in the fields of critical literacy and democratic processes, will challenge the reader to examine long-held notions. In asking that the reader become engaged with the text at hand, we do not represent this volume as “the truth,” so much as a perspective that can be challenged, engaged with and expanded upon.

In order to accomplish the task of bringing a text that is about critical literacy to the fore, we chose to employ a construct that we refer to as the “Five Contexts” (Cooper & White, 2012). Thus, the text is viewed through a conceptual framework that utilizes the five lenses of autobiography, history, politics, postmodernity and philosophy. Through this conceptual framework, it is our goal to gain a perspective on critical literacy and its connections to democracy. It is hoped that the conceptual framework will allow for discussion, a conversation that will engage the reader with the many versions of “truth.” It is expected that readers may be troubled by the text; for example, there may be versions of the “truth” that are absent. This, in part, may be due to individual autobiographical contexts the readers bring to text. In addition and by way of example, we, Robert and Karyn, have been socialized into Western views of democratic thought. We recognize, given our own cultural pre-understandings, the limitations that we are living. Therefore, we call for many perspectives and multiple interpretations in this conversation on critical literacy and its relationship to democracy. We hope that further conversations about this relationship will serve to inform issues of causality rather than inscribe notions of a linear reciprocity between critical literacy and democratic values. This view, we hope, will add depth and understanding to a very complex discussion surrounding democracy and critical literacy. That is our hope for this text.

To return to the “Five Contexts,” this framework has proven to be invaluable in disentangling complex notions such as the relationship between critical literacy and democratic ideals and practices. The autobiographical context is important, as indicated by our own preconceptions within this text. As such, this context helps to situate a particular speaker or reader within a frame of reference that can assist that reader in making inferences relating to particular individual perspectives. In other
words, this context can enable the recognition of multiple, marginal and dominant perspectives. Through such sharing of perspectives, hopefully one may come away with a broader, more critical viewpoint.

The historical context allows the narrative that is represented by the text to be identified and located within a certain time and place. History is hinged upon powers that hold and write the “truth.” For example, many cultures with oral histories have become marginalized or excluded by historical documents represented by a hegemonic discourse, such as “legally binding” written contracts. It is contextual and, given this, one can see that there is not just one conceptual truth. This is why global contexts, and hence, multiple cultural realities, become increasingly important, as our current times become increasingly complex.

As well, the political context helps in determining consequences of the actions that are referenced within the text. Interestingly enough, these contexts run concurrently and are often overlapping or interwoven with other contextual considerations. For example, if one is preparing a birthday celebration, this may be an element of one’s autobiography, nothing more. However, this birthday may also represent an historical event as well, such as a one hundredth birthday, a sixty-fifth birthday or even a sixteenth birthday. As such, we attach historical footnotes to events that we wish to remember as special in some way.

Let’s take another look at that birthday that is at once autobiographical and historic. It may also have political significance as well. Perhaps that birthday was celebrated on the event of a matter of world significance. Or perhaps that birthday is held in tandem with the birthday of, perhaps, the Canadian patriot, Louis Riel, a founder of the province of Manitoba, and political and spiritual leader of the Métis people of Canada’s prairies, or some other great patriot. As you may see, a single event in one individual’s life may also be historically significant to that person and beyond, or it may also have greater political overtones. All this to say that the autobiographic, the historical and the political contexts may or may not have overlaps and significances far beyond themselves, as the sum of the whole is often much greater than the sum of its parts.

Add to this the postmodern context. Here is an overlay of what it means to be alive in one of the most exciting epochs in human history. The postmodern era, now frequently referred to as “liquid modernity,” has, as its hallmark, questions about the nature of almost everything. Poststructuralists have provided us with the means of deconstructing, the opening up, the re-examining of terms, such as “democracy,” in order to recognize the multiple interpretations available in any given text. Thus, it is not so much about questioning the nature of “truth,” as to question the contexts within which any discourse is embedded.

This postmodern era is a time when choice abounds, although the choices themselves may not be particularly important. It is a time of change, rapid change, where the one constant has become the accelerating nature of change. Hyperbole exists in terms of the gigantism reminiscent of the prehistoric era when dinosaurs roamed the earth. This gigantism was attributed to the fact that there was a great deal
more oxygen in the atmosphere than exists in this current day and age. However, we have our own forms of gigantism in terms of the proliferation of transnational corporations, in the economic globalization of huge tracts of geographic areas and in the rapid changes occurring within our environment. As such, postmodernity is an important context to assist in making sense of, describing and exploring what critical literacy is and how it has been adapted to our ever-changing circumstances – globally, nationally and locally.

Perhaps the most important context is the final one, the philosophical context, as it allows one to step back and to view the whole ball of autobiographical, historical, political and postmodern contexts with some level of objectivity and to begin to gain some further perspective on the particular phenomenon – in this case, critical literacy and its impact on democracy – under study. Through the pages of this volume, with some of the most influential scholars of our time, across global contexts, we hope to explore the nature of critical literacy and how it has been shaped by individuals, how it is played out in various geographic locations and some of the considerations pertinent to this particular interpretation or permutation of literacy.

In this volume we travel to several parts of the world. Because we are concerned with what critical literacy means and looks like in predominantly English-speaking countries, we chose to explore three Commonwealth countries – Australia, South Africa and Canada. Each of these countries has developed its own views relating to critical literacy. Australia was perhaps the first country to develop a coherent and cohesive approach to critical literacy. As with any country, South Africa continues to struggle with its own democratic issues and with emergent critical considerations. Canada has imported much of its culture from the United States, its neighbour to the south and, as such, critical literacy seems to have assumed a more “continental” perspective.

Video-interviews have provided a means of capturing a number of the “experts in the field.” Within the pages of this book, we offer a survey of a number of people who have developed, refined and put into practice – in short, performed – critical literacy. These people have offered their time, their insights and their knowledge that adds to our understanding of what critical literacy may be, may become, and how it may operate in these trying times of the postmodern era.

But what of democracy? What does that have to do with critical literacy? There is not one story to tell about democracy, and this volume attempts to bring together a variety of perspectives from renowned scholars to enhance our understanding of what we might mean by this term. If critical literacy can be used to help people understand biases in their various scripts, texts and worlds, then perhaps it may be a useful tool to help people to begin to advocate for themselves. What is the end result of this? Carried to logical extremes, critical literacy can pave the way to a future where powerful “others” can be held accountable for their actions, where decisions that are made “for the people” can be questioned and even, if necessary, reversed. It can help to establish differences between notions of equity and equality, where ideas of meritocracy can be called into question and where people from all walks
of life, race and creed can come together in the spirit of community and humanity. Can critical literacy really help to achieve greater democratic free will? Perhaps this is a tall order. However, to do nothing is to condone current practices that influence power differentials, foster greater consumerism and help to deplete an already suffering planet.

We hope that, as you read through this book, you will come to see the myriad connections between individuals, their influence on others and the impact that this can have for good or for ill. We trust that issues of democracy and the global patterns that we have come to take for granted can be adjusted. This may not be easy and it may not occur in our lifetimes, even if it is to occur at all. However, to not strive for positive social change is to accept the status quo as it stands. This is problematic in the face of such issues as world hunger and impoverishment, neoliberal forces of consumerism and political manipulation, and the decimation of a planet that is the only home we know. Clearly, if critical literacy can begin to question such elements and, if it can be seen as a possible way forward, perhaps humanity, in the broadest sense of the word, will stand a fighting chance to leave behind a world that our children would want to inherit. The alternatives are distinctly unattractive.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped to make this book a reality. It would be impossible to recognize all those who have offered their time, their wisdom and their hard work to assist us in bringing this volume to publication. To all of you, thank you for your patience, your heroic efforts and your loyalty to the cause. We remain forever grateful.

There are also a number of individuals who we can identify who have been instrumental in developing this book. Bopha Ong has given of her time when she was rushing to complete other enterprises. To Bopha, thank you so much for assisting in editing the video-clips and helping to mount them in a useful frame. We are proud of your dedication to this work.

Another important individual to this project is Neil Tinker. Neil, thank you. On more than one occasion you managed to work your considerable magic to ensure that videotapes were backed up, accessible and “readable.” This project would have stalled and ground to a shuddering halt without your steady hand. We owe you a huge debt of gratitude.

In addition to all the marvelous support that we have received, Frances Tolnai has transcribed all of our interviews. For this, Frances, we are truly grateful. We thank you for your promptness, accuracy and attention to detail. There are numerous others who will remain nameless but who have contributed significantly to this work. To all those people who have helped this project come to fruition, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

Last, but not least, we wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its unflagging support of our projects. This grant has allowed us to refine our approaches to video work and has assisted us in our exploration of the intersections between linear texts and video work. Your continuing assistance is greatly appreciated.
CHAPTER 1

DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1944)

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

While this volume is about democracy and its relationship to critical literacy, it is first and foremost, a book about critical literacy. However, it is important to begin a discussion that attempts to unpack the notion of democracy, albeit from a secular Westernized tradition. The influential scholars who grace the pages of this volume have informed the conversation by contributing their views, perspectives and opinions. In doing so, it is our intent to question a single, monolithic presentation of an untroubled version of the “truth.” It is these scholars who present a forceful critique that helps to deconstruct normative, hegemonic notions of democracy, and helps to underscore Niebuhr’s (1944) comment that “Man’s [sic] capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s [sic] inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Truer words were never spoken.

Critical literacy and democracy are intertwined, in this text, so much so that it may nigh be impossible to talk about one without allusions to the other. While critical literacy may be “intertwined” with democracy, they are not one and the same thing. In fact, critical literacy may be a consequence of a deeper conception of democracy, although there are innumerable highly contested debates regarding the nature of democracy and democratic thought. However, one must start somewhere and, so, a brief discussion of democracy follows. For a much more complex and thoughtful discussion on deconstructing the many permutations of democracy, readers could turn to such helpful texts as George Novack’s Democracy and Revolution (1971) or Nelson Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom (1995).

