Investigating Youth Critical Literacy Engagement

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Abstract

This paper considers how youths adopt a critical literacy approach towards the important, multimodal texts that they identify in their lives. Qualitative data are presented, which demonstrate how critically minded these youths are when engaging with texts. The author suggests approaches teachers can take to enhance the relationship between literacy curriculum and teenagers' text-based interests. A tool for evaluating youths' approach to texts is presented to assist teachers so they can move their students beyond evaluative thinking into a transformative position. This article concludes with suggestions for how teachers can develop their own critical literacy approach to texts and curriculum.

In my free time I just read the dictionary a lot…so whenever people say words like, that are meant to be offensive, I'll look it up in the dictionary and I'll say you used the wrong term. And then they get all confused and I'll read out the definition for it and they're like, "Oh," and they just kind of shut up… like when people call other people gay. It's like, that means that they like someone of the same gender. I don't know how that's supposed to be offensive. (Becka, age 14)

Ninth grade Becka (all names are pseudonyms) was not shy with her peers, her teacher, or me, while I spent time observing her class. I spent over a month with her Grade 10 Social Studies/English class becoming familiar with and getting to know the students before I interviewed them as part of a study into youths' critical literacies. During this time I witnessed numerous examples of Becka confronting her classmates when they used words like "gay" and "fag", intended as insults. Becka is a strong believer in social justice and her actions towards her peers demonstrated this characteristic.

Becka's teacher encouraged her students to engage critically with a variety of ideas presented in various types of texts: oral, print, electronic, and visual. For the purposes of this paper, any mode of communication intended to communicate meaning is considered a text. This definition was used when working with all the participants. Becka's teacher invited students to adopt a critical literacy stance and question the texts with which they engaged. In this kind of environment, the students had opportunities to develop a critical literacy approach towards texts. Because the teacher invited her class to bring a variety of texts into the classroom for the purpose of teaching about critical literacies, she provided opportunities for her students to strengthen their abilities as informed, critical readers. She also demonstrated she valued the choices her students made regarding texts that were of interest to them, not simply teacher-directed texts.

In today's media-rich environment readers are inundated with texts from a variety of sources, for instance: YouTube videos made by famous musicians; newspaper articles; school textbooks; blogs; television programs; and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. If readers are unable to filter out what is not important to them or how the information they are reading relates to them, the results could be overwhelming and confusing and potentially promote continued hegemonic stereotypes (Sanford & Bonsor Kurki, 2012).

> With the barrage of information available at the stroke of a single key, learners need to develop skills and strategies to determine the quality, reliability, validity, purpose, and intent of the information that they can easily access. (McLeod & Vasinda, 2008, p. 261)

Toward assisting this end, this qualitative ethnographic study centres on investigating youths' engagement with texts that they define as important to them, and the extent to which they adopt a critical literacy stance towards these texts in their lives. In this paper, I will explore *How are youths critically engaging with texts in their lives?* And I provide a tool for teachers and their students to use to develop a critical literacies approach when encountering all forms of texts.

Literature Review & Theoretical Background

Texts

The working definition of text, in this study, comes from a post-structuralist, broad, and unfixed concept that extends beyond traditional books into a realm of semiotic possibilities, which include "images, gestures, music, movement, animation and other representational modes" (Siegel, 2006, p. 65), as well as "sociocultural conditions and relationships" (McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004, p. 12), and electronically-based ways of sharing, creating, and exploring information. Given these definitions, the participants came to understand that text was far more broad than the traditional idea of text related to written script; rather text could include things like jewellery, videos, clothing, dance, sculpture etc…Social influences surrounding text lead the reader to make an interpreted or negotiated meaning, "meaning therefore does not reside within the text, but is constantly in movement…The meanings attributed to texts are what readers make of them *within various contexts*" (Hagood, 2002, p. 255, emphasis added). The context of a text includes the reader's current and past experiences, the author's current and past experiences, and the many cultural and historical influences that add to the interpretation of the text: "The text, imbued with societal and cultural structures of race, class, and gender, marks the site of the struggle for power, knowledge, and representation" (pp. 250-51). The struggle Hagood refers to can take place publicly or privately, with others or independently as, "producers and interpreters of new texts [also] assume an interactive new role that defines them as active participants rather than passive meaning consumers" (Gounari, 2009, p. 149). Tapscott and Williams (2006) link the concept of passive consumers to the more active producer in coining the term "prosumer." The idea that readers are now participants in creating the text (and its meaning) is echoed in Lankshear and Knobel's (2007) description of Web 2.0. and the "production [of texts and their

meaning] is based on 'leverage', 'collective participation', 'collaboration', and distributed expertise and intelligence" (p. 227). They go on to point out that it "decentres authorship" (p. 227).

