

Recovering the Power Inside: A Qualitative Study of Critical Reading in an Iranian University

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Abstract

A fundamental goal of critical literacy approaches is to bring a change and empower students as critical agents and subjects of decision making. Students are expected to do more than simply accumulate information; they are encouraged to challenge their 'taken for granted' belief structures and transform themselves as well as their immediate social environment. In this article, we present a qualitative enquiry in a university reading course based on critical literacy. We explored how learners reflected on their individual/community and word/world concerns through critical understanding of texts and how they challenged and shattered their 'taken for granted' beliefs and started to transform into critical agents of voice and position. The data consists of 400 concept maps, called *webs*, and personal journals by fifty undergraduate English literature students at an Iranian University, as well as oral and written interviews. The data was qualitatively analyzed in search of themes that could illustrate students' early thinking structures and their empowerment and transformations into subjects of decisions. The study revealed that, through webbing words/worlds and critically challenging texts, students took the opportunity to approach the knowledge and information presented to them analytically and critically. On this basis, we discuss how students were able to gain the power of critiquing, freeing their thoughts, finding and expressing their voice and position, discovering personal meanings in texts and contexts, cooperating and participating, and understanding learning for meaning through the critical act of reading.

Keywords: *Critical literacy; language learning; webbing; journal writing; qualitative research*

When the class started something really strange happened to me... that strange class... was a kind of sparkle in my mind, in my heart... at first I didn't understand what it meant... But when I thought about it something...some... power, you know, was hidden in me, it completely recovered, I recovered it, I feel it, I feel the power of myself, and that was the changing point... (Atefeh)

Introduction

Critical literacy appeared as a reaction to the skill centered curriculum in which the students were not exposed to the education of power and consequences (Freire & Macedo, 1987). It rejects the

traditional education in which the know-all teacher transfers bits and pieces of information to students and fills in their empty minds with information not necessarily related to their lives. Instead, critical literacy welcomes a situation in which learners experience education as something they do (Fasheh, 2000). It affirms and empowers learners as subjects of decision making who question critically and transform their worlds. The central idea of critical literacy approaches is active learning and student construction of knowledge instead of acting passively with an empty mind supposed to be filled by knowledge (Freire, 1972). In reading (and writing) courses, critical literacy aims at helping learners gain critical understanding and making them conscious so that they can read the world and be able to connect the world with the word (Freire, 1991). Reading word/world helps students to connect what they decode on the printed page to an understanding of the world around them (Kincheloe, 2004). Perceiving the relationship between the text and context, that will be called *webbing* in this article, is essential in critical understanding.

It was such a perspective that triggered our decision to look for alternative methods which set creativity and empowerment as major objective for the teachers and students uninspired by the standard syllabus in our context. Our challenge was to help students experience education as something they do, and as something related to their natural life experiences; something compatible with their out of school and living literacy. We aimed at empowering students as subjects of decision who abandon their 'taken for granted' beliefs, question critically, and transform their worlds. This article reports our naturalistic research on the application of Freirian critical literacy approach (Freire, 1972, 1991; Freire & Macedo, 1987) and community literacy approaches (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984) in university reading courses.

Theoretical Background

Critical literacy

Traditional views of literacy have been deeply ingrained in positivistic assumptions (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Based on such assumptions knowledge and theory are subordinated to technical mastery (Giroux, 1983). In such an approach to literacy methodological issues are abstracted from their ideological context and the relationship between social issues and literacy is ignored. This kind of literacy is viewed simply as the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant language (Macedo, 1991; McLaren & da Silva, 1993).