Prior to an all-too-brief discussion of democracy, this volume proceeds to ground critical literacy in three different locations – Australia, South Africa and North America, with specific reference to Canada. The reason for this is that all three of these countries are Commonwealth countries, meaning that, at one time, they were all part of the British Empire, replete with issues of colonialism and the attendant privileges that such power confers on the dominators. However, aside from this commonality, all three countries have enacted critical literacy in a decidedly different vein.
CHAPTER 1

For example, Australia has attempted to operationalize critical literacy within its school system, and some would argue that this represents the dawning of critical literacy in educational fields. South Africa has a different issue with critical literacy and there are almost an infinite amount of factors, arguments, and dissenting voices in that context that would render the issues quite different to those in other parts of the world. Viewing the issue of critical literacy in South Africa as a deficit condition of ‘access to education’ is very reductionist in a very complex historical and political context such as South Africa. While it may be true that large numbers of the population have been unable to access suitable educational resources, it could be said that aligning critical literacy with access to education tends to repeat the dominant deficit neoliberal discourses on schooling in South Africa that have gained traction post-apartheid, rather than attempting to deconstruct this discourse. While Canada, on the other hand, pays tribute to the idea of critical literacy through the likes of noteworthy literacy pioneers such as Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye, it has not really focused on the topic of critical literacy in the curricula of school districts within its various provinces.

Perhaps because of its relatively small population, much Canadian culture, of course, is imported from its neighbour to the south, the United States of America. Typically, this has a great effect on policies and practices that are established within Canada itself. As a result, this volume will deal with North America as a whole, while striving to separate purely Canadian events from the larger international events that have helped to shape this nation.

In addition to a discussion of how critical literacy is enacted in these countries and how this relates to democratic practices, we have been fortunate in being able to provide video-clips from interviews that we have conducted with a number of notable scholars. These video-clips are provided online and the reader will be prompted to view particular video-clips at different points throughout this book.

In order to facilitate the complexity of a volume that discusses critical literacy and its connection to greater democracy, we employ a framework that we have found to be quite successful in being able to isolate various parts of the discussion for closer examination. This framework we call the “Five Contexts” (Cooper & White, 2012), and each context, while distinctly observable from one to the other, is also capable of overlapping and existing concurrently with the other contexts that we use. These contexts are identified as the autobiographical, the historical, the political, the postmodern and the philosophical context, respectively.

In summation then, we present to you, the reader, a discussion of critical literacy and its connection to democracy, in three different countries, through five separate lenses and include video-clips from interviews with scholars in each of these locales. We begin our journey in Boston, Massachusetts to interview one of the great luminaries, not only of our time, but also of all time, Dr. Noam Chomsky. Then utilizing the five contexts, we travel variously between Australia, South Africa and North America. Eventually, we end our journey in Greece, the cradle of Western democracy, a fitting place to disembark for a number of reasons that will be clear
DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

to the reader who is aware of current (at the time of writing) developments in the European Union. A fitting place indeed, for this is where Western democracy was born, and where this form of democracy has been assailed by the new world order of neoliberal thought.

It must be mentioned that the assertion that Greece is the cradle of democracy is, indeed, Westernized and Eurocentric in origin. To be fair, in his book, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), Nelson Mandela cites a number of different forms of democracy that were current in Africa, possibly for thousands of years. As well, and in concert, it can easily be argued that many indigenous cultures practised various forms of democracy for many generations, separate from the West. It is not the authors’ intent to imply that these traditions derived from the Greek “cradle of civilization.”

THE SOCIAL VALUE OF DEMOCRACY

There exists a strong relationship between democracy and any number of social constructs within a democratic society. For example, social justice, equity and equality, and critical literacy are all present in varying degrees in any democracy, nominal or operational. Hopefully, each and every individual who has an opportunity to pick up this book and to open its pages has been in a position where his or her voice has been heard, listened to and acted upon. Of course, this does not mean that the powers receiving this communication from such individuals must hear the voice, listen to the words being spoken and then act upon the message without consideration for the consequences. Due process, debate, testing of alternatives and so on will likely be the result for any voice that calls for change. However, the message here is that it is not always the case that every voice can be heard at any given point in time. In fact, a great deal of effort has been invested in silencing voices, even in democracies. Unfortunately, many people currently living in democracies have had opportunity to reflect upon the fact that their voices have not always been heard or have not been heard at all.

This fact alone brings into focus issues that are related to democracy. These are issues of social justice. The need for every voice to be heard, listened to and acted upon is an essential element of democracy, yet how can this be accomplished in an effective, efficient and logical manner? Habermas (1973) speaks of the ideal speech situation in which the power of the best argument wins the day. However, not every individual is eloquent and, due to greater immigration and the increasing diversity of populations, not everyone speaks the same language within the borders of one’s own country. In addition, there remain variances in education, social economic status and a whole host of other reasons why one voice may be heard above others, often silencing or marginalizing other voices along the way. Social justice focuses on the need for all voices to be heard. This implies a greater commitment to the principals of equity, a fundamental goal of critical literacy.

For example, in South Africa, critical literacy has arguably been far more evident than it has in many other international contexts as a result of street politics, and the
mobilisation of solidarity movements in the struggle against apartheid. As well, it could be argued that, given these high levels of critical literacy, access to schooling as it is currently conceived and mandated in the South African context may do little to foster transformation agendas. These complex issues may look very different from colonial, Western notions of critical literacy. It is necessary to understand such conceptions of critical literacy in differing global contexts in order to provide a deep sense of many of the existing contradictions, ambiguities, discrepancies, varied interpretations and issues, range of philosophical and epistemological orientations, all under the name of democracy and critical literacy.

Equity and equality are terms that are often used interchangeably. However, they really represent the extremes of a continuum. For example, equality implies that everyone is treated the same way. We all have to climb the stairs from the first floor in order to get to the second floor. But what about the old, the tired, the frail? Perhaps, in the name of equality, they, too, can be expected to climb the same set of stairs as anyone else. The differential here is represented by issues of time and effort. It will clearly take these people longer to accomplish the same task with greater difficulty than others who may be able to accomplish it without a second thought. But, what about those among us who can no longer walk? Or who never were able to walk? Can we also expect these people to climb this same flight of stairs? It seems that, for some people in such circumstances, climbing this flight of steps is akin to climbing the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. What is to become of them? Are they to be left to their separate fates at the bottom of the stairs? While they may have been treated equally and the expectations placed upon them may be the same as for others who have successfully managed to negotiate the stairs, there remains the matter of equity.

Simply put, equity refers to providing people with what they need in order to obtain the same advantages as others enjoy. For example, if one were to introduce an elevator or a moving stairway, such as an escalator, the people who were left behind are now able to join their peers at the top of the stairs. They have become equal once again.

This is the nature of equity. If people were to be provided with what they need in order to be successful in their endeavours, we would have a more authentic form of equality. In short, the way to true equality is through the practice of ensuring equitable treatment for all. However, even in democratic societies, there is still an imbalance between the more powerful and the less powerful, measured in any terms one may wish. Often, the meritocratic card is played with comments like, “Work for it, like I had to,” or “Those people are just lazy,” or other phrases that serve to justify the fact that some people enjoy privileges that others do not.

This is to say simply that, in any society, there will always be those among us who either have not had the opportunity, the access or the good fortune to have what the majority of people enjoy. Power differentials operate within any society to further marginalize those who are least able to fend for themselves. Even in a democratic
society, this may occur as well. As Henry Giroux (In Cooper & White, 2012) notes, a society can never be democratic enough. Democracy must be “performed” again and again, over and over, daily, each time including those who have been left out, re-including those who have somehow become lost within the larger group, and seeking out those voices that have not yet been heard, listened to or acted upon. Let us view society as a metaphoric pyramid, with the general populace forming the base of the pyramid and the elite of the society at its pinnacle. As we move from the base to the peak of this metaphoric pyramid, we may begin to see how democracy, writ large, helps to govern us all and how the same concept can serve to assist or to marginalize each and every one of us, depending on who has more power and privilege along the way. This is so because the notion of democracy is a function of the actions, motives and values of the people within a particular geographic space. Each and every one of us can influence the democratic process for good or for ill, and each of us may have very different abilities in terms of our means to control this process to make it work for us or to prevent (or promote) difficulties for others.

Power tends to be distributed unevenly within any society and people who are marginalized by the society tend to be marginalized in one of two ways. They can be marginalized by physical characteristics such as physical abilities or disabilities, skin colour or gender, or by less obvious issues such as height, weight or age. People can also be marginalized through social characteristics such as financial ability, psychological or emotional issues, culture (or the lack thereof), race, religion, sexual orientation, or even the part of town from which they come.

These considerations are by no means exhaustive and the list continues to grow at an alarming rate, aided and abetted by social media such as television, the newspaper and the Internet, which tend to portray desirable attributes as a function of the consumer culture within which many of us currently live. Clearly this discourse values some cultural characteristics such as youth and beauty over others, created in part by less than conscious consumer desires or circumstances. Simply put, learning to become more critically literate may help citizens to become more democratic, at least in part.

As noted previously, no society can ever be democratic enough. This means that we must always remain vigilant not only to ensure that we do not become marginalized within the very society to which we belong, but that others less fortunate than we are can continue to contribute and to be productive in the best ways that they can. The move is always towards greater democracy. Anything less is a restriction that threatens the rights of individuals and groups of individuals to a happy, healthy and prosperous life in which they can all become contributing members of a strong, productive and vibrant society.

