Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2003

Teaching Critical Thinking: using experience to promote learning in middle school and college students

SIBYLLE GRUBER & JEAN BOREEN
Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ, USA

ABSTRACT *This article shows that an awareness of students' use of their own experiences and a consistent promotion of critical literacy skills throughout a child's, adolescent's, and adult's life strengthens awareness of the social, political, economic, and cultural implications of education. The article expands on John Dewey's (1938) theory of experience as the means and goal of education to show that middle school and college graduate students use their different levels of both personal and academic experience to respond to and interpret similar issues in the same text. Specifically, the authors discuss their use of Roald Dahl's (1983)* The Witches *to show how teachers might approach a children's book as the backdrop for teaching different age groups an increased awareness of gender issues, the effects of stereotyping, and the influence of popular culture on students' lives. They argue that educators need to use creative teaching strategies to provide opportunities for students at all educational levels to expand their literacy skills. The final section of the paper provides possible ways in which teachers can use literary texts at various levels to engage students not only with the material itself but also connect the text with their personal/professional experiences and their own literacies.*

> REAL WITCHES dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women. They live in ordinary houses and they work in ORDINARY JOBS. That is why they are so hard to catch (Roald Dahl, 1983, *The Witches*, p. 7)

Introduction

Discourse practices, as scholars in rhetoric and composition studies have pointed out, are embedded within an intricate system of social, cultural, political, and economic relations. Accordingly, literacy practices and interactions differ depending on the specific situation, the discourse participants, and the goals of the speakers/writers and the audience. As Richard Ohmann (1987) has put it succinctly, 'literacy, like every other human activity or product ... embeds social

ISSN 1354-0602 (print)/ISSN 1470-1278 (online)/03/010005-15 © 2003 Taylor & Francis Ltd
DOI: 10.1080/1354060032000049878

relations within it. And these relations always include conflict as well as cooperation. Like language itself, literacy is an exchange between classes, races, the sexes, and so on.' (p. 226). Ohmann's perspective corresponds with Min-Zhan Lu (1992) who argues that 'individual consciousness is necessarily heterogeneous, contradictory, and in process' (p. 889). She moves against assumptions about language which suggest that 'the essence of meaning precedes and is independent of language' as well as against 'a view of "discourse communities" as "discursive utopias," in which a single, unified, and stable voice directly and completely determines the writings of all community members' (p. 889). Awareness of the context-specific nature of literacy practices is especially important for teachers who consider learning as part of an experience that moves beyond the walls of the classroom and instead encompasses students' backgrounds and experiences (see, e.g., Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1968; Giroux, 1992; McLaren & da Silva, 1993; Hooks, 1994).

In this paper, then, we argue that an awareness of students' use of their own experiences and a consistent promotion of critical literacy skills throughout a child's, adolescent's, and adult's life strengthens awareness of the social, political, economic, and cultural implications of education. We expand on John Dewey's (1938) theory of experience as the means and goal of education to show that middle school and college graduate students use their different levels of both personal and academic experience to respond to and interpret similar issues in the same text.

Specifically, we discuss our use of Roald Dahl's (1983) *The Witches* to show how teachers might approach a children's book as the backdrop for teaching different age groups an increased awareness of gender issues, the effects of stereotyping, and the influence of popular culture on students' lives. We focus on the chapter 'Frizzled like a Fritter' to explore how the various experiences or literacies students bring to the classroom can promote different approaches to critical thinking, reading, and writing. We argue that educators need to use creative teaching strategies to provide opportunities for students at all educational levels to expand their literacy skills. The final section of our paper provides possible ways in which teachers can use literary texts at various levels to engage students not only with the material itself but also connect the text with their personal/professional experiences and their own literacies.