An alternative view of literacy is the view that not only considers mechanical skill learning but also, and more importantly, a critical understanding of society (Giroux, 1987). It involves enabling people to participate in the transformation of society (Walmsley, 1981). As a socially based phenomenon, it serves to link the ideals to possibilities in struggle for a qualitatively better world (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; McLaren & da Silva, 1993). Critical literacy calls forth the critical reflection of learners and educators and relates *words* to transforming the reality and *world* (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2005; Masny & Ghahremani-Ghajar, 1999). In Freire's view, literacy is reading and writing both the word and the world. McLaren's (1998) account of critical literacy is as follows:

Those who argue for critical literacy maintain that an uncritical enthusiasm for making individuals functionally literate, conceals the substantive issue of what it means to be truly literate behind the imperatives of linguistic mastery... In this view, the value of cultural and literary texts resides not in their collective currency as the heralded virtue of the society... but in the manner in which they have been constructed... Critical literacy focuses, therefore, on the interests and assumptions that inform the generation of knowledge, itself. (p. 290)

This is the view that rejects narrow definitions of literacy that reduce it to reading and writing skills at an instrumental level or learning narrowly defined cultural codes (Giroux, 1992,). Critical literacy, rather than treating literacy as a set of neutral psychologically based skills, treats it as “social and political practice” (Siegel & Fernandez, 2000). The learners, based on a critical approach, rather than being given the ability to encode and decode, are encouraged to understand ideologically loaded nature of language (Lankshear, 1997) and to take a critical view of text (Scholes, 1995).

Based on a critical approach to literacy, the world is viewed as a text (Giroux, 1992) and learners reflect on the nature of literacy as a social practice. When they recognize words in texts as representations of social realities, they are more likely to take a powerful position towards them; to reject them if necessary, to interpret them in a unique way of their own, and to reconstruct them in ways more consistent with their own experiences (Cervetti, et al, 2001).

Webbing

There are different methods for achieving critical understanding of texts, including making ‘concept maps’ (Novak, 1998). Concept mapping is a technique that allows learners to understand the relationships between ideas in a text by creating a visual map of the connections. But beyond concept mapping is designing webs or *webbing* (Kafshgarsouteh, 2006). Expanding the idea of concept mapping of texts, webbing involves making relationships between concepts; relating them to one’s own life experiences, knowledge, values, and attitudes; and taking a critical position towards the words and the worlds. A concept map is the descriptive summary of a text that organizes the information of the text and is based on, basically, the text author’s point of view (Novak, 1998; Novak and Gowin, 1984).

Webbing, however, as we define it, is *the act of meaning making* as a process of construction – while reading – and giving value to a text in the social and historical contexts of, power relation. In webbing, readers and writers make an attempt to go beyond the text and try to find out how and why knowledge and power are constructed (Kafshgarsouteh, 2006). Upon reading the words/worlds and webbing the texts, readers try to change their attitudes, values, and worldviews and transform their social environments as well.

In a critical literacy course, students do not read simply to find the facts and gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text, but they try to recognize what a text says, how it is saying it, what it wants to *do*, and what it means as a whole. Students try to relate the texts to their own life experiences and to find themselves and their own values in the text. Based on a critical literacy, readers are aware that no text is ideologically neutral (Freire & Macedo, 1987). So they take a stance on the issue by trying to find out their own ideas and attitudes and having a position towards it.

Methodology

Research participants

In this study we explored how learners reflected on their individual/community and word/world concerns through critical understanding of texts and how they challenged and shattered their ‘taken for granted’ beliefs and transformed into critical/analytical readers and people of voice and position. The participants in this study were the undergraduate English literature students registered in a freshmen reading course (the class included 50 female students) in 2005-2006 at Alzahra University (a

university exclusively for women students) situated in northern Tehran- with one of the researchers as their teacher and the other researcher as a full-participant observer. Before taking this critical literacy course, all students had passed a 4-Unit reading course in the first semester intended to improve their reading abilities, with another instructor and a skill-based approach based on reading comprehension strategies and different types of comprehension questions.

The students had a weekly schedule of one session per week, two hours a session for sixteen weeks during the term. Throughout the term, three specific literacy events happened: critical reading of several texts (some of them chosen by teacher and read by all the students and some individually selected and read by students); designing webs about the text (as exemplified in the following sections); discussion and dialogue initiated by both the teacher and students; and personal journal writing (at home, the students spent time writing some personal journals responding to the texts; in class, they had the option of sharing the journals with the teacher, or commenting on each other's journals).