But, given the inequities and inequalities that exist within any society, including democratic societies, how did we come to embody, within our societies, such uncomfortable harmonies? Perhaps the answer lies within the very nature of the democratic process itself.
Chapter 1

To this end, we have had the marvelous opportunity to interview one of the world’s greatest activists and scholars, Dr. Noam Chomsky, at his office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.). This video-clip (1.1) may be viewed at:

https://youtu.be/0OFBznW6uQ

In order to view this video-clip, please copy and paste this URL into the address box of your web browser. Alternately, if you have an electronic version of this volume, you may simply click on the URL to gain access to the video-clip.

The word “democracy” arrived most recently from the Middle French around 1570. “Democracy” had its origins in the Medieval Latin “démocratie” which, in turn, came from the Greek “demokratia,” meaning “popular government.” This word referred to the “common people” (demos), although, originally, it was used to refer to a district (demotic). The term “kratos” referred to “rule” or “strength.”

As words move through time and across great distances, it is no little wonder that the denotations, or definitions, of words often change or become adjusted to new sets of circumstances, new problems and new perspectives. Not only do denotations change, so do the ways that the words are used. The “connotation” of words, or the way in which words become used in circumstances other than those for which they were originally intended, are everywhere evident, particularly in slang words among the youth of today and in computer technology where new vocabulary has been cobbled from common words currently existing in the English language.

Thus, it is no surprise when Noam Chomsky notes that the term “democracy” has dual meanings, therefore the term can be used in a variety of ways. Dr. Chomsky notes that one of the dimensions to democracy is that public opinion is, to some extent, reflected in public policy. He claims that, to the extent that this is true, any country that reflects public opinion within public policy can be said to be democratic.

What is important to note here are the “degrees” of democracy that are enacted at
DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

any given time in any country’s history. Democracy, viewed in this way, can be seen to ebb and flow like the tides or wax and wane like the cycles of the moon. It is not an ever-fixed constant, and, as such, can never be taken for granted. In fact, to the opposite, it is an asset that must be jealously guarded, particularly as it comes to be seen in finite supply.

Dr. Chomsky goes on to note that this definition and its attendant connotations are not representative of the operative sense of the term. He states that there is a significant gap between public opinion and policy, which means that, in today’s society, public policy is often made regardless of public opinion. While this may be true of the United States of America, it is also true of many of the nations that currently choose to identify themselves as democratic nations. Democracy is enacted and performed differently in different places.

Dr. Chomsky further claims that the difference between the way that democracy is envisioned and the way in which it is enacted occurs due to various built in mechanisms that determine the very nature of the government and also by the constraints through which this governing body must operate. So why is the image of democracy so very different from how it plays out in the public realm? As Dr. Chomsky points out, the way that democracy operates within a society bears witness to the distribution of power within the society in question. Power and its attendant privileges, supported by minimally regulated capitalist economies, inhibit formation of political social structures, and the unmitigated progress of technology limit the realization of full democratic practice (Habermas, cited in Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Because of this, we can begin to see that, in many Westernized countries, there is a high degree of economic power brought to bear on public policy making through large transnational corporations. This marriage of political power and economic might are frequently referred to as the neoliberal front, and the attempt is to fashion public policy to favour the interests of the large corporations that, in some cases, have the financial backing to be able to topple entire governments. Consequently, in this postmodern age, unlike any age previous, corporate power tends to drive public policy towards the interests of the ultra-wealthy rather than towards the interests of the general populace.

However, the subjugation of public policy to the interests of the “scions of industry” is not the only problem to which democracy has fallen prey. This issue is one that every democratic society must ultimately come to grips with. The question is basically this one; “How much democracy is democratic?” In the following video-clip, Noam Chomsky suggests that democracies and the extent to which they are democratic is an issue that must be decided upon. Clearly, such issues are decided upon by those in power. So, the question that must be asked, then, is, “How democratic do those in power wish their societies to be?” Dr. Chomsky uses the United States of America as his example, and traces the development of the current level of democracy in this country all the way back to the Constitutional Convention.

The Constitutional Convention was also known as the Philadelphia Convention, the Federal Convention, and the Grand Convention at Philadelphia. It took place
from May to September, 1787, in Philadelphia, PA. The Constitutional Convention was formed to address issues of governance within the newly-formed United States, following the War of Independence (1775–1783). Up to this point, the fledgling United States had been operating under the articles of Confederation following their independence from the British. The major thrust of this convention, following the lead of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, was to create a new government rather than redesigning a government after the British system that they had so recently overthrown. The result of this convention was the creation of the Constitution of the United States. One of the more contentious issues emerging from this convention was how “proportional representation” was to be defined. Thus it was that the very parameters around what we take for granted as “democratic” were decided upon. This is a scenario that is enacted and re-enacted during every meeting of democratic governments where public policy is decided upon. To view Video-Clip 1.2, please proceed to:

https://youtu.be/mOjC7g4vIEY

Ultimately, the issue surrounds the notion of who gets to decide upon what is good for the people which, of course, is predicated upon what is good for the country itself.

According to Dr. Chomsky, it was James Madison who was the main framer of the nascent constitution for the newly formed United States. However, it was Madison who pointed out a fatal “flaw” with the notion of democracy. Madison likened the society to a large pyramid with the very wealthy at its pinnacle. The less wealthy occupied a tenuous position in the middle of the pyramid, with some being able to migrate upwards into the ranks of the elite, while others may fall back into the masses of the poor, nearly poor and permanently impoverished. Society was held in a kind of “dynamic equilibrium” where the three main social classes sought either to maintain their position on the pyramid, strive to be more upwardly mobile or attempt to reduce or mitigate the effects of a “fall from grace,” typically caused by a reversal of economic fortune.

**REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

James Madison noted that, in a democracy such as England, the poor could use their voting power to overcome the more powerful minority. This could be easily accomplished since the lower echelons of society were in the majority. According to Dr. Chomsky, the problem with this was that the poor could then encroach on the property of the rich and would carry out all manner of land reforms. In Madison’s analysis, this would have been considered undemocratic because, in his opinion, one of the main functions of government was to protect the interests of the minority against those of the majority. The fact that the minority controlled most of what was worth controlling was immaterial to Madison. His solution to this determined “flaw” in democracy was to limit democracy so that the more opulent could serve as sober
DEMOCRACY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

decision makers for those who were less educated and therefore more prone to make ineffective or damaging decisions with their votes. In essence, Madison’s choice was to limit democracy to the upper and middle classes. It took almost another hundred years before slaves were given the right to vote. Voting rights for women occurred after this and the suffragette movements extended into the early 20th Century.

Dr. Chomsky comments on the American vision of representative democracy:

… If you read the Fifth Amendment, for example, it says that no person shall be deprived of rights without due process of the law. But the Founding Fathers didn’t mean person when they said person. So that obviously, it didn’t include Native Americans, you could do anything you liked to them. It didn’t include slaves, it didn’t include women and up until the mid-twentieth century, women were mostly property under the law. In fact, until the 1970’s, women didn’t even have the legal right to serve on juries. A woman was the property of her father or her husband, so they weren’t persons. And this goes right up to the present. So if you come up to the present day, if you look at the Supreme Court rulings, the concept of person has been both expanded and narrowed. It’s been expanded to include legal fictions, corporations, collectivist legal fictions established by the government – they’re a person. But it excludes undocumented immigrants; they’re not persons, so they don’t have rights under the law. … When we talk about our yearning for democracy, our leading the world in democracy, none of these questions ever come up. (Chomsky, Personal Communication, March, 2012)

In Noam Chomsky’s view, the founders of the American nation were very clear on the notion that only some individuals were to be recognized as “persons.” Perhaps, even more startling, is the fact that corporations have gained the right to be labeled as “person.” Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott explore this concept in their documentary entitled “The Corporation” (2003). In this film, it is accepted that the corporation is to be treated as an individual. However, this “individual” is given a psychiatric evaluation and is identified as having strong sociopathic tendencies. However, given that corporations wield huge amounts of power, they are also given privileges they ordinarily would not enjoy; perhaps simply because of the threat they could pose to governing forces if such large corporations were to experience even the threat of being marginalized. Other members of the society, and by this we mean living, breathing, flesh and blood people who populate the far reaches of any nation, and often populate the far reaches of the society itself, find they have less power by far than a construct that has been legislated into “being,” literally as well as figuratively.

And so, power, according to James Madison, was to be concentrated in the hands of the wealthy of the nation. The bulk of this power rested with the Senate, which, as the dominant group at the time, was furthest removed from the general population. Interestingly enough, the Senate was not an elected body. Intrinsically, what this meant was that the architects of the new American Constitution, while they
were committed to democratic governance, effectively distributed the power of the democratic among themselves, arguable the most elite individuals of the fledgling nation. Thus, the power would be in the hands of the wealthy, the more “responsible” of men, those who sympathized with property owners and their rights, rather than those who were already marginalized by the existing society. And the general public would be marginalized in a myriad of ways.

“Representative” democracy, where those with more power are expected by the general populace to exercise their votes in the interest of the people they represent, works well providing that the interests of the people are in line with the interests of their representatives. However, as we find out more times than is comfortable, the representative also serves a master. The representative must either vote in the way that his or her party wishes him or her to vote or else risk the ire of that party. Secondly, if the representative is presented with a dilemma, such that the people being represented want the vote to go differently than that envisioned by their representative, the representative generally votes the way that he or she would have voted regardless of the wishes of the represented populace. The rationale for this is that those who are ejected from office are no longer able to represent their supporters. In short, when push comes to shove, the representatives of the people vote to preserve their own power, often at the expense of those they represent.