Literacies–Old and New

Literacy has traditionally been recognized as a term referring to reading and writing skills with print. Contemporary definitions include, however, the ability to communicate with oneself, others, and unknown audiences:

> Instead of seeing reading and writing skills as mere preparation for work and further education, Freire understood the learner's relationship to literacy as the origin of genuine dialogue and active participation in communication. (Endres, 2001, p. 401)

Additionally, this study includes the notion that being literate means having an *active* role in reading, understanding, sharing, and producing texts. Because texts are so varied in form and meaning, there are many different kinds of *literacies* with which one engages, and in which one can become proficient. Literacies skills are not equally shared or accessed by all people, thus the communication of information is also not equally shared or accessed. This is explained by Kellner (2004), who writes, "literacies evolve and shift in response to social and cultural change and the interests of elites who control hegemonic institutions" (p. 17). Thus, literacies include making meaning of texts created by oneself and by others, and assume an interaction between text and reader, as reflected in the Critical Engagement Continuum (Figure 1) a tool I developed that stems from the research data, which provides a way to evaluate one's engagement with texts. The study also indexes the ideas that literacy is multimodal, with the modes of communication ever increasing (Sanford, 2008). Therefore, "literacy, may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do" (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004, p. 11).

Being literate has become progressively recognized as a socially situated practice, with social implications for its use. Lankshear and Knobel (2006), for instance, define literacies as "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses" (p. 64). In this definition, literacies are about more than simply decoding a sign; they extend into meaningful interactions between people and texts, as suggested by Gee's (1990) notion of Discourses. Discourse, with a capital D, refers to the parts of language and social life that share similar aspects for particular groups of people:

> Discourse is always more than just language. What is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations…Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities. (Gee, 1990, p. 3)

Coupling Discourses with literacies allows for a deep understanding of the meaning one makes of texts, because it introduces an emphasis on the reader's experiences in social life and how these experiences influence the diversity of literacies a person acquires.

The study is further influenced by Kellner's (2001) recognition of the social influence on the definition and function of literacies:

> Literacies are socially constructed in educational and cultural practices that are connected to various institutional discourses and practices. Literary thus involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read and interpret the text of the world and to successfully navigate and negotiate its challenges, conflicts, and crises. (p. 69)

Discourses structure the meaning of literacies and the agreed upon uses within the societal framework in which they appear.

Kellner's (2001) *texts of the world* are dynamic and suggest that the idea of just one literacy is out-dated. Rather, emergent literacies are being created and defined to reflect the new modes of communication with which literate people engage, but to define these new literacies can be a perplexing task. This could be because, as Leu et al. (2004) suggest, literacies are deictic, meaning that depending on who uses the term, when and where it is used and in what context, the meaning changes, like the words "today" and "here" for example (p. 17).

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy, in this study, encompasses the above definitions of text and literacy but focuses on a broad understanding of reading, which includes *thinking about*, *responding to* and *creating texts*, *moving to social action,* and *developing an awareness of texts in relation to the larger context in which we live*, "to be critically literate, readers must come to understand that texts are not 'true' but rather that they represent the perspectives of the writer and the socio-cultural times in which they were written" (Lapp & Fisher, 2010, p. 159). Therefore, engaging with and producing texts is a political act (See Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Critical thinking and critical literacy are two related yet distinct concepts. Critical thinking is an approach to reading a text that uses evaluative and analytical questioning and a step-by-step approach to finding truth in the text (Burbules & Berk, 1999), solving problems, and working through solutions in a compartmentalized manner: "Critical thinking is a process whereby a person reflects upon his/her own thinking process so as to create clear, well-reasoned ideas for the benefit of him/herself and others" (Mulcahy, 2008, p. 17). A critical thinker thinks locally, or individually, focusing on how texts impact him/her. Critical thinking is an important aspect of becoming critically literate, but a clear distinction between the two approaches must be highlighted.

Critical literacy, in this study, moves away from the traditional ideas of literacy, which Wesley White (2009) refers to as being "hegemonic" and "moves towards being transformative" (p. 55). Critical literacy involves an *active participation* from the reader, which leads to this transformation. "Critical literacy challenges the status quo and clarifies the connection between knowledge and power" (Bell Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 488). The mindset of critical literacy is adopted by the reader when her/his questions push

beyond the analytical or evaluative (as found in a critical thinker) and he/she begins to consider how cultural ideologies and social practices of the author and of him/herself impact the meanings of the texts (Hagood, 2002). Shor (1999) states, "Critical literacy [thus] challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development" (p. 1). Critical literacy involves independent *and* collaborative thinking and inquisitiveness.

Engagement

Engage - To hold the attention of (Merriam-Webster.com, 2014)

This study used a definition of engagement that centres on attention. When working with youth, attention is a variable factor depending on the text in question and the context in which the youth can be found. For instance, some video games can hold the attention of the players for hours at a time while other texts, like a commercial for a children's toy or a Tweet from a comedian that they do not find amusing, barely get a moment-long glance. In reference to literacy engagement, attention draws on the notion of the "integration of motivations and strategies in literacy activities," (Guthrie, Van Meter, McCann, Wigfield, Bennet, Poundstone, Rice, Faibisch, Hunt & Mitchell, 1996). Throughout the observation period, and during the interviews, I noted the participants' various levels of engagement with texts and focused on their responses to the texts rather than the time they spent involved with texts.

Methodology

This research is an ethnographic case study. Ethnographic observation provided me the opportunity to view participants during their lessons and interact with them in a role with which we were both familiar (teacher's assistant), while I observed and collected information about the way learners interacted with texts. A teacher's assistant in this context refers to an adult who is assigned to the classroom to help the students academically. In this role, I was prepared to guide students through assignments, coach them on study skills, assist with tasks and homework activities, and provide direction in completing projects and activities assigned by their classroom teacher. Students had previous experience with adults in the role of teacher's assistant, which seemed to help them identify my temporary role in their class as a helper and researcher.