Much of the current scholarship on reading and writing about various texts addresses literary and rhetorical interpretations suitable for specific age groups (Newell & Durst, 1993; Marshall, Smagorinsky & Smith, 1994). However, there are few in-depth studies of the similarities among interpretative strategies used by upper-elementary, secondary and post-secondary students, and little attention has been given to the implications of early training in critical reading and writing on later development of critical thinking strategies. In this paper, we want to bridge the gap that so often deters middle and high school teachers from discussing their students' reading and writing strategies with their colleagues at the university. As our study of students' reactions to *The Witches* shows, while middle school and college students reacted at very different levels to the text—emphasizing the

importance of experience—their responses were focused on similar issues such as cultural features and stereotyping, gender issues, and rhetorical strategies used by the author.

Telling Stories: Including Experience and Creativity in the Interpretation of *The Witches*

Many teachers assume that students approach texts from similar vantage points. We expect specific answers to questions we ask about a reading; we create writing assignments with a good response in mind; and we give quizzes that underline the importance of specific and often teacher-prompted readings of a text. And although we know that students bring different experiences to the classroom, we often forget that those experiences influence how students approach and write about a text. However, already in 1938, John Dewey pointed out that 'attentive care must be devoted to the conditions which give a present experience a worthwhile meaning' (p. 49). To achieve such meaning, Dewey considered it important that 'control' is derived through the community and that all individuals participate in the activities and contribute to the process of meaning making (p. 56). Education, in this setting, is a 'social process' (p. 58) that is multi-directional and shared by a group of learners. In addition, Dewey argued that the activities used to reach an intended purpose depend on the maturity of the learners, thus proposing that thinking and reasoning skills develop with experience 'if experience is educative in effect' (p. 88).

When we decided to work on this project, we realized that Dewey's 1938 discussion on the importance of experience in the educational process and later explorations on literacy development (see, e.g. Freire, 1968; Heath, 1983; Brandt, 1990; Giroux, 1992; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993) provided the ideal starting point for experimenting with using the same text for two audiences—middle school students and graduate students at the university. We wanted to find out whether Dewey's concept of education and experience could be applied in the specific settings with which we were familiar. Thus, we made the assumption that students' experiences and their previous literacy experiences in both settings influence how they read, interpret, and write about a text, and also influence what they consider important enough aspects of the text to warrant further exploration and discussion. For example, middle school students (10–14 year olds) might see themselves closely connected to a main character who is similar in age, and has to deal with many of the issues facing 'real' adolescents. Their interpretation of the story, then, becomes firmly joined with their identification with the main character. On the other hand, graduate students reading the same text might still identify with a younger character because she/he reminds them of their own childhood. Their interests in the fictional representation of the trials and tribulations of growing up and their interpretation of it, however, will also be influenced by the experiences they collected in the years following their childhood and adolescence.

For methodological purposes, we collected and analyzed data from class discussions, observations, interviews, and written commentary from students in two

specific groups. The first group was comprised of 27 eighth-grade students (age 14) who read Roald Dahl's *The Witches* in their English class. Their parents' income levels ranged from lower middle class to upper middle class. The majority of the students were Anglo Americans (60%), African Americans and Asian Americans numbered 15% each, and several students were from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Of the 27 students, 15 were female and 12 were male.

The second group was comprised of 14 graduate students enrolled in a master's program in Rhetoric and Composition. This group was asked to listen to a live performance of *The Witches*. The eight female and six male students in this class ranged from age 22 to age 54. They were either graduate assistants or had taken on part-time jobs to pay for their education. Four of them wanted to continue their educational careers and go into doctoral programs, six wanted to become community college teachers, three wanted to work in industry as professional writers, and one intended to use the degree for personal satisfaction.