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

We have ascertained that the term for democracy came from as far back as Ancient Greece. According to records of the time, it was Aristotle who studied various forms of political governance. Ultimately, after a period of research, Aristotle came to the conclusion that democracy was probably the best of a bad deal. Democracy was probably a system that was slightly superior to the other forms of governance, but it was flawed. Interestingly enough, James Madison’s argument about the flaws inherent with democracy was not entirely original, as Aristotle pointed out the same issues. Aristotle, too, was concerned that the poor, the majority of the populace, would use their votes to wrest property from the wealthy. Like Madison, Aristotle believed this to be unjust and, like Madison, proposed a solution to the problem. However, Aristotle’s solution was the opposite of Madison’s. Dr. Chomsky provides his view in Video-Clip 1.3:

https://youtu.be/VMCcfH88NI

Where Madison believed that the answer to the problem was to reduce democracy to protect the wealthy, Aristotle’s view was to reduce the inequality between the various classes of people, rather than to reduce their voting power. Aristotle had envisioned the first “welfare” state.

This solution that Aristotle envisioned for the city-state of Athens, compared to the solution of reduced democracy by Madison, exemplifies two different types of democracy. The type of democracy espoused by Madison would be similar to a
“representative” democracy, where those with more power exercise their votes in the interest of the people they represent.

Aristotle, on the other hand, considered a “participatory” democracy in that all people had a vote and they were free to vote into power whomsoever they wished. After all, if the issue of inequality were effectively addressed, the people would enjoy more equitable life circumstances and the twin issues of power and control would be minimized. At least, that is the way it sounds in theory.

At the time of writing, there appears to be no truly participatory democracy that can be observed in the so-called “developed” world. Even Marxist doctrine was intended to be more democratic and egalitarian than as practiced but it, like so many philosophies, was re-interpreted by those who took hold of the reins of power subsequent to the fall of the Romanoff dynasty. Thus, democracy, even “true” democracy, is enacted and performed differently in different places and different times. Perhaps, “true” democracy is an ideal that can, for the moment at least, only be envisioned as an elusive dream, sought by many, enjoyed by a privileged few.

The premise here, of course, is that democracy may not be the prettiest thing ever, but it is what we have at the moment and it is still worth fighting for. As we travel through this new millennium, already we see our freedoms being diminished as we are becoming ever more prone to technological surveillance, which serves to reduce our democratic rights even further, to stifle advances in the name of democratic thought and to continue to privilege some citizens and corporations at the expense of more vulnerable citizens, namely the impoverished, the young, the old, the non-conformists and groups of people who are identified as belonging to unworthy or suspect groups, based on their racial heritage (Bauman & Lyons, 2013).

WHAT’S EDUCATION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Can we envision a society where there is little difference between groups and classes of people, where everyone is valued, respected and accepted? It is a tall order. Marx thought he had it figured out and, while it may appear cogent in theory, interpreters such as Joseph Stalin managed to hold on to power that was intended to be distributed amongst the entire population. The “power of the people” has been rendered ineffectual in democratic countries around the world. Perhaps, then, it is not the problem of the inability of democracy to be practiced fairly, but the inability of those in power to practice it fairly.

One way to further the pursuit of greater democracy is to educate the populace. This could provide a response to problems posed by both Madison and Aristotle. In both cases, education can increase equitable treatment within society through allowing greater life opportunities and thus reducing inequality between the various classes of people. It is this very inequity that results in inequality that is eating away at the heart of democracy. Many people throughout the history of education in North America have been vociferous in calling for universal education. John Dewey, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Ralph Waldo Emerson are just a few names in a long
list of people who believed that education was a way forward, not necessarily just in terms of politics, but in terms of life. In Video-Clip 1.4, Dr. Chomsky refers to several of these champions of education:

https://youtu.be/8Frs4kx5RLE

Dr. Chomsky comments that leading intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, expressed surprise to see that leading political figures were so much in favour of education. Perhaps this is due to the power that education can unlock. In Emerson’s words:

Whilst thus the world exists for the mind; whilst thus the man is ever invited inward into shining realms of knowledge and power by the shows of the world, which interpret to him the infinitude of his own consciousness – it becomes the office of a just education to awaken him to the knowledge of this fact. (Emerson, 1964, p. 201)

As has been noted elsewhere by a cynic whose name has been lost to the vicissitudes of time, we must help the poor so that they don’t turn on us. This very sentiment may be the reason for leading political figures of Emerson’s day to call for more education for the general population. Unfortunately, this raises an ethical dilemma. Those in power want to keep the poor from their throats but they do not wish to allow too much power to be devolved to the public because, in this case, the results may be the same. At any rate, maintaining and protecting the power of the democracy was not seen as something that would easily be shared. Education remained one of the few means by which individuals could exchange whatever capitals they possessed for education which they could then convert into cultural, financial and social capital in order to become one of those empowered to assist in maintaining the democracy, such as it was.

So it remains. The early hypocrisy of the representative democracy and, indeed, of all attempts at democracy, has been transmitted through a number of permutations; and the system of education is no different. The powers that controlled democracy also controlled the system of education. Consequently, while it was felt that it was very important to educate the “masses,” too much education would have the reverse effect and would make the populace dangerous to those in power. Educating people enough so that they will conform and obey continues to be a hallmark of educational systems in many developed countries. As Dr. Chomsky affirms, that dilemma has run throughout the entire history of education up to the present time. Depending on the time and place in the history of Western society, the young have always been manipulated to be dutiful to the “democratic state.”

The solution is clear. The current position held by the policy makers and corporate entities is clearly problematic. As global warming and depletion of raw materials devastates the planet, as we are offered too much choice over things that do not matter much and little choice over things that do, as the middle class becomes hollowed out due to the ravages of taxation and consumerist policies and philosophies, people
remember the words of some of the past philosophers in the field of education, who claimed that, as Wilhelm von Humboldt, a Prussian philosopher, suggested, education should allow students to experience the joy of discovery. This seems like a precursor to critical literacy, as one of its features tends to encourage less manipulation and more self discovery and thoughtfulness, redolent of the quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, above. Noam Chomsky refers to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as an example:

In fact, at a university like this, MIT, that’s exactly the way the sciences are taught. It’s not taught to test and it doesn’t really matter much what you cover… it matters what you discover. So students have to – are expected to – challenge, to inquire, to create. I mean, there’s a framework; that’s the string that Humboldt was talking about. (Chomsky, Personal Communication, March, 2012)

Unlocking the power of education includes liberating the powers of observation, the power of bringing logic to bear on any given problem, and the power to recognize the need for justice in all of its forms. And this power is not limited to those in higher education. Even primary school-aged children can benefit from an education that invigorates and enlivens, rather than an education that serves to pacify and de-motivate. Dr. Chomsky comments on this aspect of the educational process as well:

… Bruce Albert, who’s a biochemist, talks about K to 12, younger education, same kind of criticism. And he also points out success stories. One of them, for example, is in Kindergarten; it’s a good example of this. It’s a project where the children in Kindergarten were…, each child was given a small dish and on the dish there was a collection of seeds, pebbles, and shells. And the task was to figure out which ones were the seeds. And so the project started with the kids getting together and having what they called a scientific conference in which they thought about different ways in which they might be able to do this. And then they tried out some of the ways, you know, the teacher gave some guidance and so on, but basically the kids explored their own ideas about how to do it. By the end, they finally figured out which were the seeds and knew how to find them. At that point, every child got a magnifying glass and they now knew, were cut apart, and they could find within it the embryo that makes it grow, that makes it a seed. Well those kids, first of all, they learned about science, but they also learned what it means to discover, to create. They experienced the joy of discovery. That’s serious teaching. And that can go on at any level. (Chomsky, Personal Communication, March, 2012)

A number of New England authors, notably Edith Wharton in her novel, Ethan Frome (1911), and Nathaniel Hawthorne in, among others, his short stories, Young Goodman Brown (1846) and Ethan Brand (1852), respectively, do not always see education as an epiphany of graciousness, happiness and the acquisition of artful and scientific discovery. The message is short. Knowledge does not always bring
happiness. It can bring other things to the fore, such as the understanding of how people can be marginalized, how wars can begin and how, like the seven-year cycle of rabbits, we may carry within us the seeds of our own destruction. Noam Chomsky describes just such a lesson by a sixth grade teacher:

A friend of mine, who is a sixth grade teacher, to give one more example to you, was teaching a history course, and got to the American Revolution. So what she decided to do for a couple of weeks was to impose arbitrary, onerous restrictions on the children, senselessly. And they didn’t like it much but they sort of followed them. And finally, they got so upset that they were practically revolting. At that point, she introduced the American Revolution and said “Yeah, that’s what happened.” That’s a creative way to teach History. And you can do it at any level whether it’s graduate school or Kindergarten…. (Chomsky, Personal Communication, March, 2012)

Thus there is a need for critical literacy along the path of one’s education. Essentially, Professor Chomsky reveals how this can be accomplished at all levels of education. The key is to allow children to think for themselves and to foster this early if equity, social justice and democracy are considered to be important goals of education. However, the question remains: Are they?

WHAT IS EDUCATION LIKE TODAY?

Since the advent of postmodern times, described by Zygmunt Bauman (2000) as “liquid modernity,” the world has seen revolutionary changes in culture and society. Apparently, the postmodern age was introduced in 1978 with the invention of the microchip (Bauman & Lyons, 2013). This allowed for miniaturization of almost everything, resulting in tremendous societal change. Now, huge sums of money can be shunted around the world at the touch of a button (read “computer key”). Borders have become so porous (Castells, 2000) as to require thorough surveillance at all border crossings, airline flights and any form of transportation that will put you within arm’s reach of any “foreign” country. In fact, Bauman & Lyons (2013) state that we have become a surveillance society that serves to include some who have the wherewithal to be able to consume and the “Others” who, using the same technology, are excluded until further notice; “further notice” means until such time as their conditions improve to allow them to join the closely guarded ranks of the few who have the privileges that are coveted by all of the society.

