



Reading the world as a literacy practice: A teacher's reflection[♦]

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Abstract

This article attempts to share with the reader a reading club program that was developed for a group of adults in situation of displacement in Bogotá, Colombia. It is framed in the context of forced internal displacement which is a critical social situation our country has been suffering lately and it is somehow, shaping our current, local teaching practices. The reflections presented in this article are focused both, on the critical theories of pedagogy and on my experience as teacher researcher in the creation and development of a Reading Club at "Red de Solidaridad Social", Bogotá.

Key Words: reading as a situated social practice, reading club program, forced internal displacement in Colombia, critical pedagogy.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende dar a conocer al lector un programa de club de lectores que se desarrolló con un grupo de adultos en situación de desplazamiento en Bogotá, Colombia. Está enmarcado en el contexto de desplazamiento forzado el cual es una situación social crítica que nuestro país ha venido sufriendo últimamente y de alguna manera esta presente y moldeando nuestras prácticas de enseñanza actuales. Las reflexiones que se presentan en este artículo están enfocadas en las teorías críticas de pedagogía y en mi experiencia como profesora investigadora en la creación y desarrollo del "Club de Lectores" en la Red de Solidaridad Social en Bogotá.

Palabras claves: La lectura como una práctica social situada, programa club de lectores, desplazamiento forzado interno en Colombia, pedagogía crítica.

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Introduction

Throughout my experience as new teacher researcher, I have realized and experienced that my responsibility and role as teacher of English as a foreign language goes far beyond both, instructional tasks and “teaching” Spanish speaking students the components of a foreign language.

On one hand, I consider improvements in education come from raising teachers' awareness and self-criticism rather than from specifying objectives, lesson plans and syllabuses with precision. On the other, components such as grammar, phonetics, syntax, linguistic theories and communicative skills are indeed relevant to my professional field, however, it is my believe that the critical, living connections with the sociocultural and political arena of the realities we live in our country cannot be overlooked in education.

The reading club at “Unidad de Atención Integral al Desplazado” (UAI D) which is part of “Red de Solidaridad Social” in Bogotá, was created as an attempt to gain understanding of the social and critical realities that adults in situation of displacement experienced when being forced to flee their homes as a result of the armed conflict that takes place in rural areas of Colombia. Thus, the purpose of this article is to share with the reader, my experience as new teacher researcher in the creation and development of the reading club.

Getting Started

During June and July 2002, I participated in a training workshop offered by ASOLECTURA, which is an association that connects in its purposes of promoting reading and writing as social practices, with one of the Master program areas of research which is literacy. As a result of participating in this training workshop, I became “Ayudante” of “Clubes de Lectores”. There, I started to become familiar not only with authors and perspectives regarding reading, but most important, I became aware of reading programs which are put in action in Bogotá to benefit large numbers of people. There, I also had the opportunity to meet people who talked about their experiences as readers as well as being “Ayudantes” at “Clubes de Lectores” and I experienced the relevance of creating a space in which readers shared readings, perspectives, backgrounds and even emotions at a dialogic bases and beyond the classroom bounds.

In late February 2003, I was able to create a small community of readers.



I started a “Club de Lectores” at (UAID.). The participants who volunteered to join this reading club were displaced adults who not only shared ideas, feelings and opinions around the readings, but had the opportunity to share their life experiences and the way they perceived the reality of their worlds through dialogue.

The Reading Experience At (Uaid).

Though many interpretations and definitions have been given to reading, and authors have, from different perspectives, worked on this vast area of language, it is certain that reading plays an essential role in the daily life of individuals. Reading goes, as I understand it, far beyond decoding sound/symbol correspondences, reading implies not only linguistic knowledge but a set of social processes which bring into play the crucial role of literacy. For the creation and development of this reading club I considered Baynham’s view of reading as a situated social practice which he summarizes as follows:

- “Reading is *situated* because of its dependence on the interaction of linguistic knowledge, background knowledge and interpretative work”.
- “Reading is *social* because, even in the stereotypical case of solitary reader engaging with text, the activity of reading routinely implicates the social-indeed reading strictly can’t take place without the implication of socially derived knowledge”.
- “Reading is *social practice* because the activity of reading presupposes reading the social world and introduces the potential for *critical, resistant readings*, not simply accommodations to the givens of text” (p. 207).