We used an in-depth case study approach because, as Denzin (1989) argues, 'theory as interpretation should be grounded in the worlds of lived experience' (p. 33). For example, it is important to study interactive behaviour not only from a theoretical perspective but in connection with specific settings that allow the researcher and the researched to interact in specific situations. The research participants thus have an opportunity to describe their own experiences in detail. It is especially important to study events in context because, as Egon Guba and Yvonne Lincoln (1981) argue, 'it is virtually impossible to imagine any human behavior that is not heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs. One can easily conclude that generalizations that are intended to be context free will have little that is useful to say about human behavior' (p. 62). This is in accord with Geertz's (1973) view that 'a good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us to the heart of that of which it is the interpretation' (p. 18). Following these premises, we wanted to take human agency and social construction of meaning into consideration when undertaking our study of students' interpretation of *The Witches*.

The Witches certainly provides numerous possibilities for teachers to draw on students' experiences when using it to help them find their own interpretive voices and critical perspectives. Dahl presents a first-person narrator, an eight-year old boy who has lost his parents and is now living with his grandmother, an avid storyteller. During a vacation in the South of England, the boy happens upon the yearly meeting of the RSPCC—The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Although the boy is misled by their initial appearance—they look like ordinary women—he eventually realizes that they are, in fact, English witches holding their annual meeting with their leader, the Grand High Witch. Sniffed out by the amazing sensory abilities of the witches—who cannot tolerate the smell of children—the boy is captured and turned into a mouse ... but not an ordinary mouse. Still able to speak and reason, he enlists the support of his grandmother and devises a plan to kill all of the 'wicked' witches. Using their own secret formula, the witches are turned into mice themselves after eating their soup.

Eventually, in a fitting irony, they are chopped into bits by various carving knives brought to 'good use' by the cooks in the restaurant.

The Middle School Perspective on Interpretation

Jean, an enthusiastic and lively teacher, wanted to make sure her 8th graders were capable of using a transactional approach to texts. Instead of using decontextualized materials that often fall short of providing students with the necessary impetus for wanting to know about or discuss a particular idea or issue, she wanted to use a specific reading over the course of several class periods that would provide context and sustain interest in the text and the consequent lessons and discussion sessions. Thus, instead of discussing sexist language as an abstract feature, Jean could ask students to reference a 'real' text that students could refer to as they made their own arguments. To put her intentions into action, she brought a copy of Roald Dahl's *The Witches* to class and began to read a chapter a day for the first quarter of the course.

Although Jean knew that she wanted to use *The Witches* as the basis for discussion and writing assignments, she didn't know how students' experiences would influence their responses to the book. After the first few readings, Jean realized that the text itself, the performance aspect (Jean read the chapters aloud, impersonating the voice and tone of the characters), and students' own interpretation of the text provided the students with more opportunities for critical thinking than she had initially anticipated. Students were able to move beyond traditional constructs of learning and use their personal and cultural experiences in conjunction with the text to discuss the personification of evil, gender stereotypes, prejudice, and the influence of popular culture on their perception of identity.

Women and Evil

By the time Jean had finished reading Chapter 5 to the students, she noticed that they were making off-hand comments to their classmates about the content of the book. There was a vague dissatisfaction on the part of many of the girls [1] in class concerning the deception perpetrated by evil in the guise of sweet, kind women. Although Dahl provided a disclaimer in Chapter 1 that 'a witch is always a woman' but 'a ghoul is always a male. So, indeed is a barghest' (p. 9), the girls were annoyed with comments about 'witchy' women they got from their male classmates. The boys, on the other hand, accepted and acknowledged Dahl's depiction of witches as 'normal' women without questioning the assumptions made by the author.

To address the discontent of the girls, Jean asked the class about their reactions to the portrayal of women in the book. This prompted one of the girls who had just finished Elizabeth George Speare's *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* an opportunity to suggest that women historically were seen as witches and were influenced by evil forces to commit evil. And although these forces were historically connected

to a 'male' devil, it was the women who were persecuted and burned at the stake. This comment led to a spirited discussion on the nature of evil and its supposedly 'genderless' qualities while at the same time using women as the scapegoats for unexplained witchcraft. A provoking twist was added when one of the boys suggested that in most movies and television shows he watched, evil was usually created by a male 'bad' guy who 'got women and stupid men to do his dirty work'. Thus again, the advocate of evil is a male figure but the actions are carried out by women or weak men. Students in this case did not only draw on the story but also on their experiences with gender stereotyping, other stories, and the depiction of evil in popular culture. They were able to use their previously acquired literacies to criticize and discuss the text read in class.