What is at play here is the immense power of the corporate world. As corporations have taken advantage of the available technology, they have grown into transnational firms, many of them powerful enough to topple governments. Consequently, governments have been careful to hearken to the needs of their very powerful corporate “citizens” whether they are physically present in the governing body’s country or not. After all, thanks to miniaturization, tremendous financial damage can
be wrought from outside the borders of any country, thus calling into question the idea of countries as a modern day anachronism (Castells, 2000).

And the competition is fierce. Takeovers, hostile or otherwise, are the order of the day. Insecurity mounts as corporations change hands, threaten to leave a host country or demand concessions in terms of tax breaks, government bailouts or outright gifts. It is not possible for the corporations to devolve into a state of grace that they may have enjoyed previously because, in this new world order of gigantic competitions, the investors in any company want to see a profit – a return on their investments. If the CEO of any given company cannot or will not supply the necessary dividends, he or she is simply replaced by one who can or will. Power and privilege, particularly bolstered by the influence of minimally-regulated capitalist economies, inhibiting political social structures and the unmitigated progress of technology limit the realization of full democratic practice (Habermas, 1970 as cited in Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

So, what does this have to do with education?

In the growing “war,” and this term is used advisedly, one of the ways that corporate partners have seen fit to improve their financial bottom line and one of the ways that governments have seen fit to maintain a vibrant economy is by conscripting education. This is a complex undertaking, as the neoliberal right wing seeks to privatize education for several reasons. Among the main reasons is the idea that, if the market were in charge of education, the businesses and corporations would be able to more easily influence what it is that students would learn in school (Tooley, 2000). These structures are not interested in the whole person; they are only interested in developing an obedient, compliant and dedicated employee. Oh yes, there are a few elite private schools capable of turning out elites who will form the management teams required to govern the army of near-drones. Even though some of the rhetoric suggests that industry is looking for competent, resourceful problem-solvers, this does not apply to the rank and file of the students within the walls of our public educational institutions; or problem-solving is taught within an unethical vacuum, with a textbook relating to the teaching of creativity as an exercise in technique rather than imagination. The “successful” individuals will already belong to or will take their places among the elite management class.

Governments around the world exist in synchronicity with corporations attempting to replace public with private education. After all, public education has not been the panacea that it was hoped. The results of public education have not been standardized. Some students perform better than others and it is extremely costly for such varied results. Around the world, systems of public education are succumbing to the thrall of the Siren (Σειρήν Seirēn) call for private schooling.

Enter Margaret Thatcher and her solution to under-resourced schools in the UK. Her move to provide funds to schools was not without strings attached. The site-based management approach may have been useful in some ways, but it also added the burden of deliberation and choice to already struggling schools. Furthermore,
all schools had to comply with the new order and justify their success (or the lack thereof). Standardization had become the new standard by which schools were measured. This did not take long to spread across the ocean to the United States and other parts of the world.

This is not to say, however, that there has been no repudiation of earlier versions of neoliberal practices across time, even though it is common knowledge that continuous attempts to oppressively influence educational decisions have a long history in various parts of the world, particularly in North America. Standardized testing in the form of the Stanford-Binet test, for example, first developed in France in 1905 and adapted for use by the US military prior to World War I, bears witness to how White, male, middle class, English speaking individuals were perceived to be superior to others, chiefly as a result of the cultural bias of the test itself. Thus, many of the critiques advanced in this book are anything but new and many of the concerns that exist have been strongly contested over time. It is unfortunate that those critiques continue to remain with us.

Neither is it to say that standards, in a variety of instances, have no positive aspects. For example, standards in curriculum subjects are important in providing a variety of experiences for students, as they move through the various grade levels, without repeating information from previous years. Additionally, standards in research ethics are intended to prevent harm to participants. In the same way, standards in food preparation are intended to prevent the public from getting ill. The issue remains that standards, in general, are not singular, linear, and static. Nor are they established in order to be met in rigidly similar ways. Also noteworthy are long-standing educational conventions that situate standards, outcomes and assessments as similarly long-standing tools for the marginalization and oppression of minorities, often under the guise of equity and access, a trend that is as similar in North American – Canadian and American – contexts as it is in the rest of the commonwealth. Perhaps these issues are exactly the problem with the setting of standards in educational circles around the globe.

However, it was this development of standardized testing that allowed for the comparison, however faulty, of educational achievement between competing countries. Of course, context was not a consideration and, as countries happily compared their educational apples to other countries’ educational oranges, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) became a huge player. The OECD now exports educational policy to over 40 countries. The writers of this volume refrain from asking the somewhat obvious questions about the legitimacy of an organization that promotes economic development becoming so deeply and irrevocably involved in matters of education.

Along with the processes related to practices of standardization came the holy grail of the new order of education – to improve student “achievement,” something that is notoriously difficult to define. However, improved scores on standardized tests are how society, government and corporations have chosen to define achievement. Here, it is completely divorced from knowledge acquisition, and improving marks are not
seen as a proxy for learning, they are seen as knowledge itself (MacNeil, 2000). In fact, in MacNeil’s study of students in Texas, she found that, although their marks went up, the students themselves did not really know any more than they did before the advent of standardized testing. The reasons for this may be threefold.

First of all, if a teacher’s career is connected to how well students perform on standardized tests, that teacher will often do the only thing that remains available to him or her – they will teach to the test. Secondly, and in response to this, the curriculum often shrinks to only what is going to be tested. Finally, not everyone takes the test. Those who have learning disabilities, those for whom English is not their language of origin and those who are considered to provide a level of exposure that may weaken the test scores are often exempted from writing the standardized tests. In their infinite wisdom, corporations and governments alike are racing directly towards a future that they are desperately attempting to avoid – mediocrity.

It is not standardization that is the answer. It is the opposite. Instead of a malleable, sheep-like society that is stunted in terms of its cultural development because culture is seen as an unnecessary distraction that takes us away from the culture of “everyman” – that is, the culture of the television set which is an outlet for the consumer culture; instead of an “all you need to know is your particular job” attitude that renders people docile and disengaged; instead of a system of education that valorizes test scores over authentic knowledge, what is needed is a system of education where students are free to explore, to investigate, to think and learn; in short, to become “critical thinkers.” Noam Chomsky comments:

It’s the opposite of what is done; it’s the opposite of “No Child Left Behind,” you know, “Race to the Top,” teaching to test, evaluating students and teachers. In fact, I’m sure you have too, but I’ve seen the results of this in my own grandchildren. And we’ve all experienced it. I should say this Humboldtian conception was counterposed to a different one in the Enlightenment. The alternative conception to be rejected was thinking of education as pouring water into a vessel. And as we all know from experience, it’s a pretty weak vessel. To be poured in to pass a test, a week later, you’ve forgotten what the subject was. We all know that’s a lot of what’s done unfortunately. It’s training for conformity and obedience but not for independence of mind, meaningful participation in a free community, inquiry investigation, and so on. And that goes right back to the origins of the mass education system. One of the great achievements of the United States was to pioneer mass public education when there wasn’t any in Europe, just elite education or just, you know, kind of what amounted to training to be a worker. You know? And the American system went beyond that in interesting ways, but with constraints. A large part of the motive of the educational system, the early educational system, was to convert independent farmers to docile workers in an industrial system. And they resented it bitterly. The Labour Press, which was quite lively in the late
nineteenth century, discusses this at length. And even some of the leading intellectuals discuss it. (Chomsky, Personal Communication, March, 2012)

Given the current state of affairs, along with an educational system that threatens to become ever more restrictive, a trend that is being echoed throughout the society as the powers of technology are being harnessed to provide ever greater levels of surveillance, something needs to be done. If this society is not flexible enough to bend, it will break. And, unfortunately, the flexibility that marks so many powerful societies that have appeared in the past is being systematically removed from our current society at an ever-increasing rate.

SUMMARY

This first chapter has attempted to outline some of the main points that this volume will undertake to explore. First of all, an all-too-brief discussion of the roots of the democratic process has hopefully served to acquaint or re-acquaint the reader with the development of Western democratic thought. Democracy tends to play out differently in different contexts. Ancient Greek thoughts on democracy, as per Aristotle, were juxtaposed with the American Constitution, of whom one of the major architects was James Madison. What was pointed out was that democracy is never an easy concept; it is performed differently in different locales and it is interpreted differently by different groups of people. As has been implied, the pathway from Greek constructions of democracy, transformed through continental, as well as colonial constructions, to contemporary interpretations of Western democracy, cannot help but ignore some voices. Typically these are the voices of traditionally marginalized peoples. Ultimately, perhaps all we really have is the illusion of democracy.

Over the past half-century, democracy has become ever more elusive as corporate entities have become defined as individuals with many of the attendant rights that individuals possess. Not only are these organizations financially more powerful than the citizens of any given country, the corporations are, in Bauman’s opinion, amoral (Bauman & Donskis, 2013). What has also made this all the more complex is the need for governments to become very close to the corporate world in order to maintain that ever-so-elusive “vibrant” economy. This has had a huge impact on education over the past quarter century as corporations and governments confer as to what a system of education, beneficial to the needs of both the corporations and the governments, should look like.

Systems of education have attempted to withstand these pressures in accepting multinational organizations dictating educational policy inside their own countries and from outside their countries. The result has been an unprecedented standardization movement that seeks to re-order educational systems around the world. This has created increased stress on stakeholders in the system to the point at which mental health issues in schools among all levels of stakeholders is on the
rise. Student achievement has been re-interpreted in terms of standardized test scores and this has come to serve as a proxy for knowledge. In the wake of all of this, technological “improvements” have both complicated the issues already extant, while simultaneously ameliorating others.