The participants of our study have been raised in culturally and socially rich and community-oriented families. They enjoyed a rich personal relationship with family members, friends, and community members who talked to them in the language of poetry, respect, care, and responsibility. As reflected in their class dialogues, when these young girls entered school and university, they discovered a mismatch with what they had experienced in their informal communities and found an unexpected gap between their out of school literacy and in school literacy. During years of authoritative schooling, students developed a sense of loyalty towards their teachers and to a teacher oriented monologue and to decisions made for them.

Such a schooling abstracted education from the challenges of developing a critically conscious, socially responsible and politically active student body and citizenry (Leistyna & Woodrum, 1996). As a result the mindset and focus of students is shifted toward the final exam by which their educational fate and destiny is supposedly decided by, so is the focus of educational syllabus designers and materials developers. The best students work at memorizing subject matters and getting high marks, and the more they work on and learn the tricks for taking multiple choice format tests, the more successful they will be at surpassing their competitors.

Data collection and analysis

We studied and closely observed the students and all the literacy events happening in the classroom. We took notes and monitored and collected all materials that students produced in and out of class for a qualitative analysis. There were three kinds of documents which we were mainly concerned about:

Webbing: Each participant was required to design a web for each article, making relationships between concepts and taking a critical position towards the words and the worlds of the text. In webbing, student readers and writers made an attempt to go beyond the literacy texts. The texts with various genres, lengths, and topics were selected by both the students and the teacher, based on the relevance and importance of their contents to the participants, and were read both in class and extensively outside the class.

Blogging: The students were required to comment on the articles regarding their agreement, disagreement, and/or their position towards the ideas mentioned in articles, which we named *blogging* as opposed to the conventional writing exercises.

Journaling: The students were expected to write personal journals in and out of classroom as a form of a written dialogue with their teacher.

The students started webbing, blogging, and journaling at the beginning of the course and continued them through the course to the end, and filed them in the form of portfolios. A chronological overview of each student's portfolio could show the early thinking model and value structure and the changes they went through during the course. We adopted a naturalistic interpretive qualitative research method and we applied triangulation procedures by interviewing the students formally (predetermined sessions exclusively for interviews) and informally (in the form of friendly dialogue) before, during, and after the course to find out the changes they had in reading, understanding, critical thinking and expressing their words/worlds, as well as the transformations they were trying to make through their social, cultural and political webs. The formal oral interview was conducted and tape recorded at the end of the semester to find out students' understanding of the act of reading in this critical course. We also did some informal oral interviews during the term with students to perceive their feelings and thoughts during the process of critical literacy.

The bulk of data was analyzed according to the seven-step data analysis procedure offered by Cohen, et al., (2000), which is based on definition of data analysis as "making sense of the data in terms of the participants definition of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories, and regularities" (p. 147). Different bodies of data were carefully read and reread in search of relevant themes. The results of the data analysis process discussed below and the findings are then put together and considered as a whole for the theory generation stage as a major stage in naturalistic research(Cohen, et al., 2000). The names used in this article are the participants' real first names and are brought here upon asking their permission and considering the ethical issues.

Analysis and Discussion

In this critical literacy course, the students read articles chosen either by them or the teacher. Then they had dialogic conversations regarding the problems posed by the teacher based on challenging students' thought about the social and critical implications of the issues reflected in texts. The students tried to read the worlds behind the words of the article and relate them to their own personal lives and experiences. Then based on their understanding and interpretation of and connection to the article, they designed webs to show the critical understanding of the text as well as their critical position towards it. Moreover, they showed their involvement with the texts by bloggings, that is, they wrote their comments, agreements, disagreements, and life experiences; posed their questions and voiced their concerns; found their personal meaning, values, and attitudes in the text; and revealed their critical positions on the margins of the texts. The teacher at the beginning of the course renamed reading as webbing and writing as blogging to create a new and different view towards the traditional skills. What follows is an elaborate discussion exemplification of the five critical literacy themes that emerged out of a triangulated qualitative analysis of the data:

Nothing is neutral

Sahar was one of those students who at first used to take everything for granted and accept the things as they are, 'because they were so'. But later she started to adopt a critical perspective about the ideas and information presented. She talked about this change in her interview:

Sahar: I've learned how to look at something beyond the word, something in the middle of the text, not the text itself.. I've learned that when I want to write something, it means something, it is intended to mean something. ...At first I used to read a text, look

at the words, and try to understand the meaning of the text itself without any critical mind, without criticizing actually...

After reading an article in this critical course, Sahar designed a web (Figure 1) in which she used colors and creative shape and tries to make relationships between the words and colors. The words *happiness* and *optical control* are written in blue; the words *think*, *human*, and *realistic* are written in green; *fears*, *sadness*, *misery* are black; *challenge*, *power*, *angry* are red. The word *life* is written with two colors, red and black. The word *human being* is written in green and red. Even the hexagonal shapes that she has drawn have two colors, red and green. But in an interview, she confesses that the use of colors by her was an unconscious act. When the teacher sparked her attention, Sahar perceived and considered the relationships between the colors and words she had used. In her idea, webbing is discovering one's hidden ideology, meanings, and values, and noticing them:

Sahar: *I just drew these shapes unconsciously and I didn't notice them at first. But teacher said 'look at this one and try to have a relationship between these colors and these words'.*

I noticed them and I saw that, for example, expressing, happiness, optical control, they are all blue... And I had life in two colors, red and black, and fear is black, so a part of life is black because we are always afraid of something...

First I did them unconsciously but Dr. Ghahremani said 'look at it, it has a relationship in itself' and I noticed and then I found the relationship and teacher said 'happy birthday, you found yourself'.

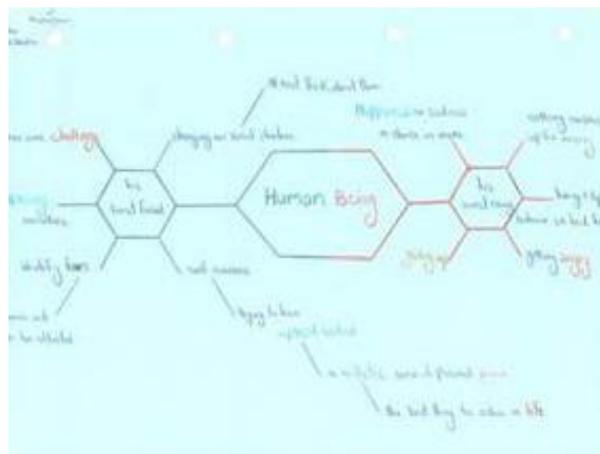


Figure 1: Sahar's web (1)

In her next web (Figure 2), Sahar drew a human's head in the shape of a plant in a vase. Again, she has used colors to convey her personal meaning. The words *anger*, *love*, and half of *life* are red. Reading critically and gaining a different understanding of her world has changed Sahar to a responsible decision maker who can reflect and transform her life. She talked about this web in her interview:

Sahar: *This one, I thought a human's mind is like a jar, we can have lots of things. And our thoughts are just like plants, they can grow. This color [the yellow one], I wanted to say that our mind is bright. I wanted to relate the mind to heart, because although mind is very important, logic is very important, heart is as important as this one. Because I myself think that we can not be logical just, we have to think about our heart too. We have to do lots of things in order to satisfy our hearts.*