Breaking Stereotypes

As the eighth-graders moved further into the text, the discussions often seemed to refer to earlier comments about stereotyping. A lesson on characterization allowed students to consider how they would describe types of people—grandmothers, teachers, businesspeople, children—based on names and their own experiences with certain types. For example, although Dahl had given an early description of the narrator's grandmother—more often noted as 'Grandmama'—as an energetic, cigar-smoking woman with a quick sense of humor, students tended to describe Grandmama as a white-haired woman with a bun who was also a large person. On occasion, someone would mention Grandmama's ever-lit cigar and the rest of the class would nod their heads and say, 'oh, yeah'. But it was obvious that stereotyping played a large part in students' understanding of the text, suggesting that Jean would have to do more during class discussions to prompt students to reconsider stereotypes as well as consider the problems inherent with stereotyping.

Jean's reading of the Grand High Witch provided her with a strong opportunity for undermining stereotypes. Because of Dahl's portrayal of the witches as 'nice women', the Grand High Witch came onto the scene as a major surprise to the students. With her loud, shrieking voice and 'maggot-eaten' face, she did not fit the stereotype Dahl had previously set for witches. In the ensuing conversation, the 8th graders discussed why Dahl would want to 'trick' them in this manner. One girl, for example, pointed out that Dahl might be trying to show that not all women act the same way. Ignoring several comments from some of the boys who disputed her claim, she argued that people have to get over trying to make everyone fit specific molds, and maybe this was Dahl's message to them as readers.

The students also addressed their own reactions to the witches and the Grand High Witch. Most agreed that the Grand High Witch was a truly evil and disgusting person, although one female student noted that she would like to have the kind of power the Grand High Witch did. Another student commented that although the children of England 'had it bad' because they had to deal with the witches who lived in their country, their problems would be multiplied if they

had to confront the absolute evil of the Grand High Witch in their own country. After extended discussions, students suggested that making the Grand High Witch the true personification of evil allowed readers to see the other witches as more 'human' and, like the rest of us in the world, at the beck and call of those who exert power over their subordinates. This consciousness of the layers of evil/power supported Jean's efforts to move her class beyond simple dichotomies so often accepted by students and their teachers.

Prejudice and Popular Culture

Young adults are constantly bombarded by a variety of representational images perpetuating stereotypes. The media—television, movies, radio, and teen magazines—support and often promote images of girls and boys, men and women, that perpetuate existing sexism and condone violence against women. They also portray different cultures along lines that support popular, but often unrealistic and racist ideas. Consequently, many teachers have found that the best way to combat popular culture's misconceptions is to analyze those representations in class discussions. With the 8th graders, Jean used a variety of media depictions in conjunction with the reading of *The Witches* to show that stereotypes are widely prevalent yet rarely addressed critically. Furthermore, she pointed out that stereotypes drawn from popular culture could lead to an unconscious perpetuation of unfounded and often discriminatory actions against people they know. For example, when Jean's students were discussing the voice she used for the Grand High Witch, they commented that the foreign accent reminded them of all of the 'bad' people in films—the Communists, the Italian Mafia, or the radical Ayatollah Iranians [2]. One student, who was originally from Saudi Arabia, shared his own experiences of being ostracized by others who didn't know him simply because they assumed his looks and Middle Eastern accent made him Iranian and thus a threat to national security.