Participants, Method, and Data Analysis

Participants

Participants in this study were 12 youth students in two Grade 9 English and Social Studies classes at an alternative high school in an urban centre in Western Canada (Table 1). These students were deemed at risk of failing in a regular high school setting because of various issues, such as academic abilities, substance abuse, emotional and/or physical health, or bullying from other students in their previous high school. The students in these two classes were between the ages of 14 and 16 years old. Each class had approximately 20 students, with about 70% of them designated with special needs, including Asperger's syndrome, behaviour and learning disabilities, and social anxieties. The school's focus was to address the academic and emotional needs of students with an

emphasis on developing literacy and numeracy skills, which could be transferred into their personal lives outside the classroom. The pedagogical philosophy of the school was inclusion, collaborative learning, differentiated instruction, and formative assessment.

In the class, the priority of the participating students' learning was on building literacy skills. They were exposed to a variety of texts, such as movies, YouTube videos, Tweets, songs, poetry, paintings, and narratives. They completed assignments related to current events and had a voice in how they got to demonstrate their learning. Because nearly all the students in the classes had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) there was more freedom for the teacher to embrace a range of texts that could address the students' abilities and needs. The teacher's pedagogical philosophy of promoting new literacies, critical literacies, and student questioning was also in line with the students developing a critical literacy approach towards texts. After spending time in these classes I learned the students were forthright in what they had to say by speaking freely and openly expressing their opinions. They appeared to feel comfortable and safe in their learning environment, and, because of this, they offered insightful information about texts and text use, especially since they used a variety of text sources and media as part of their day-to-day learning activities and social interactions.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions

Name	**Sex**	**Age**	**Grade**	**Texts Used as Identified by Each Participant**
Cody	M	15	10	Television, Radio, Internet, Movies
Lily	F	14	9	Talking, Internet, Text Messages
Morgan*	F	14	9	XBox Live, Books, Songs,
Eve	F	15	9	Music, Jewellery, Clothes, Painting
Thomas	M	15	9	Phone, Internet, Facebook, Videos
Becka	F	15	9	Music, Paintings, Sketches, Poetry
Tristan	M	16	9	Phone, Text Messages, Talking Face to Face, Music, Internet
Liam	M	15	9	Video Games, Sculptures, Clothes, Ads
Chloe	F	14	9	Instant Messaging (IM), Internet, Songs, Books, Photographs,
Rachel	F	15	9	Internet, Video Chat, Songs
Jordan	M	14	9	Clothes, Text Messages, Movies,
Grant	M	14	9	Movies, XBox,

**Note.* Participants' name in bold text have comments in this paper.

Method and Qualitative Data Collection

To initiate the study I spent seven weeks in the two English and Social Studies classes making ethnographic observations and field notes related to critical literacy, noting what the students *said about texts* (both in-school and out-of-school based texts),

what students wore and listened to (as music and clothing are both forms of text), and *what actions students participated in,* such as text messaging their friends or writing stories. These observations gave me some insight on how the participants engaged with texts and which texts they considered important. Taking time to make these observations also allowed me to get to know the students better, and after the first month of observational visits, I invited students from both classes to take part in a focus group discussion about important texts in youths' lives. Four students attended this discussion that was held after school and off school property. The week after the focus group, I taught a mini-lesson with both classes to introduce them to a broad understanding of text. The open-ended, individual interviews took place over a few days following the mini-lesson on texts. Twelve students participated in the interviews, which lasted between 20-40 minutes each.

Data and Initial Analysis

The data for this research includes observational field notes, focus group transcripts, and 12 interview transcripts. During the transcription phase, I made notes that then informed the open coding I used in the initial analysis using NVivo 9 software (QSR International, 2010). I coded the data by categorizing based on the *kind* of text being discussed by the participant, such as *music* and *Internet*, the *thinking* participants demonstrated about the texts, such as *influences* and *self-identity*, and the *people* and *places* they mentioned related to the texts they discussed, such as *school-related text* and *who are participants discussing texts with*. There were 67 codes created after the first read through of interviews. During the review of the coded themes, I made notes about my thinking related to the critical literacy stance the participants were taking towards texts. These notes proved to be a basis for which I was able to develop the Critical Engagement Continuum–a framework through which I could view the data and also a framework for others to use to examine how we think about and interact with texts; our critical literacies. See Figure 1.

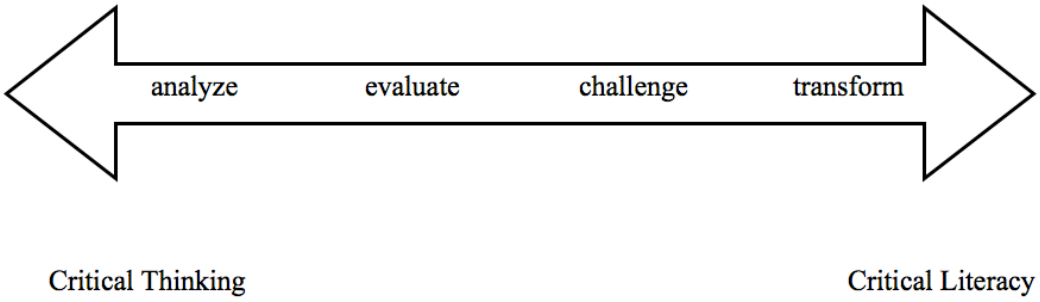

Figure 1. Critical Engagement Continuum

The Critical Engagement Continuum

The critical engagement continuum and accompanying guiding questions (See Table 2) were developed during the data analysis stage of this research. Building upon the research notes made during the coding and analysis stage, the continuum allowed me to