The question is, “Will all this result in a newer, improved society?” We think not. In the wake of corporations becoming ever more global and governments being restricted to operating within their own porous-border countries, the slow death of democratic process on a world-wide scale and the on-going siege of systems of public schooling, societies around the world are having to contend with issues that are beginning to approach the critical. Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman & Lyons, 2013) believes that the centre cannot hold for much longer. What Bauman points to is the resilience of the society itself. The answer must come from within. We, the authors, feel that the answer does exist within the very form of democratic thought that sought to establish systems of public schooling in the first place.

However, in order to better mobilize the awesome potential of the public school, we must first recognize the structures of oppression and then seek to neutralize them. How can this be accomplished? The authors of this volume believe that re-investigation of critical literacy may hold the key. To this end, we have traveled to three Commonwealth countries – Australia, South Africa and Canada – and to Greece, the first developer of the democratic process. Through the pages of this book we explore what critical literacy looks like for each of these countries. Through the words and stories of critical literacy leaders in these educational institutions, we hope to find some answers as to how critically literate societies can be fashioned and how this, in turn, can help to prevent the further erosion of democratic ideals.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

The world must be made safe for democracy.
—President Woodrow Wilson (Address to Congress, 1917)

DEMOCRACY AND CRITICAL LITERACY

“The world must be made safe for democracy,” represents an interesting view that seems to suggest that President Wilson felt that the world may not yet have been ready for democracy, or that democracy was too fragile a philosophy for immediate currency, or both. At any rate, this comment represents what we call “the voice from the margins.” Even though Woodrow Wilson was anything but a marginalized individual, his comment offered a new positioning of democracy, a position that showed it to be vulnerable. Perhaps this is not a common idea associated with democracy – its inherent vulnerability – and, as such, it represents a counterpoint to commonly held beliefs about the invincibilities of democracy and the democratic process.

The recognition that democracy is frail and must be bolstered allows for an interesting balance because such comments, expressed from this perspective, give us pause for consideration. And, as such, it is these considerations that allow us to gain a greater awareness of the fragility of many of humankind’s greatest ideas. Abstract notions such as democracy can be supplanted by other notions, other systems of governance that are supported by the public, unaware of the fact that they are supporting complicity in their own captivity within a system that may fail to protect them. Democracy shares these fallibilities with other great systems of governance and it is only through continued vigilance and the daily re-enactment of democracy and democratic values that we, the public, can be sure that we are being governed in a democratic fashion.

This point cannot be stressed thoroughly enough. If we believe in democratic freedom, then we must maintain it through protecting our rights and freedoms. We must engage, enact and perform democracy on a daily basis. It is not useful to assume that those in power will protect us and that they will also protect democracy for us. Ultimately, it is the individual who must ensure that democracy continues to support and protect us. Much like M.C. Escher’s (2000) drawing of two hands, each one drawing the other, democracy supports and must be supported by those who consider it their preferred system of governance.
Moving from the individual to the society, it can be noted that society is made up of individuals who join together, almost as tribes, to embrace a common goal. Once their goal is achieved, the tribe dissolves as individuals join other tribes with other causes (Bauman, 2000). Each group of individuals comes together and drifts apart many times during the course of a multiplicity of causes or purposes – and these causes and purposes overlap and may, or may not, be congruent with one another. While the pursuit of democratic principles may be hotly debated by one group or another at many times during election cycles, from local municipal elections to federal elections, it is true that the particular form of democracy practiced by any group in power tends to affect all citizens of that particular territory, whether they are considered to be full citizens or those who languish at the margins of democratic thought.

Thus, it is important that all citizens need to develop a greater understanding of democratic processes, policies and practices in order to ensure fair representation of themselves and others. It is these relationships between the self and the “Other” that allows for greater understanding among people to unite in the spirit of democratic thought. This may sound a trifle idyllic and, to be sure, it is. The rose of democracy is sick. The following poem, by William Blake, definitely a voice from the margins, could have been a poem about democracy.

THE SICK ROSE

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:
Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

—William Blake (1927)

Yes, democracy is sick. Perhaps the metaphor of democracy being represented by a rose may be somewhat “overblown,” but democracy is being besieged by malignant forces. While there may not be an exact symbolic correlation between the poem and the ills of democracy, the metaphor can perhaps explain some of the leading issues relative to the need for a strong democracy. The neoliberal front, that marriage of politics and corporatism, may well be thought of as the “invisible worm” that “flies in the night.” Perhaps the worm is not malignant. Perhaps the worm is doing just what worms do – eat roses. The fact that the worm is “invisible” and “flies in the night” reveals a certain secretiveness in the worm’s actions, however. While the worm, like the neoliberal alliance, does not want to be caught in the act of consuming democracy, it cannot help its actions.
After all, around the world, governments require “vibrant” economies in order for their lands and territories to be considered developed countries. Their appetites are insatiable. Bauman and Lyons (2013) suggest that globalization, in general, is responsible for the consumerism that threatens economies and environments. And, as we have seen, it is the profit margin that dictates the rules of the game. For a CEO to have a twinge of conscience and not honour the investments of those buying into the stock market is to find himself replaced by one who will. The worm cannot stop being a worm. However, the worm can wrap itself in a cloak of secrecy, much as the corporations, in league with government, attempt to wrap themselves in the same cloak of secrecy, perhaps in order to (mis)guide their citizens in the best (perhaps only) way they know how.

Because of this, democracy is under siege. This has serious implications for the societies in which we live, but it also has dire consequences for the systems that we support and hold dear to our hearts – particularly systems of education. The Organization for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD) makes educational policy for over 40 member countries. These policies contain themes that speak of education as being important for a number of reasons, but such vocalizations in the form of policy statements frequently add tags promoting the “need” for a vibrant economy. Thus, education becomes conscripted to the purposes of the neoliberal agenda. Leif Moos (2012) avers that equality and participatory democracy are core values in the welfare state. While this may be true, he also notes that competition in and preparedness for the labour market are also core values for the competitive state.

Pederson (2010) notes how this came about through three distinct phases of development. The first phase is represented as a nation-building period that, in Europe, lasted until the end of World War II. As many nations of the world moved from primary industry to secondary and tertiary industries, societies realized that they needed to educate future generations to become individuals who would build new, national communities. From the Second World War to the 1990s, the welfare state became a common feature in various societies the world over. This second phase is represented by a democracy-building period. Because politicians endeavoured to prevent other wars by raising democratic thought in schools, democratic participation became a pivotal value in schooling. However, in the current era, as a result of ever-increasing globalization, the state is competing for survival, largely in economic terms.

Because of this, politicians and their counterparts in the corporate world attempt to ensure that children grow up to be able and willing workers. We have moved from the dream of developing creative and enthusiastic problem-solvers to creating an army of compliant and obedient workers. Schools, thus, have begun to (re)focus on basic skills and knowledge and on accountability through standardized tests. Michael Apple (2006) states that public education has become contested terrain. Apple distinguishes between neoliberals, who promote consumer cultures and individualism, and neoconservatives, who believe in moral authority and a return to
past schooling traditions. Apple notes that large segments of the dominant culture, such as evangelical church members and the middle class involved in corporate endeavours also complement the ideologies of the politically right wing neoliberals and neoconservatives. Consequently, many of our curriculum initiatives, such as the infamous *No Child Left Behind* edict, are replete with right wing political assumptions. Besides possessing material resources to drive their ideological perspectives, Apple (2006) claims that neoliberals and neoconservatives alike make effective use of language to conjure support from the general public. He claims that this also highlights the impact on society of neoliberal interests that promote market-oriented practices at the expense of young people’s needs. These political right wing movements seek to create a world where democracy becomes modeled on economic principles expressed in terms of a consumerist philosophy. In this world, dwindling material resources are made more accessible to certain social classes, thus reinforcing James Madison’s notion of a limited representative democracy.

So, while society has been conscripted by neoliberal ideals and a consumerist philosophy that is being actively promoted in schools around the globe, what can be done to disrupt these damaging academic discourses of the current educational climate? What can be done to contain what counts as legitimate social practice within and outside of our public school systems?

Goodlad (1979) argues that the essential goal of schooling is to provide a systematic general education that addresses the purposes of democracy as well as the needs of the individual. He states, “The making of free individuals will result in the making of a free, democratic state. In this we must have faith or education will be corrupted” (p. 42). Perhaps it is not only democratic purpose that is sick; perhaps the educational systems of so many countries, like the sick rose, have already been corrupted. Noting this concern, Apple (2006) worries about how capable and resilient the education system is in its ability to disrupt the dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative discourses in academic institutions.

Jackson (2012) may begin to provide a way forward as he notes that “Education is a socially facilitated process of cultural transmission whose explicit goal is to effect an enduring change for the better in the character and psychological well-being (the personhood) of its recipients and, by indirection, in their broader social environment, which ultimately extends to the world at large” (p. 95). Clearly, the struggle for control of the educational systems that are so important to the continued vibrancy of the economy has begun in earnest. Likening this to World War III is not so far from fiction. Like all wars, the battle at its deepest level is ideological. The war on one side is being fought to preserve democracy. On the other side, the war is being fought to win future markets and to further a consumerist agenda. In preparing to do battle, we must fight fire with fire by providing ourselves with weapons equal to the task of preserving our democratic future.

But what weapons are available to teachers? Perhaps a return to our democratic roots will provide an answer. The background for education and assessment is in practice based on, what Aristotle calls “phronesis,” a Greek word for a type of
WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

wisdom or intelligence. While this word eludes description in terms of universal standards, it is open to negotiation, and innovative and creative perspectives. This could be likened to a form of critical literacy, a term that will be defined in this chapter by international experts in the field of literacy education through a series of video-clips.