The discussion also led students to consider their own practices of inclusion and exclusion in the cliques they formed in school. Some of them commented that they probably chose their friends initially based on surface considerations—looks, clothes, parents' socioeconomic status or job—and often stayed in certain groups not because they necessarily liked their friends all that well, but because it was a popular group to 'hang with'. Eventually, the discussion moved to how one becomes part of an 'insider' group. At this particular middle school, the insider groups tended to be: (1) the rich, well-dressed students who typically dictated clothing style, what was 'in' and what was 'out'; (2) the smart, 'nice' kids who were willing to help other people out in an 'academic jam'; and (3) the 'jocks', those students who excelled in football, baseball, basketball, or softball. Those who recognized themselves as 'outsiders' tended to see themselves either as somehow inferior to their peers or as greater individuals. Some also commented that they didn't want to be in the 'in' groups because they didn't want their lives dictated by their peers. However, a few 'outsiders' were honest enough to say that if they knew how, they would try to join an insider group, basically because they

felt the 'in' groups received more positive responses from older students and teachers.

Roald Dahl's *The Witches* provided the 8th graders with an opportunity to discuss gender discrimination and cultural stereotypes portrayed by Dahl's characters. In addition, it prompted students to evaluate their own prejudices and to think about ways to move beyond simplistic notions of 'evil' and 'good,' 'in' and 'out'. Jean's approach—to allow students to bring in their own literacies and their own perspectives—enriched her students' understanding of Dahl's text and also of themselves as readers and consumers of texts and information.

The College Perspective on Interpretation

Rhetoric and Culture, a Fall 1998 graduate course for master's students in Rhetoric, examined the discourse conventions of dominant and marginalized ideologies. It was geared toward increasing graduate students' awareness of social, cultural, political, and economic influences on rhetoric, and it provided the background for a discussion on how we construct meaning by imposing our own experiences and backgrounds on stories told and read. Students were encouraged to develop an understanding of rhetorical features and their underlying belief systems, an awareness of competing rhetorics and their influences in and outside the academy, and an ability to participate effectively in different discourse communities. Inviting Jean to read a chapter from *The Witches* was intended to give the graduate students insights into rhetorical strategies used by children's authors. Jean's animated reading and her performance as the Grand High Witch led to spirited discussions in the graduate class. Students drew on their previous readings in cultural studies and gender studies to comment on the implications of using specific dialects and accents, and of depicting REAL WITCHES as 'ordinary women'.

Before coming to class, Jean dressed up in high-heeled shoes, put on her gloves, and looked generally like a 'nice lady'—or—a REAL WITCH dressed up like a 'nice lady'. As Roald Dahl's narrator points out, the witch 'might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment' (p. 10). Jean provided the context for her costume and explained that she wears her 'nice lady' outfit when she reads to middle-school students to make the witch 'come to life'. The middle school students learn that witches are bald and wear wigs. She laughingly told the graduate students that one of her middle-school students had come up to her after class and had pulled on her hair to make sure it wasn't a wig and that Jean was not a witch.

Although none of the graduate students tried to see whether Jean's hair was real or not, they seemed surprised that a college professor would dress up and read a story about witches to them. During Jean's passionate reading of 'Frizzled Like a Fritter', the students listened intently, focusing on her voice and appearance. Similar to the middle-school students, they recoiled when Jean spat out the Grand High Witch's words, 'A stupid vitch who answers back, Must burn until her bones are black!' (p. 74). After Jean left, and the graduate students recovered

from the performance, the subsequent discussion of the chapter encouraged students to explore the connections between *The Witches* and the articles on rhetoric and culture they had previously read. The discussion and the writing exercises focused on the portrayal of the witch and the cultural implications of the rhetoric she used, and the gender stereotypes and contradictions underlying the text.