explain in what ways the participants were engaging with texts, including texts created by other people and texts participants created themselves. I developed the guiding questions by using the participants' statements about texts as a starting point. To create the questions, I used statements as answers and asked myself: What could the questions be? (e.g., when speaking about the messages she finds in movies Chloe said, *"It seems like they're trying to say that if you do hurt someone, as long as it's for good, then it's ok."* This could answer the question: What messages do I get from this text?)

The critical engagement continuum has two purposes: Firstly, to reflect the critical stances that participants demonstrated during the data collection, and, secondly, to disrupt the concept of what critical literacy is and offer alternatives as to what it could be for students and teachers. The first purpose will be expanded upon below while the second will be addressed in the implications section of this paper. I use emergent themes from the analysis to help explain the critical literacy approach adopted by the youth in the study and to highlight and contextualize the texts considered most important as used by the participants.

Towards one end of the continuum is critical thinking. Participants demonstrated critical thinking when they questioned texts, and their questions contained an analytical or evaluative focus, which produced a different kind of understanding about the text than when using a critical literacy approach. Table 2 contains guiding questions educators can use to help plot where on the continuum one's approach to a text can be found. One does not have to ask all the questions or meet all the criteria when thinking about a text in order to be taking a critical literacy approach to their reading. The foundational levels of thinking in the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002), such as "remember" and "understand" are related to the critical thinking end of the continuum. Common examples from the participants that demonstrate a critical thinking tendency include judging the text as one they liked or disliked, wondering if the text's message was real or fake and searching for who had produced the text (its source). Also, when the participants expressed little or no reasoning for their opinions, I located the response more towards critical thinking on the continuum, because they had not shared any deep consideration about the text. For example, Morgan commented that she did not "*usually read magazines or newspapers cause [she doesn't] like some of the topics in them.*" This is all she shared about the topic. This generalization about all magazines and newspapers stemmed from her experience of finding topics she did not like in magazines. She expressed no desire to look for magazines or newspapers that could reflect her interests; instead, she avoided these kinds of texts altogether. This example represents critical thinking (in a limited way), because Morgan is approaching the text with an uninformed evaluative perspective.

Towards the other end of the continuum is critical literacy, where the commonly held ideas about critical literacy, such as text and literacy being transformative (Wesley White, 2009), text being influenced by "social, cultural and historical factors" (Hagood 2002, p. 249), readers "interrogating textual ideologies and engaging in multiple perspectives" (Edelsky, 1999 as cited in Bell Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 489), and readers considering questions of "power, equity and fairness" (Shanklin, 2009, p. 45) are located. As I reviewed the interview transcriptions, I found comments, which stood out for me, that went beyond the critical thinking end of the continuum, such as questioning social

justice issues, which arose from texts, and reflecting on the effects of texts on the students themselves and others. Examples of these kinds of comments are included in the following section.

What Lies Beyond and Within the Arrows of the Continuum

Located beyond critical thinking is the kind of rote memorization that occurs often in response to standardized testing and one-size-fits-all curricula. It is fact-based teaching which does not invite students to engage in critical thinking, let alone critical literacy. When this kind of teaching occurs, students are rewarded for regurgitating content without having to show deep understanding. Beyond critical literacy are radical pedagogy and anti-institutional thoughts and actions. Non-schooling and a radicalized approach to teaching are the opposite extreme to the standardized education that is purported at the critical thinking end of the continuum. Within the arrows, a learner or reader finds flexibility and adaptability of understanding, the encouragement to question texts, and potentially support from those around them (parents, teachers, peers) to more deeply understand texts through responding to and creating them.

Table 2

Guiding Questions to accompany the Critical Engagement Continuum

Type of Questioning/ Response	Guiding Questions
Analyze	What is the message/meaning of the text? Is the message real/fake or true/false? Is only one source used to find out more about a text? Are generalizations made about the text's meaning? Where does the text come from (source)? How is the text being produced? What is the purpose of the text? Why is it produced? Who is/is not involved in producing the text?
Evaluate	Do I like/dislike, agree/disagree with the message? Are personal responses with little or no reasoning provided (i.e. I like, I think…)? Is the text shared with others (with little or no reasoning given for sharing)? Is the reader comfortable even if the text's message does not align with their personal beliefs?
Challenge	Quality of text is judged–how does this affect the meaning? Is the reader skeptical of messages in the text? How does the text affect me and/or others? (Personal to global responses

	to the text.) Are connections to other texts or experiences made? Does the reader consider if anything is missing in the text (i.e. other perspectives, voices, and images)? Does the reader question the message(s) of the text (disrupts the status quo)? Is the text shared/discussed with others (collaboratively considers text)?
Transform	Which social justice issues are addressed by the text? How? How is the reader moved to act/respond because of the text's message? What views are transformed because of the text (text as catalyst to transform ideas)? Is there reflection and action occurring (praxis)?