The struggle for control of the public educational system in the United States of America is described by Henry Giroux in Cooper and White (2012):

It was impossible in the 1960s not to be aware of what was going on in the outside world…. People were really beginning to re-theorize what it meant to connect schooling to politics. Bowles & Gintis had just written *Schooling in Capitalist America*, an enormously important book for many of us. Paulo Freire, of course, his work we had already known. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was an enormously important book because it linked education to social change, whereas Gintis linked education to questions of capitalism and exactly what that relationship did and what it meant and the metaphor of schools as factories and schools as modes of social and cultural reproduction began to emerge and became dominant in the language. (p. 144)

As can be seen from the above comment, Professor Giroux understands that schools as modes of social and cultural reproduction had begun to emerge as early as the 1960s. The rapid emergence of capitalist ideologies was an anathema to critical education in that the proliferation of authoritarianism, along with the growth of capitalism, threatened the very foundations of social justice and democracy. He says, in moving to Canada:

… I could no longer live in a country that in many ways was…inventing a mode of authoritarianism that in many ways was increasing as dangerous, particularly to the issue of democracy…. [A]uthority should be held accountable; that, you know, we should push the envelope around questions of social justice; that societies should be seen as never just enough; and that intellectuals have responsibilities, to say the very least, not just simply to produce knowledge but, in some ways, do what they can to expand and deepen the possibilities of democracy itself…. (Giroux, in Cooper & White, 2012, p. 145)

Let us take a moment or two to explore the concept of critical literacy. First of all, the term “critical” may not have been the best choice for this idea, simply because the word “critical” may mean different things depending on to whom you are speaking. In this volume, we use the term “critical literacy” as a means to differentiate it from reading and writing, as it is both of these and so much more. It is a means by which scripts and texts can be analyzed in order to detect bias. In so doing, hierarchies of power can be identified, interrogated and, hopefully, dismantled in the name of greater democracy.

This chapter began with a quotation by an American president calling for the world to be made safe for democracy. The irony extant in this comment is much like
the position that Sophocles’ Oedipus found himself in, as he rushed blindly towards
the very fate he was attempting to avoid. Democracy must be accepted rather than
mandated. By its very nature, it must be something that can be negotiated. As we
delve more deeply into issues within the democratic process, a democracy that is
“forced” upon its citizen is at best a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1995) and, at worst,
a parody of itself. As a way of intervening in the democratic process in a positive
frame, perhaps the concept of critical literacy will allow for democratic nations to
ensure that they do not become trapped within their own critique of other nations’
infirmities.

DEFINITIONS

One of the most important things to do, by anyone who is contemplating writing
as opposed to a face-to-face encounter, is to define the terms one is using. Have
you ever had a conversation with someone with whom you believe that you share
a common vocabulary, only to find out part way through the conversation that each
of you is really talking about something entirely different? If you have never had
this experience, try to engage someone in discussing student achievement without
defining in advance what you mean by this term. Some might assume you are
talking about test scores; others may interpret the term to mean general conduct
or deportment in the schools. Thus, as can be seen, student achievement can cover
a very wide spectrum. Still others, cagier than most, will ask you what you mean
by this term before ploughing forward to engage with terms, whose etymology,
denotations or connotations may be indistinct or misleading.

To illustrate this more graphically, there is a very old joke about two psychiatrists
who happen to be in an elevator together. One psychiatrist says to the other, “Good
morning” and is met with nothing more than a puzzled look. The second psychiatrist
ascends to his own floor and, as he leaves the elevator, he turns to the closing doors
and thinks to himself, “I wonder what he meant by that.” The second psychiatrist
was vigilant in not falling prey to assuming that what the first psychiatrist was
saying was, in fact, exactly what he meant to say. Perhaps this says more about
the psychiatric profession than it does about understanding not only what we say,
but also what it is that we mean when we say something. However, this may also
help to illustrate the need to make our definitions clear. To name something and to
understand what it is that we mean by our naming and defining allows us to speak
about the entity, artifact or event that has been identified. It is also very helpful if
others to whom we are speaking also share a common understanding of what it is
that the object of discussion represents.

For example, “dictionary.com” defines a democracy as:

1. government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power
   is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents
   under a free electoral system.
WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

2. a state having such a form of government: The United States and Canada are democracies.
3. a state of society characterized by formal equality of rights and privileges.
4. political or social equality; democratic spirit.
5. the common people of a community as distinguished from any privileged class; the common people with respect to their political power.

Just in case we do not find what we are looking for in these definitions, “dictionary.com” invites us to ponder the following “relevant questions:”

• What is democracy?
• What is democracy in America?
• What is a republic?
• What is a representative republic?
• What is a republican democracy?
• What is a representative democracy?

For purposes of this discussion, the term “democracy” will be used as the first definition indicates, “government by the people; a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system,” whether this be entirely true or not.

Another similarly vague term is “Social Justice,” which happens to be defined very succinctly by the same dictionary as “the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society” and, as such, may actually be defining its opposite, social injustice. After all, how can any distribution of disadvantages within a society be construed as socially just unless, of course every member of the society labours under the same disadvantage? Having said that, when disadvantage becomes normalized, does it then cease to be a disadvantage and merely become an accepted way of life or of doing things? Unfortunately, such terms, and such conditions do exist within societies around the globe and, consequently, “social justice” can devolve to nothing more than a politically correct term that really only identifies those who are excluded, as if those who are marginalized require further marginalization in order for false prophets to introduce personal agendas that quickly become “social justice for me” (White & Cooper, 2013, p. 1065). Wikipedia defines social justice more closely as the ability people have to realize their potential in the society in which they live. This potential can easily be achieved by investing, in appropriate proportions, in equity and equality.

Equity and equality, oddly enough, have often been used interchangeably. However, thanks to dictionary.com, equity refers to the quality of being fair or impartial, fairness, or impartiality; whereas “equality” refers to sameness. In essence, equitable treatment means that those among us who are disadvantaged, marginalized or excluded in some way are given what they need in order to enjoy the same privileges as are commonly enjoyed by other members of the society. Equality simply means that everyone gets the same thing whether they already have more of
whatever is being distributed or not. For example, equity is evident in many of the food kitchens dotted around larger urban centres that attempt to feed the homeless people who would not be able to fend for themselves. Equality, on the other hand, would extend this offer to all and sundry, regardless of their finances, socio-economic status or position in the community. There is a place for both equity and equality in every society; however, it can be considered unjust when one poses as the other and the result is the exclusion or further marginalization of one group or another. It has been contended that, if we were to act equitably by giving to those what they need in order to thrive, eventually all people would become equal (White & Cooper, 2013).

CRITICAL LITERACY

So far, in the past chapter and a half, we have covered some territory. Perhaps this would be a good point at which to recapitulate and to point to the direction in which we are headed. First of all, the issue is about how democracy is engaged with, enacted and performed in different ways in different places and at different times. We note that democracy, while flawed, is the system that many countries have chosen to represent their population. However, democracy is tired. It is under siege. Pressures from global and national forces combine to threaten democratic societies everywhere.

So, what is the recommended solution to return democracy to a system of values that populations can continue to believe in? Well, first of all, democracy must never be taken for granted. It must be engaged with, enacted and performed on a daily basis. It is the individual who will make a difference, providing that enough individuals work for change in systems of democratic governance that threaten to limit their rights and freedoms. Our politicians, our corporations and, indeed, our citizens themselves must be held accountable for their decisions and their subsequent actions. But how can we accomplish this?

Critical literacy has often been connected to a desire for a more equitable and accessible society and as such, may offer a potential solution. This will take time, as it relates primarily to our school-age youth, simply because schools are one place where large numbers of young people gather together. In the absence of general membership in community-based institutions such as churches, recreation centres and social groups, schools become the default mechanism for the mounting of social change. Of course, maintenance of a strong and healthy democracy is not the only issue that schools are being called upon to engineer; other issues such as career considerations, university preparation, family studies and many other social issues, situations and demands also fall to the lot of the public school’s educational checklist.

This is not to say that critical literacy is not as important than these others, it is to signal that the life of the school is not only amazingly complex, it is to recognize that there are many competing demands for the very precious time that we have allotted during the school day for the education of future generations. However, the good news is that critical literacy does not need to have its own space, as it is not taught
WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

like a separate subject. It can (and should) be taught within the context of any subject or topic that is currently under the aegis of the public school system. But precisely what is critical literacy? Simply put, critical literacy is an instructional attitude originating with the neo-Marxist approach to critical pedagogy. This approach adopts a “critical” stance towards text.

Text can be defined as anything that bears a message. For example, any manuscript can be a text, as can any movie, video or performance or technological media. Norman Denzin, in paying homage to Jacques Derrida, notes that “everything is inside the text, there is nothing outside the text. The social is always within the text” (Cooper & White, 2012, p. 142). In fact, Helene Cixous, the internationally renowned feminist writer and philosopher, claims that the entire world can be seen as a text (Personal communication, 2008).

Given any text of any description, then, practitioners of critical literacy adopt a “critical” perspective toward the text. The basic premise of critical literacy requires consumers of text to adopt a critical and questioning approach to what they read. Critical literacy encourages readers to actively analyze texts and offers strategies for exploring biases and uncovering underlying messages, positions and themes. While there are a number of differing orientations to critical literacy, it was Paulo Freire (2000), in his book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, who outlined his work with migrant farm workers. In this book, Freire chronicles how teaching these farm workers to read and write was not successful until he introduced meaningful situations that were relevant to their health and welfare. At this point, the workers began to recognize not only the value in achieving literacy but also the empowering effect that critical literacy provided them with respect to changing their lives by fighting against those forces that oppressed them. Although, Freire was working with adult learners, his approach has been valued in educational venues around the globe. At the heart of critical literacy is the ability to cultivate the numerous meanings a text may contain and to develop flexibility in our thinking about these various meanings. As a caveat, no text is truly neutral.

