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Social Transformations and the Digital Age

**Knowledge and learning in the digital age:
in search for a new alphabet (and role) for the social sciences and higher
education institutions**

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**Critical Literacy in the Digital Age:
issues in knowledge construction for the humanities**

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One of the salient characteristics of the contemporary globalized world of digital media is the possibility of approximation and juxtaposition of different cultures and peoples through the various forms of communications on offer. I argue that the pedagogical role of the humanities in such a situation is to make the participants of such transcultural exchanges aware of the possible conflicts of interpreting and making sense of each other and being ethically prepared for the potential and probable conflicts involved.

If all parties involved in such conflicts attempt to critically read their postures, and seek to understand their own positions and those of their interlocutors, there is the hope of transforming potentially violent confrontations resulting from the misunderstanding inherent in language. Preparing learners for confrontations with differences of all kinds becomes an urgent current pedagogical objective that can be achieved through critical literacy.

There are several existing proposals of critical literacy, my particular proposal seeks to redefine the concept of "critical" focusing and emphasizing its temporal aspect and history and its role in a political and ethical pedagogy for the digital age.

A point of departure may be the resumption of the concept of "consciousness" or critical awareness of Paulo Freire: " This awareness was not anything other than the effort to understand the social - historical world in which one intends to or wants to

intervene politically. The same occurs with the understanding of a text from whose invention readers cannot escape, even though they respect the authorship of the author. There is no real educational practice that is not an act of knowledge and not merely an act of knowledge transference. An act in which the learner is one of the critical subjects” (2005:242).

What deserves attention in this more recent affirmation of an older concept of Freire is the connection made between the understanding and invention of a text by the reader. By referring to the reader as a critical subject, Freire emphasizes the importance of what the reader brings to the act of reading and constructing meanings. In this regard it is worth remembering Freire's previous reflections on the relationship between 'word' and 'world'.

Freire (2005:151) speaks of 'naive' ways of reading the world based on common sense, where meanings are taken as 'given' , 'natural' , undisputed and represent a form of knowledge drawn from “experience ”. Freire contrasts this “naive” way of knowing with a more "rigorous" and analytical way of knowing which is the product of critical reflection. By "rigorous" Freire does not refer to a logical-scientific methodological rigor but to a constant process of dialogue and critical reflection: "This means that curiosity becomes 'increasingly rigorous', i.e. it becomes more systematic, more demanding, more methodical ... because it is always already methodical, even when it is naive. However, it will become 'increasingly rigorous' in its method of approaching an object ... one thing is to exercise my curiosity in relation to [an object] in a naive manner; another thing is to exercise this curiosity in relation to the same [object] in a more rigorous manner , critically" (2005:151) . The key moment in this process of "increasing rigor" is the perception by the reading subject of the role that common sense plays in the apprehension and construction of meaning: "I know it's common sense, so I can overcome it " (ibid) .

How is this process played out in reading and interacting across immense cultural distances in the use of contemporary digital media? What is the relevance of such a process in the development of digital humanities that necessarily require abilities to traverse spatial, temporal, linguistic and cultural distances?

In this process of the pedagogical necessity of promoting the removal of naive readings of the world to develop more critical readings, Freire emphasizes the role and importance of learning to listen/hear. Freire reminds us that " ... deep down, is not by speaking that I learn to speak; it is by listening that I learn to speak" (2005:157). In this process of developing a critical perception of the word - world relationship, one moves

from a state of naive consciousness, common-sense , simply "being in the world" to the awareness of the connection and the difference between being in the world and being with the world .

Though common sense awareness leads us to believe that we learn to "speak by speaking," the critical perception of being with the world comes through social and critical awareness that we are never alone in the world. The perception of oneself as an "I", says Freire, arises from the consciousness of a "non-self" from which one has originated, from which one distinguishes oneself and to which one is connected even as an individual self. This sociohistorical "non-self" is simultaneously distinct from and constitutes the "I" or self of social identity "It was the world itself, as my other that said to me you are you " (Freire 2005 : 252). This interweaving and mutual constitution of "I" with " non-I" - the same with different, the individual with the collective is emphasized in an unprecedented way by Freire: "It is not starting from me that I know you ... it is the opposit . It is starting from the discovery of you as my not-I, that I turn to myself and see myself as an 'I' and at the same time, as an 'I' of myself, I experience the 'You' of you . It is exactly when my I becomes a 'you' for him, that he discovers the 'I' of himself. It is a formidable thing " (Freire 2005:149).

An important step to realize the connection between the "non-self" and the collective "I" in the educational process of developing critical consciousness is the already mentioned importance of learning to listen/hear. By learning to listen, the learner may realize that his world and his word - i.e., their values and their meanings - originate in the socio-historical community where he was born and to which he belongs. The pedagogical task of critical literacy would then be to develop this insight and understanding.

This means that it is not enough to understand critical literacy as a process of revealing or unveiling the truths of a text constructed by and author and originating in the context of the author 's text. We may now understand that the process is broader and more complex: both the author and the reader are *in* the world and *with* the world .

Both - the author and the reader - are social subjects whose " selves " originate in socio- historical communities and "non- Is"; this not only creates a sense of identity and belonging for a reader as a social subject, but also creates an awareness of History: " ... more than being *in* the world , it is by remaining *with* the world that we create a sense of time . That is, as we began to make history, history began to make us and that's exactly what ... nurtured the possibility of us having an awareness of the world and an

awareness of ourselves ... the movement of time produces history which then nurtures us and recreates us." (Freire 2005:252).

It is therefore important to understand how this process interferes influences and contributes to the reading and writing of texts, i.e. how it contributes to the production of signification in general. In a period of digital media communications and the use of digital media for knowledge production, critical literacy can no longer be content with only understanding how text signify *in* the world; it also needs to promote the understanding of how texts and the reading of texts are with the world in Freire's terms.

Put another way, the process of reading critically involves *learning to listen to* not just the text and the words that the reader is reading but also - and perhaps more crucially in the world of conflicts and differences of today – *to learn to listen to one's own readings of texts and words*. This means that at the same time that one learns to listen one must learn *to listen to oneself listening*. To read critically implies then to perform at least two simultaneous and inseparable acts: (1) to understand not only how the author produced certain meanings that originated in his context and in his socio-historical belonging, but at the same time, (2) to understand how, as readers, our perception of these meanings and of their socio-historical context is inseparable from our own socio-historical context and the meanings we acquired from our context. This is how we can appreciate in all its fullness the complexity of the role of social origins and of history in the word - world relationship envisioned by Freire and relevant to the processes of meaning-making in cross-cultural interactions in the digital humanities.

References

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