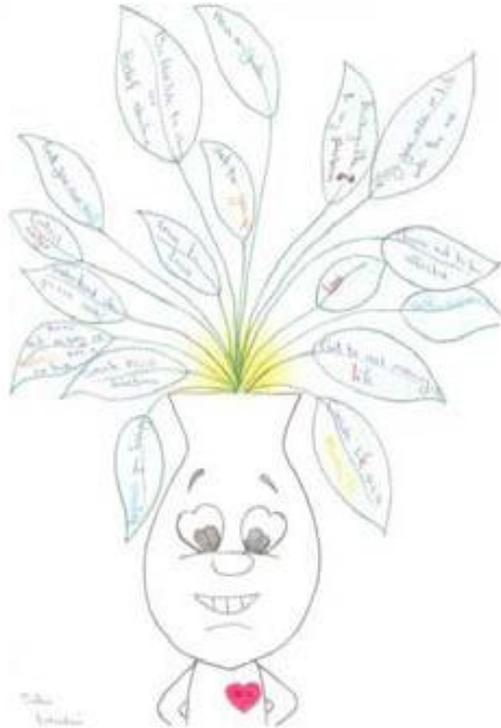


Figure 2: Sahar's web (2)

Before this course, Sahar used to read, see, and speak to her friends and comment superficially, without deep thinking, without any type of critique or analysis. But, according to Sahar herself, in this class she learned to explain the mundane, and what was taken for granted and she learned to be critical in her reading and writing:

Sahar: ...I've learned that nothing is neutral... everything has a meaning. I look at it very deeply and try to understand it. For example, when I see something... I'll think about it and I'll think about it and try and try to find something out of that subject...

Freeing thoughts

Naiemeh was afraid of making mistakes and breaking the rules, so she blocked herself from learning how to free her thoughts. In this class, she learned to think and go beyond limiting rules, to use her creativities, and to express her feelings, and free her thoughts. In her final exam, which was obviously different from the traditional kind of exams, Naiemeh read an article on literacy and illiterates and blogged on it. While reading the text, she found opportunities to express her feelings toward the statements of the text in words like 'a beautiful name', 'interesting', 'It's great', 'Beautiful!', 'I like this word', and 'It's not a good judgment'.

She expressed herself in a way as if she was talking to the writer of the article while reading the text, in phrases like 'It's a right choice, I think', 'yes, we know many of them', 'You're right, it happens many times', and 'She has changed you a lot'. Making relationships between concepts, reflecting on them, commenting on them, and self-expressing provided Naiemeh with a way to discover her own personal meaning and attitude towards the issues in the text. She questioned and challenged some issues of the article about the concept of illiteracy:

Naiemeh: Why do we call people with names that hurt them? Such names break people into parts! It's not beautiful...Sometimes they know and feel much better than a literate person

She also reflected on the beliefs and information in the text and did a rewrite of some sections that is indicative of her voice about knowledge, the world, respect, and labeling people. As she said in her interview, the critical literacy activities she did in this class were different from her previous isolating experiences and so helped her free her thoughts:

Naiemeh: *Wisdom is not dependent to knowledge... Everybody has his own WORLD... A different way of looking: a different way of perceiving... An illiterate person can be a 'treasure' too... An illiterate person is not isolated! But a literate one sometimes is...*

This class was a new and enjoyable experience for Naiemeh. It helped her change her view towards reading and learning. She became aware of the illusion of learning in the *mainstream educational system*, as she says, they did some tasks in class but at the end, they did not learn much:

Naiemeh: *Other classes were very boring, reading texts, learning words, answering questions, but at the end we didn't learn anything. But in this class everything changed... and we learned how to free our ideas...*

Underlying messages

Gelareh, another active participant in making creative webs in class, was quiet in class. She said that previous to this course, she did look for meaning in the text, but did not have a critical understanding of the context and did not think it was necessary to relate the text to her own personal experiences. In the process of making webs and talking to the texts, she learned to go beyond the literal meaning of the texts, and to find relevant ideas and values hidden in the words, and she found it important to discover her personal meaning in the (con)text:

Gelareh: *I learned how to take out meaning in a simple sentence. Sometimes you see a simple sentence, but when you look at it, it has a lot of meaning inside it. I learned how to understand the underlying messages of a text.*

