

REVIEW

The powerful reach of literacy: from critical thinking to citizenship

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ABSTRACT

In this conference, professor and researcher Régine Kolinsky led a presentation of her current research project, whose main aim is to promote critical thinking in subliterate individuals through actions that contribute to the establishment of the literacy status. For this, the researcher revisits the notion of literacy, points the influence of this over various human cognitions and exposes the need of an education that is committed to the development of critical thinking in individuals, as a form of resistance against fake news and false beliefs. Here, Kolinsky's research was assessed in terms of methodology, of reception within participants, and its relevance in Brazilian reality.

RESUMO

Na presente conferência, a professora e pesquisadora Régine Kolinsky dedicou-se a apresentação de seu atual projeto de pesquisa, cujo objetivo principal é promover o pensamento crítico em sujeitos subletrados por meio das práticas que contribuem para o estabelecimento do status de literacia. Para tal, a pesquisadora revisita a noção literacia, aponta as influências desse aprendizado sobre as mais variadas cognições humanas e explicita a necessidade de uma educação comprometida com o desenvolvimento do pensamento crítico dos indivíduos, como uma forma de resistência às fake news e às falsas crenças. Aqui, a proposta de pesquisa de Kolinsky foi criticamente avaliada em relação à metodologia, à recepção pelos participantes, e sua relevância para a realidade brasileira.

KEYWORDS

Literacy. Critical thinking. Interdisciplinarity.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Literacia. Pensamento crítico. Interdisciplinaridade.

In her conference to Abralín ao Vivo, Régine Kolinsky, professor and researcher at the Free University of Brussels, reports an outline of her interdisciplinary research project, whose core on basic education is extremely relevant to facing current social issues in today's world. Citizenship, for instance, is intimately connected to the capacity of performing critical analyses of the texts, news and information one consumes. Kolinsky addressed themes such as education and reading and the instilment of cognitive and psychological aspects that permeate the formation of critical thinking. This text describes and discusses these theoretical bases, and places this theme as a visceral pursuit in the Brazilian reality.

In one of his most renowned works, “Pedagogia do Oprimido (1968)”, illustrious educator Paulo Freire reflects upon the role of education in the shaping of the students. He points to the necessity of education as a political act, capable of eliciting in the individual “critical, transforming and differential consciousness, which emerges from education as the practice of freedom”. Through this statement, Freire signals, among other topics, the role of a liberating education, which aims towards the development of critical thinking in the student, a powerful tool to combat social issues and build the individual's citizenship.

In order to delve deeper into the role of education in the formation of the students' critical consciousness, Kolinsky introduces the term literacy (MORAIS, 2014). This concept, which is intimately related to the activities of reading and writing, has two sides: on the one hand, it assumes that reading and writing should be recognized as abilities, meaning, therefore, an automatic and efficient practice of these competencies. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a productive practice, which refers to the complete and critical use of the abilities of reading and writing, including actions of acquisition, production and sharing of knowledge. As such, the concept of literacy is differentiated from the notion of “alfabetização”, which characterizes a process whose aim is the basic grasp of reading and writing in an alphabetical system; and that of “letramento”, as the action of introduction of written culture in the development of a child (MORAIS, 2014).

However, the state of literacy, the outcome of successful processes of both “alfabetização” and “letramento”, can constitute a challenge, especially for precarious educational systems, which reflect the many inequalities of a country. In Brazil, according to data from the Avaliação Nacional da Alfabetização - ANA (National Evaluation of Literacy), published by Inep (National Institute of Educational Research and Studies) in 2016, only 14,1% of children belonging to the lowest socioeconomic

group show a satisfactory level of literacy, in terms of reading abilities. In contrast, children of a high socioeconomic group have a performance of 83,5%. The data also show that in 2016 less than half on the students in Brazil in the last year of high school reached considerable levels of reading proficiency, around 45,3%. Adding to these issues, the small investment in education, the shortage of adequate infrastructure for learning and the lack of appreciation of teachers make up the set of difficulties which deeply impair the students' ascent to the state of literacy.