Enculturating Hatred for the Other

Because of our focus on how rhetoric influences our perceptions of reality, the graduate students were certainly interested in Dahl's use of language to portray the Grand High Witch. They pointed out that everything bad, ugly, and revolting is personified in the Grand High Witch. For one, her accent portrays her as an outsider to the empire:

> there was some sort of a foreign accent there, something harsh and guttural, and she seemed to have trouble pronouncing the letter w. As well as that, she did something funny with the letter 'r'. She would roll it round and round her mouth like a piece of hot pork-crackling before spitting it out (p. 69).

Furthermore, instead of speaking like a civilized person, she shouts, screams, shrieks, yells, snaps, snarls, and glares around the room. For example, she chides the witches in her heavily accented snarl for not being productive enough in killing all the children of 'Inkland':

> 'Miserrrable vitches!' she yelled. 'Useless lazy vitches! Feeble frrribbling vitches! You are a heap of idle good-for-nothing vurms!' (p. 72).

In addition to her foreign accent and her 'bad' behavior, the Grand High Witch's appearance, like the appearance of all the other witches, is 'monstrous' and 'unnatural' (p. 70). As Dahl describes within the chapter, once all lady-like paraphernalia is removed, she is bald, has claws instead of fingers, her feet are square and toeless, and her face is wrinkled, old, and 'rotting away at the edges' (p. 66).

Reinforced by Jean's performance, and her use of a heavy German accent (as dictated by the text), the students saw similarities between the witches' meeting and meetings organized to incite the members of particular groups against marginalized people. For example, they compared the absolute power of the Grand High Witch with Hitler's power over much of Germany. Getting rid of all the children of 'Inkland'—although Dahl's witches did not succeed in their endeavor—brought to mind the call for the extermination of Jewish people and opponents of the Nazi regime in Europe. Furthermore, the elimination of the disobedient witch, which leaves 'the smell of burning meat' in the room, prompted students to discuss the atrocities committed in Nazi concentration camps during World War II.

A reading on anti-Semitic rhetoric by Ruth Wodak (1997) provided the basis for identifying the Grand High Witch's discourse as a strategy to convey racism. According to the students, the Grand High Witch constructed a 'discourse of difference' (p. 73) by defining herself and the other witches as different from the Other—in this case the children of England. Furthermore, students also pointed out that the witch used strategies of justification which enables her to 'make evaluations and to assign responsibility and guilt' for eliminating a specified other (p. 73), emphasizing again the contrast between good and bad, 'us' and 'them'. Thus, she tells the witches to get rid of all the 'filthy smelly children,' accuses them of not doing a good-enough job, and gets them to promise that they will do 'much better' in the future (p. 73).

On a broader perspective, the graduate students also made connections between the rhetoric used by the Grand High Witch and the rhetoric used by leaders of political parties to alienate one social, economic, or ethnic group from another. Instead of using and appealing to ethos and logos, students argued that these political figures—similar to the Grand High Witch—use pathos as their main strategy to appeal to their audiences' emotions: their paranoias, homophobias, xenophobias, and other phobias which are easily aroused when addressing somebody's fears of a badly defined other who is portrayed as a threat to 'society as it is'.

As a consequence, the students interpreted the congregation of witches as members of a nation cowed by an authoritarian leader who knows how to rouse latent anger against a perceived 'Other' [3]. According to the students, the witches believe the Grand High Witch because she uses rhetoric to promote and strengthen an already existing loathing of children. Students connected the relative ease with which the Grand High Witch was able to convince her audience of the threat to society children pose to a reading we had done on hate. According to the author's (Roderick Hart, 1998) comments on the nature of hate, it 'is beautiful because it is uncomplicated or, better, because it can be made to seem so. Like the hangman, hate concentrates the mind. It allows—no, demands—that we think in binaries, and it turns a world of Technicolor into pure black, pure white' (p. xxxiv). Accordingly, children are universally bad and a nuisance and therefore need to be exterminated not only in England but in all countries.