Gelareh read an article about the power of narrative and designed a web to show her critical understanding of the text. She made a connection between the concepts of the text and her understanding of the world and took a critical position to rewrite the text with her own new ideas about how the past and future can make a story for every person's life:

Gelareh: *...But listen to what happened to me... Life is understood BACKWARDS but must be lived forwards... My story about an incident in the past provides a platform on which I can stand, and then step with greater confidence into the future. No story is a story unless the main character wants something and wants it badly, and every story reflects learning...*

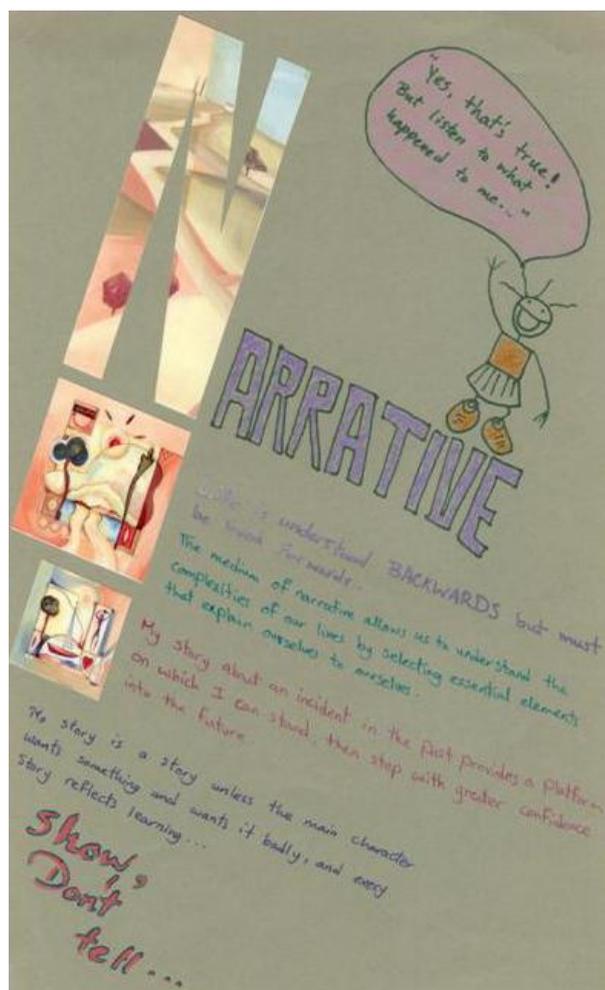


Figure 3: Gelareh's web

In her web (Figure 3), Gelareh placed a road in the letter 'N' of the word *narrative*. The colors of the road are varied. In some parts, it is green, and in some other parts, it is brown. In the interview Gelareh talked about this web:

Gelareh: *I cut down some pieces to make this. About narration, it is life. Life is a narrative kind of writing and you make it, you write it. This [the shape of the letter N] is the path of life, from beginning to the end, which is not straight. These are some problems or things that happen to us, good days, bad days, the colors change.*

Life for her is a kind of writing, and writing is a kind of reshaping of life. Gelareh shows how she can use her voice as the one who can make and shape her life by narrating personal life stories to others. In the next article, she applied narrating her real life stories. She reflected and blogged on the text, revealed her values, wrote her attitudes, took a critical position, and told her real life story:

Gelareh: *So a little good change in each one of us would make the world WONDERFUL! It's obvious! Because it is us, people that make the society and communities... We just see things in surface. We never bother go deeper in them, even for our own benefit. And that's what most of the time causes MISUNDERSTANDINGS...*

In her next blogging she related a sentence to her own experiences and wrote her critical position towards it and in another article, she related the text to her life experiences with her mother and how she believed life demands sacrifices on both sides of parents and children. She also reacted to some sentences of the article in the form of a dialogue with the author:

Gelareh: I did the same thing for my mom... I knew she was always interested in continuing her studies...but because of some problems she couldn't go to university... and one of the biggest problems was ME. Cause she'd always wanted me to be the best, so she spent her entire time helping me find my talent in English, math, music...and somehow I felt I owed her my success...so I helped her in the same thing. It was my turn...