I was also influenced by Freire’s approach to literacy and reading as he argues that literacy is a political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society (1987). Literacy for Freire is part of the process of being self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one’s experience by giving meaning and expression to their own needs and voices as part of a project of self and social empowerment. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading illuminated this reading club program as well. She points out that meaning happens during the transaction between the reader and the text and that the purpose of that activity involves the whole person (1985).



Having such theoretical foundations in mind, influenced by the professional literature and academic training I had been involved with these last years, and thanks to the support given by Unidad de Atención Integral al Desplazado (U. A. I. D.) in Bogotá, it was possible to open the doors of a space for sharing and considering the personal, social and cultural situations of the participants through reading as a situated social practice at a dialogic bases.

Selection of highly motivating and high quality reading materials preceded the encounters. This selection process was supported and guided by Asolectura. During the reading club sessions, short stories were read aloud by and for participants who were invited to predict content and outcomes from context clues. They in turn responded orally to the readings, at a dialogic bases. Adults in situation of displacement related and shared their personal insights, perspectives, own experiences, feelings, emotions and concerns which resulted from transacting with peers and with text. Interaction among peers built a good atmosphere to reflect on questions, concerns and issues of the community interest. It was intended to create a resilient environment where social support was provided and a building resiliency attitude could be fostered.

While making meaning of the readings through negotiation at a dialogic bases, self-reflection and higher-level thinking skills were promoted by relating the text to prior knowledge; making inferences and supporting conclusions; relating to self and national social issues.

In short, it was the way in which reading generated dialogic transactions between readers and texts. Participants were engaged in a reading practice where the written word was the spring board to explore the social reality lived and experienced by the participants. That reality became the new text to be read and explored by the adults in situation of displacement who participated in the reading club sessions at UAID Bogotá.

Forced internal displacement is one of the gravest social, economic and humanitarian crisis facing Colombia today, consisting of forced movements of people displaced by armed conflicts. The creation of a Reading Club at Unidad de Atención Integral al Desplazado (UAID) in Bogotá, has proven to be a space for dialogic interactions, reflection, for a critical reading and critical understanding of society and as Freire states for “reading the world”.

In the reading club sessions participants found a space to freely share their concerns, needs, the struggles they have faced, and the experiences they



have lived, at a dialogic bases which provided them a mutual possibility to read themselves and the world. It provided a space for a living connection to their reality. (Freire and Shor, 1987).

The population who participated in the reading club sessions have been forced to flee their homes due to the armed conflicts that take place in rural areas between paramilitaries and guerrillas mainly. During the reading club sessions the adult participants engaged in dialogic interactions and felt free to narrate and share their own life experiences. Their statements showed that they were forced to abandon their customs, working practices, lands, friends and families. Populations in situation of displacement are forced to cope with a number of problematic situations. Searching for a safe place to live, they migrate to big cities. Cities which are unfamiliar to them and do not often offer them effective ways to overcome adversities and satisfy basic needs such as food, accommodation, health and education.

The reading club and critical pedagogy

Critical education, as Ira Shor (1987) explains, has to integrate the participants (students and teacher) into a mutual creation and re-creation of knowledge framed in a dialogic pedagogy. I, as ayudante de clubes de lectores, which is the title given by Asolectura to the role we play in the reading club sessions, established an atmosphere where participants agreed to say what was authentic to them. I never forced them to share. I helped them to say more by restraining my own voice to give their voices room. Participants were as active as I was during the dialogic interactions. I do agree with Freire (1987) when he points out that teachers learn *with* and *from* students, “Liberatory education is fundamentally a situation where the teacher and the students *both* have to be learners, *both* have to be cognitive subjects, in spite of being different. ... for teachers and students both to be critical agents in the act of knowing.” (p.33)

Freire (1987) suggests that liberatory education and the context for transformation is not only the classroom but it extends outside of it. (p.33-34) This reading club created at UAID was a space to share literate voices and provided the possibility to take literacy practices and critical pedagogy beyond the classroom bounds. The participants in these reading club sessions found this space appropriate enough to engage in critical dialogue, reflecting upon



critical issues of their social, cultural and political realities, and their places in society.