Portraying Gender

Students were not only interested in the cultural and political interpretations of Dahl's *The Witches;* they also wanted to explore the gender implications and the contradictions implicit in the portrayal of women as witches. Although students noted that the leader of the witches is portrayed as a woman who has complete authority over the other witches, they also pointed out that the Grand High Witch personifies all the negative stereotypes attributed to women. For example, her pleasant exterior hides her 'true' nature. Once she does not have to be ladylike for an outside observer, she screeches and screams, she is old and ugly, and she is

mean-spirited and evil. The negative implications of this portrayal were not lost on the students. For one, they compared the position of the Grand High Witch to the position of women in powerful and often male-dominated positions. What is considered a positive attribute in men, they pointed out, is often considered negative in women. For example, being assertive, powerful, and in a position to exert authority and influence over others is considered a male prerogative. In women, such behavior is often seen as negative and inappropriate.

Second, students explained the depiction of women as witches as patriarchal society's fear of independent women—none of the witches were married—who move beyond the stereotypical roles of wife, mother, and homemaker. And although many of the male students argued that these stereotypes are a matter of the past, the female students were less optimistic about the 'liberation' of women. One woman, for example, pointed out that her parents wanted her to get her MRS degree and despite her college degree stay at home and take care of the future husband and children; another told us about her mother who, although she had all the qualifications, was never promoted in her job. We also discussed why girls who do well in math when they are younger often develop a negative attitude about math and science courses and related occupations as they move into adolescence. For example, we discussed the lack of institutional support for girls in the hard sciences and some teachers' emphasis on preparing boys for their 'future occupations' as engineers, computer scientists, etc. Students pointed out that this then leads to continued inequalities in the job market.

Third, students noted that the witches—which are always women—were characterized as child-hating creatures, and consequently, as women who do not have children themselves. This led to an interesting discussion of society's perception of women as child bearers with innate maternal instincts. Single women, women who do not have children, and women who do not have a maternal instinct are often seen as lacking some expected womanly qualities. The vilification of such women, although they are rarely portrayed as witches nowadays [4], was still considered a problem by many of the female students in the class.

All of this, according to the students, could be seen as a way to keep women in their place and to teach children—and especially girls—that women should not be strong and independent. Women who move into the public sphere, give speeches, and promote the equal status of men and women turn into revolting creatures who are despised and characterized as witches. And although there have been advances by women, students were concerned about the unequal number of female CEO's, business managers, and politicians compared to the number of males in those positions.

Similar to the middle school students, the college students brought in their own literacies to interpret, discuss, and write about Dahl's text. They profited from a classroom environment that encouraged them to make connections with their own experiences and also apply knowledge gained from previous readings. Their critical perspectives on the reading helped them understand not only the characters portrayed in the book but also their own perceptions of reality and their prejudices based on culture, religion, politics, and economics.

Converging Stories

Our study shows that students' experiences—their home and school literacies—influence their readings and interpretations of texts not only once they have graduated from high school but at all age levels. Although the students in middle school responded to the issues addressed in *The Witches* at a different level than the graduate students at the university, the problems they saw with the text and with the representation of women and outsiders were very similar. The middle school students in Jean's class realized the problems with portraying women as witches; they also pointed out the problems of stereotyping those different from oneself. Similarly, the graduate students explored the depiction of women and the results of discrimination against other ethnic and religious groups. In both classes, students contextualized the readings based on their own experiences. The literacies that they brought with them influenced their discourse practices and their reactions to the reading (see Brandt, 1990). From our analysis of the two classes, we realized how important it is to promote critical thinking, reading and writing throughout a student's educational career.

The following section provides possible ways in which teachers and their students can promote and experience critical literacy at various levels and be engaged not only with the material itself but also connect the material with their own lives and their own literacies.

