

English

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Critical Reading and Cultural Background

During the 1960s, critical reading evoked considerable interest and investigation. Robinson (1967) considered critical reading to be a "judgment of the veracity, validity, and worth of what is read, based on sound criteria or standards developed through previous experiences" (p. 37). Dale (1967) called critical reading "reading beyond the lines" (pp. 25-26), which requires readers to draw inferences from and recognize implications in what they read.

The chief emphasis of most of the early work in critical reading, reflected clearly in the collection of articles in *Critical Reading* and in other books on the topic, was that the text is central and that effective readers unlock its meaning by approaching it with the intention of discovering what ideas and information it contains. The basic intention of these early researchers was to transfer information from the printed page into the consciousness of readers.

However, in their recent paper, "Critical Reading: A Redefinition," Barbara Lyman and Martha Collins (1990) arrive at a new definition of critical reading that has broad implications, particularly for minority learners. They view critical reading as "the construction of meaning by the reader when what is in the head interacts with cues on the page" (p. 58). Whereas the old definition of critical reading focused on the text, the newer definition, based upon considerable research data, focuses on the interaction between readers and texts.

Implicit in E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987) is a similar idea. Students must be helped to build background information, Hirsch contends, so that they can understand the reading they will encounter. Hirsch drew up a list of some 4,400 names, dates, and terms he felt literate people

should know or be familiar with. But, although the items on Hirsch's list may be useful information, those who become familiar with them will not necessarily be transformed into critical readers in the sense that they will be able to make the crucial judgments about their reading that critical readers must make. Having information is not tantamount to using information intelligently or even to understanding its importance.

Lyman and Collins (1990) report that "schema theoretical research suggested that meaning does not reside in text. Rather than being extracted from text, meaning is constructed through the interaction to readers' schemata and text clues. Reading is a process in which successful readers integrate appropriate knowledge with the cues of the writer" (p. 59).

The research reviewed by Lyman and Collins emphasizes that critical readers must understand the schemata they bring to their reading and find ways to broaden them. This means that readers are most likely to read critically and intelligently—skeptically, if you will—writing that relates to them in ways that tap their own cultures.

"Ah!" one might complain, "you simply want to cater to students' interests rather than help them experience elements of life and society that are unknown to them." Such a response, however, focuses on ends rather than on beginnings. Those who teach students to read literature usually find that the reading is most productive when students begin by reading material to which they can relate on a personal level. This reading leads to other reading, until the scope of reading is gradually broadened to include more searching and profound material.

The schemata that people bring to reading determine which aspects of the reading they will emphasize and remember. One's individual schema

enables readers to fill in the gaps in texts. For example, one experiment showed that when two groups were asked to read about a house, one group being cast as potential home buyers and the other as potential burglars, the two groups remembered vastly different elements.

Similarly, in an early study by Bartlett (1932), British subjects were asked to read a Canadian folktale. Afterward, Bartlett tested their short-term and long-term recollections of the story. The short-term recollections were colored by their cultural backgrounds. Their distortions of the story also increased with time: *canoe* became *boat*, and *hunting seals* became *fish*ing.

The critical reading research may offer some explanation of why large groups of minority students perform poorly on standardized tests: their own cultures dictate answers and interpretations that, while not necessarily wrong, are inappropriate to testing situations and thus are graded *incorrect*. □

References

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