Findings and Analysis

The main goals of this research focused on trying to understand when, how, and with which texts youths engage critically. Questions in the open-ended interview centered on these five areas: The important texts in youths' lives? Which texts are approached critically? What questions are youths asking about the texts with which they engage? What, if any, social justice issues are mentioned? And what kinds of texts are youths producing? The following excerpts are from the interviews, observational notes, and focus group discussions. Connections to the Critical Engagement Continuum are included to demonstrate its usefulness during an initial analysis stage of a research study or during a literacy lesson in a classroom. Each section of the continuum is explained with examples. Additionally, examples are included that show how the continuum relates to participant comments about social justice issues and how the continuum can be used to interpret comments about participant-produced texts.

The Critical Engagement Continuum: Analyze

When a reader is looking for meaning in a text, or wondering about its purpose or validity, their critical engagement can be located within the analysis portion of the continuum. Tristan provided examples of questions he asked about media messages during the focus group and later in our interview. I asked him if he ever questioned what he sees on television, movies, advertisements, or posters. He replied "*all the time*." I wanted to know what kinds of questions he asked. "*Is this real? Is this happening?"* I asked him to clarify what he meant by "real" and he said, "*Like, is it fake? Is it accurate? That type of stuff*." Tristan's questions show he understands that he cannot believe everything he reads/views/hears, because he doubts the authenticity and accuracy of the information he encounters. His responses also point to the fact that he is frequently thinking about the messages he is shown, since he questions things "*all the time*." These comments demonstrate Tristan's analytical thinking as they deal with finding out if the information is true or false, fact or fiction, which are key aspects of critical thinking–thus Tristan's comments could be located at the critical thinking end of the continuum.

The Critical Engagement Continuum: Evaluate

The participants spoke freely about the texts that they liked and disliked. These evaluative comments often reflected how they spoke with their peers, which I observed during the classroom field visits. The participants seemed to be able to make judgments on texts fairly easily and many were able explain their reasoning for their evaluative statements, like Morgan for instance. Morgan had a strong relationship with books. She shared how her father owns a used bookstore and she gets books for free. She "*love[s] almost any book*" and expressed being particularly fond of fantasy, adventure, and action novels. She read these genres because:

> *I love the fact that anything can happen. It's like, you can be going downhill and then all of a sudden it changes, so positive, which is sort of what my life has done recently. So, I like books that give you an option, and like, change.*

Morgan reflected on the lessons expressed in the books she read, and recommended these books to others to teach them about herself:

> *Sometimes I will see a book and see a message that will help my parents but I can't exactly say it myself so then sometimes...sometimes I feel a longing to be in nature a lot so I try to get them to understand that. They don't fully understand that yet but they're getting closer.*

Sharing texts with others and using books to communicate about herself demonstrated how Morgan critically engaged with books. She read them for understanding and related to their messages. She used books to enhance her interactions with her family. Through these comments, which are located mainly in the evaluate section of the continuum, Morgan demonstrated her critically literate approach to texts.

In numerous examples, the participants' evaluative comments led to stories of their actions and/or responses to texts. When I asked the participants about which texts they disliked, found fault with, or generally steered away from, they were all able to answer without much hesitation. They often mentioned whether they *believed* a text or not, and when I pushed to know why, quite a few talked about how truth and realism play an important role in if they like a text. The participants also shared their skepticism of texts with me, especially related to television advertising. They wondered about the messages they saw in texts by looking for ways to prove the texts' messages were fake or untrue. This seemed to give the participants more strength for their dislike of the texts. Participants used both analysis and evaluative thinking, as one lead to the next. They thought about the truth (analysis) and this lead to their like/dislike of the text (evaluate). The continuum is something one moves fluidly along, rather than being stopped in one section per thought, comment and/or text. From analysing to evaluating texts, the participants' comments showed a deepening of thought in understanding of and responding to texts.

The Critical Engagement Continuum: Challenge

The comments that directly challenged texts' meanings and/or purposes, as well as comments that explained how the participants were affected by texts are grouped in the challenge section of the continuum. In this part of the continuum, readers may express ideas that show how they question a text beyond its meaning, often discussing the text with others. Every participant discussed music with some kind of critical perspective. Often they shared a comment about whether or not they liked a song, however, some participants expressed more than a like or dislike. For instance, Rachel had strong opinions about the kind of lyrics she found offensive and stated:

> *If I hear a song that I don't like and I don't want to hear–I turn it off…My friends get mad at me cause I'll hear a song that I don't want to listen to so I'll turn it off…It's my house. I find it irritating and I don't want to hear it.*

Her feelings expressed towards some songs were strong enough to cause her to turn off the music rather than listen to it. She was challenged by the text to act because of her understanding of its meaning. Her friends either did not share her feelings for the dislike of a song or they were not moved to act. I asked Rachel what kind of music she did "*not want to hear?*" she replied, "*All guys going on `I'm going to fuck this chick tonight' blah, blah, blah.[sic] You know what? You think you are so cool, go, go die in a hole. I hate guys like that*." She was angered by the lyrics and moved to act and defend her actions to her friends. She was frustrated that people choose to express themselves in disrespectful ways towards women in their songs. Rachel disliked the ways women were portrayed in music.