Promote a 'Developmental' Model of Learning and a Critical Approach to Knowledge Acquisition

This approach to learning will allow students and teachers to move away from assuming roles that see the teacher as the sole authority and the students as the 'receptacles' of knowledge. Instead, teachers need to learn that 'it is necessary for the one who knows to understand that no one knows everything and that no one is ignorant of everything' (Freire, 1968, p. 41). In other words, authority is not the privilege of the teachers but instead has to be negotiated and reassessed by both teachers and students, leading to dialogue, conflict solution, and consensus building. Students in this environment are seen not as receiving information indiscriminately but as constantly developing and improving their critical thinking skills (Tchudi & Mitchell, 1999, p. 54).

Ask Students to Develop Their Own Topics for Critical Discussion and for Writing Assignments

Although many schools require teachers and students to follow a specified curriculum, student-generated topics in some of the lessons taught can still be incorporated. Providing students with opportunities to make choices about what to read and what to write strengthens the notion of learning as multi-directional. Students can learn from each other and from the instructor; the teacher can also learn from her students. In this setting, students gain ownership over the learning

process. Instead of passively receiving information, they are actively involved in the process of knowledge acquisition and knowledge distribution.

Use Creative Teaching Strategies Geared Toward Different Skill Levels

Although we would like to teach in 'ideal' classrooms and teach 'ideal' students—those who share our understanding of the importance of school literacy—the reality is often different. Students come in with home literacies and school literacies that are widely diverse. Some of them are familiar with the requirements and restrictions imposed by the educational institutions. Others are 'strangers' to academic learning and consider education as an alien intrusion in their lives (Shaughnessy, 1977; Bizzell, 1986). To promote critical literacy at all skill levels, we need to be aware of our students' diverse needs and backgrounds. Thus, it is not only important to teach them academic language, but it is also important to know our students' previous exposure to home and school learning so that we can base our own work on an already existing foundation.

Encourage Students to Use Their Experiences and Literacies When Reading, Interpreting, and Writing about Texts

Instead of seeing the different views expressed by our students as a disadvantage, teachers can use them as a starting point for understanding the diversity in student responses to a variety of issues. When we address our students as individuals, their diverse social, political, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds 'can be used in order to change the prevailing relations of power' (Giroux, 1992, p. 103) that promote current inequalities. Students can learn, to use Giroux's words, 'how representations and practices that name, marginalize, and define difference as the devalued Other are actively learned, internalized, challenged, or transformed' (p. 103). Providing them with opportunities to develop critical perspectives based on their own experiences will increase their understanding of the texts used in class and the underlying implications of their own experiences on the interpretation of the texts.

If the goal of education is to challenge current practices of meaning making, students need to be provided with opportunities to develop their own critical approaches to thinking, reading, and writing. In our middle school and college classrooms, we have attempted to provide students with opportunities to use their experiences and literacies as starting points for interpreting texts. Their enthusiasm and their willingness to engage in purposeful discussions have encouraged us to continue our efforts and to promote critical thinking, reading and writing strategies at all age levels.

Correspondence: Sibylle Gruber, Northern Arizona University, Department of English, Box 6032, Flagstaff, AZ 86011, USA. Tel: +1 520 523 6455; E-mail: Sibylle.Gruber@nau.edu

Notes

[1] We are sensitive to the language choice we have made in using 'girls' and 'boys' in this article. While we know that many adolescent women do not consider themselves to be 'girls' any longer, we use the terms in this article to make a clearer distinction between middle-school students (girls and boys) and college students (women and men).

[2] It is important to note that Jean was teaching these 8th graders during the late 80's when American relations with Iran were tenuous. Also, many of the students' parents were in the armed forces.

[3] The discussion of Dahl's story took place during the war in Yugoslavia. Students brought up the similarities between the Grand High Witch's rhetoric and the rhetoric used by Milosevich to incite hatred against the Kosovars.

[4] Many students pointed out that when growing up, they watched the transformation of Miss Gulch into the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. Here again, the childless Miss Gulch is portrayed as a mean-spirited woman who wants to hurt Dorothy by taking away her dog Toto.

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