

WinkWorld September 2002

Theoretical Framework For Creating BIG BOOKS with Students

Prepared specifically for WinkWorld, 9-02.

The following is a description of a community literacy project and the resulting theoretical framework, which was developed mutually with Fernando Peña, the Director of MiniCorps at California State University, Stanislaus. The project began in 1995.

In this particular case, the methods preceded the theoretical framework. We created many BIG BOOKS with various students/teachers/families, before we generated and articulated our theoretical framework.

During the initial phase, the MiniCorps students worked in the local public schools and began creating BIG BOOKS with the younger students. The second phase of the project, began in September 1996 when the Spanish bilingual (BCLAD) students joined with the Mini-Corps students to create more BIG BOOKS. On a weekly basis, the bilingual credential candidates went to schools and the community to read books and facilitate the authoring of BIG BOOKS. At this time more than 30 Big Books have been created and are being used by the original authors and illustrators in classrooms and the community.

In the process of making these BIG BOOKS, we saw that positive human connections were established among all involved: the student authors; the MiniCorps students; the bilingual credential students; the school community; and the families. As the oral histories were captured in the BIG BOOKS, we noted also that "reluctant readers" in September became "eager readers" at the end of the semester. The bilingual credential candidates did not want to rotate to other classrooms because they had "connected" with specific students. Many credential candidates chose to continue their reading time with the younger students even when the semester was over. During this process, the younger students began to demonstrate a strong sense of self and pride in their language and ability to create stories and illustrations.

Two Questions Guided Our Theoretical Framework

In order to establish our theoretical framework, we simply asked ourselves: Why? Why are we making these BIG BOOKS? In what follows are the answers that we generated:

- to generate authentic voice;
- to bring in the students' voice;
- to become transformative teachers and learners;
- to base our curriculum on the students' lived experiences;
- to demonstrate a sense of care and respect for students;
- to generate literacy;
- to create partnerships between bilingual credential candidates and public schools students;
- to turn promise into practice;
- to create a process whereby students can negotiate their own identities;

- to do critical pedagogy.

After this process, we focused our continuing work under the theoretical framework of our final two answers: negotiating identities (Cummins, 1996; 2001) and doing critical pedagogy (Wink, 1996; 2000).

The first question, why?, eventually triggered the second question: Why do we do what we do? Never an easy question. However, it turns out that what we do, matters. Cummins states that ". . .human relationships are at the heart of schooling (1996, pg. 1)." Cummins writes that the connections which we establish with students are central to their development. These human interactions can have a very positive or negative effect on the students. Furthermore, it is through active language use, within the human relationships, that students negotiate their own identities.

This BIG BOOKS project created a process whereby the university students and children in the classroom and community were able to positively negotiate their own identity. The project was the impetus for the development of a positive sense of self and pride in their language.

Since the initial project of authoring and illustrating books with students, many other projects have evolved. However, even with the various pedagogical paths which evolved from this one project, all were and are still theoretically grounded by the original framework. We are often asked: How do you negotiate identity with students? Or, how do you do critical pedagogy? A critical approach to authoring and illustrating big books with students, teachers, and families is one answer.

As the project continued, it became clear to us that the authoring and illustrating of these Big Books was one way of doing critical pedagogy.

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS CRITICAL PEDAGOGY?

Just tell me what it means! (Wink, 1996, pg. 25) is often the first question we hear about critical pedagogy. One of the frustrating aspects of this study is our tendency to want others to transmit their knowledge of what it means to us. However, memorizing definitions is not the answer to an understanding of critical pedagogy. Often, this study pushes us to rethink, resee, and reexamine many of our previous assumptions about teaching and learning. Critical pedagogy triggers relearning and unlearning. It forces us to grapple with the fundamental issues of power and its relationship to students, teachers, and society. Critical pedagogy is a new lens that enables us to see more clearly our past, our present, and our future. It leads us to a critical and caring stance in the classroom and community.

HOW IN THE WORLD DO WE DO CRITICAL PEDAGOGY?

So, how do we do critical pedagogy? Is there a blueprint? a prescription? a recipe? Of course not. I doubt that we can teach anyone to do critical pedagogy because we do not do critical pedagogy, we live it. However, my view of living critical pedagogy is balanced by the persistent voice of my daughter, Dawn Wink, who keeps rolling her eyes and saying: "Yeahbut, how, Mom?" The truth is that I love to play with this dialect of doing or living critical pedagogy. The truth is that Dawn Wink is not as charmed with this as I am. So, for all the Dawn Winks, we offer the Big Books project as one way of doing critical pedagogy.

The practitioners' voice in critical pedagogy must be as strong as the theorists' voice. It is

always easier to state a theoretical concept than it is to live it with 20, 30, or 150 students every day. The voice of critical pedagogy must flow in both directions. This ongoing dialogue with Dawn has offered me the opportunity to relearn and unlearn as her practice informs my theory and my theory informs her practice. Dawn is now in her fifth year of teaching: three years in bilingual education, and two years in bilingual immersion.

WHY IN THE WORLD DOES CRITICAL PEDAGOGY MATTER?

- Kids matter, that's why.
- Our past, present, and future matters, that's why.
- Literacy matters, that's why.

What we do with kids matters. These human relationships which we create in classrooms have the potential to do great good or great harm. We think that active language use, in the language of the student and based on student's life, has the potential to do great good.

Critical pedagogy comes together for me in new and surprising ways. When I first began reading critical theory, I feared I would see too much, too critically. However, the opposite has happened. Critical pedagogy has given me hope. We all want it; critical pedagogy led me to it. Critical theory led me to believe that each of us really can make a difference. And, this Big Books project is one way.

WHY IN THE WORLD DOES MAKING THESE BIG BOOKS MATTER?

The goal of this workshop is to share one way that teachers and students can join together to become caring and critical teachers and learners for the 21st century. This workshop is designed to demonstrate that Big Books, which are written in the language of the student and based on the lived experiences of the students, are one way of doing critical pedagogy. Big Books are one way of bringing in the authentic voice so that students can negotiate their own identities.