As Rachel and I continued to talk about music, she said that she connects the singers (specifically those who comment on how they plan to spend their time with women) in the songs with people she knows. For instance, she mentioned how bothered she was by a classmate who often shared his sexual activities, reminding her of the lyrics in the music she disliked so strongly. Rachel definitely expressed a consideration of the effects of songs on her and those around her. Her comments (and actions) demonstrated a critically literate approach to music, located in the challenge area of the continuum.

The participants' comments in the challenge portion of the continuum were not only stemming from texts created by other people, but also came from their own texts. Becka expressed that she enjoyed being artistic. She created her own paintings and wrote her own poetry. She brought up painting when I asked her about finding the meanings in the artistic texts with which she engaged. When considering an artist's painting she knew that "*sometimes you can tell by like, the harshness of like, the colours and the types of colours that they've used, like how they were feeling when they made it*." Becka expressed "insider" (Gee, 1997) knowledge that enabled her to view this form of text differently than someone who did not paint. She questioned the way a painter used colour as well as the colours that were used in making meaning from the work. She considered the voice of the artist through her/his choices of colour and techniques. This example shows that Becka was thinking about more than if she liked or disliked a painting. She was also thinking about the painter and how her/his choices impacted her understanding of the work. Becka was challenged by the painter's choices and how they created

meaning in the painting/text. As a painter, her insider view provided her with a certain expertise or knowledge that allowed her to think deeply about the paintings she views. Becka's thinking can be located on the challenge section of the continuum.

The Critical Engagement Continuum: Transform

The transform portion of the continuum includes ideas that show how readers are changed by the texts with which they interact. Often readers, who are transformed by texts, express social justice issues, texts that promote praxis, shifts in understanding concepts, and responding to texts in ways that could support others. This first example however, shows how one participant moved along the continuum and was transformed, albeit her transformation may seem slightly illogical to the reader. In the section below, two examples related to social justice are provided, and are more commonly associated with critical literacies.

Chloe, like Morgan, stated that books are very important to her. She explained how the genre of books she reads has led to a transformation of sorts, in how she viewed other people and behaved:

> *I like to read Dark Fantasy and like, Romance novels. It's sort of consumed most of my life and changed who I am. I didn't really start reading Fantasy until sixth grade and since then my beliefs have changed a lot, and the way I think. Just cause, I, it's sorta made me believe in things that I didn't believe before. And like, it's embarrassing to talk about…the fantasy books sorta made me believe in, believe that more of a possibility that there are in fact some sort of mythical creatures out there and, or like, people that can read minds, so I'm always watching what I think now cause I'm afraid that there might be someone that can read my mind.*

Chloe's engagement with Fantasy novels can be classified as transformative on the continuum, although she is mistaken in believing that mythical creatures and mind-readers are real. She researched and read about these phenomena and made a critical decision to believe in what she was reading. It is through engaging with texts that her growing understanding about mythical creatures and mind readers caused a change in her behaviour. Chloe's comments revealed how she has been transformed by the texts she reads. Dark Fantasy novels have changed her understanding about the kind of animals that exist and also how people can interact with each other (i.e. read minds). Although her thinking was flawed, since unicorns and dragons do not actually exist, a transformation in her thinking had still occurred, originating from her deep engagement with this genre of text. This example illustrates that transformation stemming from textual meanings does not always occur in the way one might expect.

The Critical Engagement Continuum: Transformative Understandings and Social Justice

> Critical literacy offers an important strategic, practical alternative that provides opportunities for educators and students to reconnect with everyday life and with education that entails debate, argument and action over social, cultural and economic issues that matter. (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 16)

This description of critical literacy gets to the heart of the social justice issues that were raised by four of the twelve participants in this study. Excerpts from two participants, Tristan and Morgan, highlight how some of the participants make connections between texts, their own lives, and the lives of those around them.

Tristan
S- Um, let me think. Is there anything that bothers you about the texts that you use? Like Facebook or MSN or text messaging?
T- Yes- cyber bullying.
S- Cyber bullying, does that, is that something that you see going on around you or to you or-
T- Ah, both.
S- Oh, really?
T- But it hasn't happened to me lately, so…
S- When that sort of thing happens, do you think it's because – why do you think it happens?
T- Because they're insecure about theirselves (sic), and –
S- The bullies who are doing it?
T- Yeah.
S- Are the insecure ones?
T- Yeah, and they need to find a way to express their feelings.
S- Do you find that people who are involved in cyber bullying are also doing face to face bullying?
T- Yes.
S- Or is that a different kind of person?
T- Um, some people yes and some people no.
S- Why is there a difference?
T- Um, because some people are afraid of doing it face to face, when texting or M-
S- MSN or Facebook chat or whatever…
T- Yeah, is easier because yeah…
S- So it's easier because there's kind of like a barrier-
T- Yeah.
S- So you're a little more protected-
T- Yeah.
S- So you're a little distanced from the person. I see.

The conversation above relates to social justice but it is not necessarily about a traditionally oppressed group of people. Tristan was concerned with people who are being cyber bullied, which is done using online or electronic methods of intimidation and threats, rather than bullying someone face to face. This form of abuse is one that Tristan has been subjected to in the past. His own experiences influence how he reads texts, because he is more aware of the injustices in them. He commented elsewhere in the interview that he wishes he "*saw more of um, like people standing up for other people*." He saw it as a problem in "*a lot of music…and music videos*". Tristan's critical literacy stance provides him with a framework from which to view texts. His thinking about texts

was influenced by his own experiences related to oppression. This kind of critical literacy approach demonstrated how Tristan was making connections between messages in texts, his own life experiences, and other people who are affected by this issue.