Through this kind of webbing and blogging, Gelareh showed her critical understanding of the texts. She became involved with the texts, related them to her own life experiences, found her personal meanings and ideas in them, and took a critical position.

The literacy of togetherness

Marjan learned the value of togetherness in this course. She learned to express herself, to share her ideas, to relate with and help others, to socialize, and to live better:

Marjan: It was mostly in a group work... in our group we could web on an article... we could cooperate. At first I didn't know about that, but later... teacher came to us and helped us ...We had group works before... but in this class, the group work was different. ...We were supposed to cooperate, something we didn't do before, not just with friends, with other classmates as well. We had good cooperation...

This kind of togetherness and cooperation was different from the group work activities in other classes. The togetherness here was a kind of living with each other and sharing living, working, and learning. In this course, she read an article about capturing feeling on paper and blogged on it:

Marjan: Writing dialogues can help a lot. It's a very helpful way of making you released from bothering thoughts. When you consider others' situations and don't judge them unfair you can understand them better and solve your communicative problems better.

For Marjan, writing dialogues is a way of helping people get rid of their troubling thoughts; a way of healing their sufferings. Since dialogue requires at least two people, community is important, too. In Marjan's idea, the way people treat each other is of importance. She says that the way she treats and judges others affects her relation and togetherness with them. She tried to show her understanding of the previous article by webbing. In her webbing, she used drawings and words to show her ideas about writing, togetherness, and sharing. Then she read the article on what people can learn from failure and wrote a journal about it. In this journal Marjan took on a personal tone and wrote about her own experiences, her feelings, the choices that she has made in life, and the reasons and consequences of those choices in her life. The teacher commented on it, as Marjan mentioned in her interview:

Marjan: I remember once I woke up at 9 in the morning and I felt I wanted to write something, the old feeling that I had, because I really loved writing. Then I started to write something; then I said I should give it to Dr. Ghahremani. I gave it to her and she commented some nice things on it. She wrote: 'you have already given me the energy to feel happiness in my life.' Actually teacher gave energy to us but with this I thought that I was giving energy to her too.

The teacher's comments made Marjan think that writing a journal and talking about one's feeling is not only a personal activity, but also a social and togetherness activity that makes both feel a need for socialization, and it is a way for bringing people together.

Recovering the power inside

Atefeh had been told that *change* was a negative point and unacceptable in society. She had accepted this idea as a social norm. But in this critical course, she experienced a change in her thoughts, a change that made her feel powerful unlike her previous idea about standing in the shadow. In this course, when she read a text about getting old and blogged on it, she tried to connect the text to her own life and to her knowledge of the world. Atefeh always expressed her religious interpretations about life in class, and thus made use of those beliefs in her writings too. She connected one sentence in the article to a verse from the Holy Quran and somewhere else she related a sentence to a Hadith (saying) from Prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.):

Atefeh: There is an Aye [verse] in Holly [Holy] Quran that: 'human being can reach to all science and can do everything but he can't do anything about life – death'

Atefeh: It reminds me this sentence: so promise me forever there will never be a never; [This sentence reminds me of] 'Surviving is different from living. Are they expert in living too?'

This was the first time in her life that she started questioning and challenging the authority of a writer in a text, because, as she said in her interview, she never used to even think about it; she did not feel powerful enough or did not assume a right to do so because the writer used to be the sole authority for her:

Atefeh: Before the class I thought that reading is looking at words. I thought that a writer who writes these articles has an authority to write. I just read the words and listened to what they said. Now when I compare myself with that time I see that at that time the writer told me you don't have any power, just listen to me, follow me, and just read my words. But when Dr. Ghahremani said you have the power to write your words, you can use different colors, you can say 'I can'... I just said wow, how can I do things that I've never known about them.