Further to this, critical literacy, like democracy itself, is engaged with, and enacted and performed differently in different places around the world. It is for this reason that we have interviewed world-renowned international scholars in this field of endeavor in order to illustrate how critical literacy is valued in three Commonwealth countries – Australia, South Africa and Canada. Hopefully, the investigation that follows will help readers to engage with critical literacy in their own daily lives, their employment and professional practices, and their theoretical and philosophical orientations to the lives they lead within democratic societies. It is also hoped that critical literacy may be a method that anyone can use to interrogate systems of repression wherever they may be found.

Let us turn now towards the defining of critical literacy by the very people who have helped to understand, shape, and promote this Freirian ideal. While the approaches identified in each of these geographic areas overlap in many ways, and while they may approach the subject and subject matter in somewhat
different ways due to their own societal contexts, they do not necessarily represent competing views.

AUSTRALIA

Barbara Comber is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. In this capacity, Dr. Comber has undertaken numerous research projects concerned with literacy development, educational policy, teachers’ work and socioeconomic disadvantage.

In the following video-clip, Dr. Comber describes her view of critical literacy and notes that it is often considered to be a “family” of practices. In her view, Dr. Comber identifies privilege and injustice as targets worthy of interrogation through the lens of critical literacy. To view Video-Clip 2.1, please proceed to:

http://youtu.be/EXNOdZfOb6s

In order to effectively interrogate systems of privilege and injustice, Dr. Comber suggests that it is important to look at the various ways that texts mediate people’s lives through the relationship between language, power and identity, how things came to be as they are currently and how people become positioned through the ways they are represented by the text(s) in question.

In a second video-clip, Dr. Peter Freebody of the University of Sydney describes how he and Allan Luke of the University of Queensland developed a model that, in Australia and beyond, became a hallmark of literacy education in general and critical literacy education in particular.
WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

This model eventually became known as the “Four Roles Model” or, alternately, as the “Four Resources Model” of critical literacy. Video-Clip 2.2 may be viewed at:

http://youtu.be/t1U9gwbKA4k

As we work our way through subsequent chapters of this book, we will revisit these scholars and introduce others who have points of view to offer regarding critical literacy and its potential impact of systems of inequity and injustice.

Having witnessed the view of critical literacy in Australia, let us now travel to South Africa in order to discover the views held by South African scholars with respect to critical literacy.

SOUTH AFRICA

Dr. Carolyn McKinney was interviewed at her university, the University of Cape Town. Professor McKinney acknowledges the fact that, in analyzing others’ discourses, we cannot help but produce our own discourses. At the heart of her work is the commitment to democracy which, in the South African context, has been hard won and is still in a very vulnerable state. Dr. McKinney offers a cautionary note in suggesting that the enterprise of investigation using the critical literacy approach is, at its heart, a moral investigation.

With respect to understanding the moral nature of such investigations, Zygmunt Bauman (1993) notes that morality does not mean that one must adopt a “politically correct” stance towards a given subject, but that one must be prepared to make a choice between what they know to be good and what they may suspect to be corrupt. Either choice, claims Bauman, is moral in that the chooser has the freedom to choose either path. What makes this a moral undertaking is the fact that the individual will choose one path or another, knowing or at least considering what the consequences of any action will be:

Zygmunt Bauman recognizes the ultimately existential nature of moral choice. With the rapidity of accelerating change, choice, moral or otherwise, becomes a necessity. To not choose or to not have choice is to no longer count, to no longer have a purpose and, hence, to no longer have meaning. In these postmodern times, one is either on the bandwagon or is left behind. There
is no other alternative. Consequently, this has serious ramifications for one’s concepts around the meaning and purpose of life. Professor Bauman is not referring to the hoary old debate about whether humankind is essentially good or evil, but articulates the idea that being moral means to exercise freedom of choice in choosing between the two binaries. Thus, one must take the responsibility for one’s choice…. Bauman suggests, as does Camus (2000) that, in the absence of a higher authority, it is the individual who must take responsibility not only for his or her own actions, but for the consequences of the actions of others as they impact upon that individual and influence his or her circumstances. In this way, to choose right or wrong, good or evil, both of these possible choices are moral choices; and what it is that causes a person to choose one way or the other is a moral choice. It is not the act but the motivation and intent that recasts the issue of choice as moral commitment, which ultimately means that one’s life situation is a set of moral problems and one’s life choices can be viewed as moral dilemmas – the choice between good and evil. (Cooper & White, 2012, p. 96)

Professor McKinney is vitally aware of this consideration as she notes that some of the perspectives that are interrogated are privileged viewpoints. The issue for this scholar is how one comes to grips with a particular point of view without silencing those who hold that viewpoint. To her credit, Dr. McKinney promotes the view that all perspectives, even those from the point of privilege, are valid views and that, in order to gain greater equity and social justice, greater democracy notwithstanding, it is only by tussling with incongruent perspectives that we can influence attitudes and hope to fashion some kind of equity and fairness for all. To view Video-Clip 2.3, please go to:

https://youtu.be/seUUqElDulU

It is through the use of critical literacy that Dr. McKinney attempts to deconstruct the binaries of Black and White, the oppressed and the oppressor. The power in this approach is that, by de-materializing these binaries, we can begin to view each other as real people rather than a sum of attributes and traits that cause them to be regarded as objects, rather than as people. Thus, these people can come together and learn together and, given a modicum of trust, can actually work towards authentic, valuing relationships.

CANADA

Of the three areas that were identified for exploration, Canada remains the only country that, among other goods and services, imports a great deal of its culture from the United States. This chapter features two video-clips, one from Dr. John Willinsky, who is currently a faculty member at Stanford University. Dr. Willinsky was born in Canada and was on faculty at the University of British Columbia until
WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

2007. As a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Dr. Willinsky has had enormous influence on how critical literacy is conceived in this country.

Dr. Willinsky defines critical literacy as asking questions that go beyond the author’s purpose and identifying how that text interacts with other areas of endeavour. He asks how the text influences the individual, how it interacts with other texts and what impact this text has on the larger society. These impacts often can be seen to resonate or discord with political ideas, social interests, knowledge, and what is valued as knowledge. Professor Willinsky offers a caveat that the critical interrogation of texts should not serve to destroy the pleasure of the text, and to acknowledge the efforts and intents of the author. Of interest is the question he asks around what a counter-text to that being examined would look like and what may be omitted from the text under discussion. Please view Video-Clip 2.4 at:

https://youtu.be/0GYGAOsrsr4

At some point, notes Professor Willinsky, the critical reader must step back from the text under discussion and ask about how the text serves as a political object and how it serves or chooses to not serve social interests. He goes on to note that any program of critical literacy would necessitate providing students with some scaffolding in order for them to gain experience with simpler texts rather than moving forward too quickly into some of the more pendulous tomes. In this way, students can gain experience in the ways in which texts operate, socially and politically. Among examples of texts, Dr. Willinsky cites examples of political cartoons, satire and parody, music that is rife with social commentary such as hip-hop and rap, blogs and social media websites, as well as the new multi-modal literacies that can allow students to identify the text, discover the intent, and use it to practice critical literacy skills by raising questions about the nature of the text, how it operates, who is excluded, what is missing from the text and the standpoint of that text.

It is at this point that Dr. Willinsky takes us into the social studies or English language arts program in order to show us what this would look like in practice. He suggests that teachers should also select alternate texts that complement or are incongruent with the text at hand in order to more clearly understand what perspectives are being presented or what is being left out in the companion texts, or to provide a new perspective altogether. As such, it must be noted that critical
literacy is more of an attitude towards texts than a method that can be practiced in the same way each time a new text is chosen. By proceeding in this way, students gain an opportunity to understand what it is that is being promoted, and can begin to become critical thinkers in view of not only the canon of authorized texts, but of the responses to that canon as well.

Dr. Willinsky credits Allan Luke and others with recognizing the occupational or vocational aspect of how literacies work within the political economy of media control and the dominant messages. It is also recognized that critical literacy, having emerged, is also changing and evolving in response to new technological, political and social developments around the world.

Another scholar in the field of critical literacy is Valerie Kinloch of Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. For Dr. Kinloch, critical literacy raises issues of power and the dynamics associated with such power.

Dr. Valerie Kinloch

Dr. Kinloch holds that communication is an important facet of critical literacy. As noted previously, knowledge generation and acquisition is, for the most part, a social activity, particularly as it is engaged with in the public schools. Professor Kinloch says, in agreement with Paulo Freire, that we must converse about the ways in which people read, write and engage in thinking about the word and the world, as well as how people interact with one another and the types of questions we ask of each other. To view Video-Clip 2.5, please proceed to:

https://youtu.be/owGQx57uA3A

In essence, for Professor Kinloch, critical literacy is really concerned with the spaces that people occupy in relation to who they are and with regard to the spaces that others occupy. In short, the way that people think about the world in which they live, how they read this world and how they think about texts is a key to understanding the power of critical literacy. Texts, of course, can refer to any system of meaning making (White, 2008), including print texts, oral texts and what Dr. Kinloch refers to as the “text of our entire lives” that we are so enmeshed in that we cease to regard as a text.
WHAT IS CRITICAL LITERACY?

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have attempted to demystify what it is that we mean by the term “critical literacy” and why this may be a positive reinforcement to issues of social injustice and inequity that have begun to plague modern democracies. Perhaps critical literacy may be a useful instrument to hone in the interests of developing not only a more democratic form of governance but also one that will allow a certain understanding of ourselves, one another and of the world around us.

It is to these ends that we now turn. In the chapters that ensue, we use a construct that we have developed that we hope will help us delve into the complexities of critical literacy in a variety of global geographies. The “Five Contexts” refer to the following (auto)biographical, historical, political, postmodern and philosophical dimensions of understanding what critical literacy is, how it operates in different countries and what the sociological implications are for a democracy of the future that will truly represent the needs of the people who participate in democratic pursuits and are represented by the democracy within which they live and interact.

REFERENCES