Morgan
S- Is there anything you feel you want to share with me about questioning texts or thinking critically about them or making texts?
M- Well, some people take them too seriously.
S- What do you mean by that?
M- Like you can be judged on your clothes and you might not have enough money to buy clothes that you actually like. They're just things you wear.
S- Yeah. So, you think other people…
M- Can judge you on your appearance, because-
S- I see.
M- Like the homeless could-
S- Like they don't know the whole story or something?
M- Could have been really prosperous at one time, and they could of just had a bad time and don't have enough money to actually be what they want.
S- Okay.
M- And they don't have enough opportunities anymore.

Morgan mentions above that people take texts, such as those on clothing, too seriously and the meanings people impose on texts can often be misunderstood. She would like people to be less judgmental and more forgiving, for instance, not judging "the homeless", because you don't know the whole story. Morgan's comments show she is engaging critically as she is wondering what information is missing when she evaluates a text (for instance, someone's clothing).

A few participants made comments related to social justice and I noticed they were more emotional when this occurred. They expressed their dislike for oppression and were upset and concerned that texts' messages focused on such unjust actions. Not one of the participants mentioned any action they had taken related to social justice issues, although I would not be surprised if some of the participants who are song writers were to include the topics in their lyrics, as Becka felt strongly about listening to music with important messages "*about things that matter*", like racism and terrorism (see Becka's quote below). As for where the comments about social justice fit on the continuum, they were mostly located towards critical literacy. After discussing a past project with the participants' teacher where students worked together to raise money for a charitable cause she indicated that with more prompting and guidance, whether from teachers, parents, or peers, these students could easily move from talking/thinking about inequity to taking action to prevent it.

The Critical Engagement Continuum: Participant-Produced Texts

The participants' critical engagement with texts was not limited to texts other people produced. Students' own creations (music, stories, photography, etc.) were also considered using a critical literacy lens. Chloe's artistic endeavours include writing

poetry and stories. She also enjoys photography. A few of the other participants mentioned that they liked taking photos, but they did not elaborate. Chloe, however, expressed thinking deeply about photography and the meanings conveyed by the photos she took.

> *It helps you look at things in a, pretty much a whole different way. It's like, if you see a rock on the side of the road, it's not really anything at all. But, if you, when you take a picture of it perfectly, like, it's in a whole new definition and like, it looks so much more like a miracle than like, it looks, like just if you're walking down the road.*

Further conversation revealed that Chloe was aware that when making a picture, what you exclude effects the outcome as much as what you include. She also pointed out that looking at something from a different perspective can change its meaning or how one understands it. One photograph may draw out deep and even emotional responses in a viewer while another photograph may be completely overlooked. Chloe's insightful comments about photography demonstrated how she was engaged in thinking about and creating visual texts. Her comments suggested she was moving beyond the critical thinking end of the continuum towards the challenge and transform end in critical literacy.

After speaking with the participants about the texts they produced, it was clear that the messages in these texts were of the utmost importance to them. Whether stories, videos, songs, clothing, or photographs, all participant-produced texts came from practiced creators with calculated and thoughtful intent. Some participants shared the texts they made with friends or family while others chose to share their work anonymously through the Internet. A few participants mentioned that receiving feedback was important as it gave them confidence and helped them improve their texts the next time. The audience was important to some participants while others were not taking the audience's needs or wants into consideration, instead choosing to focus on their own feelings and letting them guide the creative process.

The critical engagement continuum can be used when considering comments made about participant-produced texts as when thinking about comments made about other people's texts. Many of the comments about their own work reflected the purpose and intent of the text (analytical) as well as their evaluation of it. There were few comments that could be located towards the critical literacy end of the continuum, although approaching one's own text from a critical literacy viewpoint is a difficult thing. These participants had some experience with adopting a critical literacy approach for other people's texts, but less so for their own work, so their critical literacy towards their own seemed to still be developing.

Conclusions and Implications

The goals of this research were to discover how youths were interacting with texts; were they enacting critical literacy as they engaged with texts? By creating the Critical Engagement Continuum I was able to show how the youths' text engagement could be classified. Each participant's comments about their interactions with texts could be

located *somewhere* on the Critical Engagement Continuum; all these youths critically engaged with texts to some degree, as Becka states:

> *A lot of people say things just because they've heard it before so they think it's right, like they've heard it from an adult so they like think `Oh well, that's got to make sense, it has to be right.'*

While Becka expressed some mistrust of adults she also questioned her classmates about their ideas, asking, "*Do you have any proof of that? Or did someone just tell you?*" She was influenced by the punk rock music she listened to:

> *They actually write music about things that matter… there's this one song that's about, there's this group a long time ago that tried to kill off all the Black people in Philadelphia and they write songs about events like that, and they write songs about 9-11 and terrorists.*

Becka considered the lyrics of the songs she listened to as another source of information about the world, rather than enjoying them simply as entertainment. Becka's critical statements about the texts in her life can be placed along various portions of the Critical Engagement Continuum, unique from her peers and their locations on the continuum.