Literacy is itself a determining factor of an individual's ability to get integrated into their community's political and civil life, and is, consequently, a basic factor for the full support critical thinking (MORAIS, 2014). This connection takes place in the sense that reading abilities influence not only the access to information itself (although that is a fundamental aspect), but also the individual's ability to internalize this information, analyse it, ascertain its biases and intentions, judge its reliability and establish correlations with the knowledge they already have. In short, literacy can boost critical thinking, which leads the individual to form, in an independent and free manner, well-argued and coherent conclusions. Ultimately, these will in turn shape their views and participation in society.

In this context, it is crucial to have a promotion of directed actions which intend to identify the fragilities related to learning processes and directly take action upon these demands, in order to solve them. It is in this scope that the instigating research proposal led by Prof. Régine Kolinsky is inserted. Aiming to examine the level of development of critical thinking and other abilities (cf. reading and writing abilities, logical reasoning, linguistic abilities, executive functions and ToM) and, through training, stimulate them, Kolinsky and her team will conduct a series of initial testes (Pre-training) and final tests (Post-training) in teenagers who attend vocational schools and "subliterate" adults, who attend Adult Education schools.

The proposal of an interdisciplinary study which seeks to discover the nature of correlations between literacy, critical thinking and distinct cognitive abilities is really relevant and original. However, it is necessary to note that these abilities are influenced, in a small or big degree, by cultural aspects which can have a strong effect not only on critical thinking itself, but also on the test made to assess it. Intuitive, metaphonological or memory abilities seem to undergo the influence of sociocultural factors in a smaller scale, when compared to critical thinking, such as social self-evaluation and adherence to conventional values as measured by the F-Scale Test. For this reason, it is necessary to employ a methodology which is able to reduce the external effects in the relationships one intends to verify.

In this sense, another point that deserves attention is the participants' profiles. This study had the participation of individuals from more than one age group (participants were 19-55 years old). Substantial age gaps among subjects can have an impact on the performance of their cognitive capabilities. Thus, it is also important to control the participants' profiles in order to avoid, again, the influence of other variables. There is another way in which the participants' profile may alter the achieved results, especially when compared to similar abilities in children: adult students often exhibit more hesitant attitudes in relation to the classroom and the testing environment. Their feelings of inadequacy, insecurity or lower self-esteem when reading, created by the idea that they are

somehow “late” or that they “lack intellectual knowledge”, frequently lower their engagement and attention in tests, which naturally is reflected in the results.

In this work, the evaluation of the relations between literacy and critical thinking will be accomplished through questionnaires and standardized tests. This simple type of measurement is interesting, as it is accessible and uncomplicated, making it easier to carry these activities out in schools, facilitating the rich and necessary link between schools and universities. However, standardized tests are sometimes excessively simple and completely based in perspectives disconnected to the reality of participants, demanding arbitrary encyclopaedic knowledge which does not correspond to that with which the person leads in their day-to-day life.

Thus, it is important that the gathered results are analysed carefully and not taken to be categorical, as they might not reflect true correlations necessarily – an example is the preliminary observation of multiple correlations between reading fluency and many aspects of critical thinking and logical reasoning. More reliable conclusions will only be possible after the training and repetition of tests, which will allow Kolinsky to inspect which aspects were influenced or not by her strategies. Once completed, this work will provide valuable information about the possible causalities which comprise such a multifaceted aspect of cognition.

The research project coordinated by Régine Kolinsky and discussed here is extremely relevant in present times: besides Brazil’s worrying rates of literacy, the contact with fake news and ideologically biased information is more and more prevalent. In this context, it is of the utmost importance to completely develop one’s reading ability for the analysis of texts, and, even more, the critical awareness of its contents, its arguments and its validity. This ability of intellectual self-defence, or epistemic self-vigilance, is what would enable Brazil’s population to curb fact distortion and reach sound opinions for the integral exercise of citizenship. Thus, as taught by Freire, Kolinsky intends to demonstrate, it is only through high quality, accessible and liberating education that it will be possible to build an autonomous and critical society, capable of detecting and rejecting fallacious discourse and overcoming the deep hurdles posed by inequality.

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