She felt powerful enough to apply the change in her point of view in her daily life. Education for her did not mean detachment of school and home, anymore, but a process in which she could learn something and use in her daily life. She had the power to question and challenge the ideas presented in texts, she could connect the text to an understanding of her world, could express herself freely, and could own the language.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the course the teacher had renamed reading as *webbing* and writing as *blogging* to create a new and different view towards the traditional skills. This renaming was a kind of warning for the students to break the routine and be able to experience diverse ways of reading, writing, and webbing. The students were surprised with a different type of literacy practice, a different type of community, and diverse ways of webbing. They perceived the value of learning and living with the acts of reading and did not memorize or participate in exams to gain high scores. Facing a new world, they started struggling and coming out of their protective and competitive worlds and started shaping a community with the teacher in which everybody was both learning and teaching at the same time. With the help of their teacher in their community, the students learned how to find their own *self*.

In this critical literacy course, the students read articles and unfolded the world behinds the words in the texts and searched for personal meanings within rich discussions that reflected their concerns about language, thought and critique. They made connections between the concepts of the texts and their understanding of the worlds around them and took a critical position. Before this critical course,

the students had some personal values and belief structures which they gained through their lives and educational careers. They were even somehow unaware of the existence of some of these values and belief structures. In this critical course, while doing critical literacy activities, the students became aware and conscious of some changes in their values and belief structures. Through a close examination of the data, a pattern of value changes emerged. Those that occurred in all events were as follows:

Nothing is neutral: Before the start of the term, some students were used to taking textual information for granted and accepting the things as they are. For them, reading was an unproblematic process of grasping information that was directly available in the texts and gaining knowledge was an unproblematic process of grasping information directly available in the world. But after the critical course, they became conscious to think more deeply and critically about the ideas and information presented to them. They learned that no text is neutral but intended to convey a special idea and influence or silence other ideas and points of views.

Freeing thoughts: Some students were afraid of making mistakes and breaking the rules in language learning and reading, so they could not use their personal meanings in freeing their thoughts. In this class, they learned to think and go beyond limiting rules, use their creativities, express their feelings, and free their thoughts.

Underlying messages: Some of the students used to look for meaning in the text without having any critical understanding of the context and without relating the text to their own worlds. But in this critical course, they learned to go beyond the literary meaning of the texts, relate the text to their own worlds, find their own ideas and values in the texts, read the worlds behind the words, and discover their personal meaning in the context.

The literacy of togetherness: Some of the students learned the value of togetherness in this course. They learned how to express themselves through language, to share their ideas, to relate with and help each other and be together to socialize, to learn better and to live better with a community oriented language.

Recovering the power inside: Some of the students started to feel a change in their entire social and cultural beliefs and attitudes. The changes that they experienced in this course were realized in all aspects of their lives. They became aware that they are the makers and creators of their language and lives, so they are responsible for making decisions.

In Critical literacy (Friere, 1991; Freire and Macedo, 1987) no genuine learning can occur unless students are actively involved, through praxis (the combination of both reflection and action) in controlling their own education. In this course, the students experienced learning as the combination of both reflection and action. Not only did they reflect on the lives they were leading and the values they had, but also they had a desire to change their lives and values as well as their social environments. Through the natural making of language as a creative process and performing literacy practices, these students gradually experienced a shift from perceiving knowledge as something 'out there' and 'taken for granted' to seeing it as something that they have the authority and power to challenge and question and construct for themselves.

The literacy practices experienced in this community-based course can be useful in the design of meaning based reading practices in various other contexts. This research can be offered as an example of alternative teaching and research which has the potential to deal with the problem of the mismatch between out of school and in school literacy. It may challenge teachers and educators to

raise their consciousness about the importance of implementation of critical literacy principles in their classrooms. We also hope that more students will become agents of power and change who will work towards transforming themselves and their society.

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