Engaging with texts *within the arrows* on the continuum can bring readers to a place where they receive encouragement to question texts, guidance about the kinds of questions to ask, and view examples of how to work towards a more just society through thoughtful action. At the same time, each participant's critical approach was unique and changing. For each one, the definition of critical engagement and their experiences with critical literacies was dependent on multiple factors: their prior experiences with thinking critically, the variety of texts to which they have been exposed, and how they have been encouraged to share their thinking about texts.

To return to the initial research question: "To what extent are youths using critical literacies to navigate texts in their lives?" I drew the following conclusions from the study.

1. *These youths were critical.* They were critically engaging with texts on a regular basis–with and without teacher support. They looked for the purpose and messages in texts and then evaluated them. The participants also spoke about sharing their ideas about texts with their peers as they were *collaboratively critically engaging* with text. This discourse around texts between these youths happened naturally, without teacher prompting or direct instruction to do so and it contributed to the deeper understanding they developed about texts. The discussion between peers was mostly evaluative in nature, relating to why one text is better than another or why one person loves a text and another hates it. For these youths, sharing texts with each other exposed them to new texts as well as different ways of thinking about texts, as they saw their peers demonstrating a variety of ways of engaging with texts.

2. *These youths were engaging with a variety of texts.* The variety of texts the participants mentioned demonstrated they have access to many forms of text. Labels for adolescents such as The Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998; 2008) and the iGeneration (Rosen, 2010) could lead one to believe that teens predominantly engage with screen-based texts however this was certainly not the case for the participants I interviewed. Technological texts were certainly a big part of their lives, but everyone mentioned other forms of media, including books, music, painting, photography, sculpture, woodcarving, poetry, and songs.

3. *These youths influenced and were influenced by their families and their peers.* Comments about participants' interactions with their families around texts came out of general conversation; I did not specifically ask the participants how they engaged in texts with their families. From our conversations, I learned that that family values and ideals shaped how the participants read and created texts. The participants in this study were also influenced by and tried to influence their peers through text-based events, for instance when Chloe wrote Dark Romantic Fiction stories her friend "*ma[de]*" her write more because she enjoyed them.

4. *These youths engaged seriously in the world.* They participated seriously in our interviews and discussions about texts, regardless of when they happened (during class or on breaks). Whether they were talking with me about a television commercial or about the way women are portrayed in some videogames, there was genuineness to their comments. The participants expressed their dislike for texts that offered fake acting or shoddy products and also cited "effort" as an important criterion to judge texts.

5. *(Based on observation and interview comments) These youths were not often transformed by texts.* As I read and reread the interview transcripts I found only a few examples of the participants referring to any kinds of changes in their thinking related to texts. This does not mean they were not experiencing transformative thinking, but there was little evidence of it. This led me to wonder if the participants recognized what transformative thinking was and if they are able to communicate about it? Are they aware that someone can be so strongly affected by a text or experience that it can lead them to alter their thinking about a topic completely?

6. *These youths spent little time talking about social justice issues.* Throughout the interviews and classroom observations I listened for the participants to mention social justice issues and it rarely happened. I've highlighted a few examples that came out of the interviews, but overall, social justice issues were not usually part of discussions related to texts, or otherwise. As in the above conclusion, this does not mean the youths were not aware of social justice issues, they just did not provide many comments during the study to demonstrate it.

Multiple definitions of critical literacy must exist in order to encompass the variety of forms of texts that exist, as well as the variety of approaches each reader may take towards the texts with which they interact or produce. The adult versions or definitions of critical engagement or critical literacy may not be the same for youths, perhaps because critical literacy draws on life experiences, and youth have fewer to draw from; perhaps because the texts with which youth engage are often different than those being read by adults, and perhaps because the texts are being read for different purposes. Critical engagement and critical literacy are not stagnant, but rather are shifting, just like literacy. As stated previously in the literature review, "literacy, [therefore], may be thought of as a moving target, continually changing its meaning depending on what society expects literate individuals to do" (Leu, et al., 2004, p. 11). From this research, I observed the many ways in which youth critically engaged with texts: Through individual readings and viewings; in discussions with peers, family, or classmates; by introduction to new texts from their friends, family, or teachers; and by creating their own texts. Teachers need to uncover the kinds of critical engagement that may be happening for their students that might be overlooked or ignored. By becoming aware of the ways students engage with texts, teachers can incorporate this kind of engagement, shown by these youths or their own students, into their teaching and improve the text-related activities they present to their students. This knowledge would then give them the opportunity to include the discussion, debating, questioning and sharing of text that their students already do with each other into their lessons.

The implications of this research demonstrate that a critical literacies approach by both students and teachers can lead to the discovery of a wealth of information that each student brings to a classroom. Knowing about students' out-of-school text selection, family values, and peer influences can aid a teacher in designing lessons that encourage a deeper interaction with texts that build on students' prior knowledge and current interests, "educators must develop radical pedagogy structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis for literacy (including the language of the student)" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 151). Paying attention to the ways in which youths interact with one another about texts when they want to and then inviting those kinds of interactions into the classroom could lead to more motivated learners. It would put the teacher in a position of learner and allow the students to be the expert voice for a change.

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