These participants in situation of displacement were able to name, to reflect critically, to act. They were able to “illuminate their realities” (Freire 1987:13) in the context of literacy practices carried out during the reading club sessions. “Through critical dialogue about a text or a moment of society, we try to reveal it, unveil it, see its reasons for being like it is” Then, transformation is possible “because consciousness is not a mirror of reality, not a mere reflection, but is *reflexive* and *reflective* of reality” (p.13) The reading club sessions provided a starting point of transformation as participants engaged each other in critical dialogue, reflecting upon their own realities together, sharing their backgrounds, life experiences and current concerns, enabling them, as a community, to construct a resilient environment required to transform their realities and overcome the crisis. As Shor (1987) remarks “If students do engage each other in critical dialogue, I see that as an act of empowerment because they chose to become human beings investigating their reality together ... I read this as a starting point of transformation which may develop in the long run into their choices for social change” (p.34)

As stated before, populations in situation of displacement are forced to cope with a wide range of problematic situations such as food, accommodation, health etc. Those are their basic needs and most immediate concerns. Literacy practices might seem irrelevant to the processes of overcoming those immediate concerns and needs. However, the creation of a reading club has shown the importance of having a space where those concerns are named, expressed, shared with others who have experienced similar situations and as a community, search for solutions to overcome adversity. That is why this space has provided a resilient environment where participants have reflected upon their realities and have found a space where their voices are heard and responses to their queries have been provided at a dialogic bases by the participants of the reading club.

This reading club was created as a space for freedom, for dialogue, a space where the existing sociocultural, historical and political realities shape education as participants are empowered to illuminate the conditions they are in, to help as a community, overcome those conditions, a space that invites participants to become resilient agents of transformation and hope.



Sonia Nieto (2002) asserts that sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives are first and foremost based on the assumption that social relationships and political realities are at the heart of teaching and learning. That is, “learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers”. (p.5)

The creation of alternative educational programs such as this reading club created at UAID in Bogotá, can be implemented in other contexts, in and outside school settings, having population in situation of displacement as participants or any other kind of population. “All you need is to bring the community together and let the dialogue begin” (Wink, 2000:109).

Conclusion

This experience as participant observer during the reading club sessions, provided me with the opportunity to understand one basic task of the liberatory classroom which consists of investigating the very voices of the students, in this case, adults in situation of displacement. I experienced what Shor (1987) states: “I research the spoken words of the students to learn what they know, what they want, and how they live. Their speeches are privileged access to their consciousnesses (p.9). I examined the words and themes most important to the participants so I valued their voices, narratives and life experiences as the topic of interest and discussion during every single session of the reading club. It was a rewarding experience that made me grow as teacher in the sense that I could realize the importance of being acute observer and listener of the social realities lived by students and understand how those realities affect their academic performance and personal development. Being aware and reflective on the happenings within and beyond the classroom have served to inform and reorient my teaching practice in search of meeting the demands of a changing society.

To conclude this personal-experience. I consider important to reflect upon the following questions: Do we create spaces for dialogue, freedom and reflection in our teaching - learning contexts? Are we reflective practitioners who engage in self-criticism exercises? Are we aware of the existing conditions each student brings to our classrooms? Do we value and respect students’ voices and life experiences and make them relevant for the school setting? Do we



as teachers, exercise and promote collaborative relations of power which enable or empower students to participate confidently, as a result of having their identities affirmed and extended in the social interactions? Are we aware of the demographic changes produced by forced internal displacement in Colombia and how are those affecting, shaping our teaching - learning contexts?

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