Title: Critical Literacy in Singapore Social Studies: 'weaving the fabric of a nation'[1]

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Abstract

How do we teach the critical in new nation states in Asia? Models of critical literacy and critical pedagogy and its constituent theories have proliferated in the United States, Canada, the U.K., Europe and Australia where they are taken variously to involve text criticism, hermeneutics, post-structuralist theory, issues of power and ideology, discourse analysis, and agendas of race, gender, social justice and equity (see Pennycook, 2001). How do such models transfer and travel to educational systems with very different histories, cultural traditions and student bodies? This study looks at attempts to teach 'the critical' in Singapore Social Studies using the principles of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1990, 1999). It focuses on pedagogic practices of critique in the context of an agenda of educational reform for enhancing cultural and other forms of capital in global economies. It seeks to recognize the complex interaction of diverse identities, practices and resources involved in the development of this enterprise as teachers and students engage with 'critical choices' across discursive fields in dialectical tension in the Social Studies classroom. Taking a case study approach, it examines texts such as classroom interaction data, teacher and student interviews, alongside notions of what counts as critical practice. How these notions are culturally located and realized within 'local' contexts is considered (Geertz, 1983; Canagarajah, 2002).

Introduction

The issue of citizenship education and critical pedagogy is not new; it has been copiously written about by both Singaporeans such as Han (2000), and Koh (2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, forthcoming), and Sim in collaboration with others (Sim & Adler; 2004, Adler & Sim, 2005; Sim & Print, 2005), by academics elsewhere interested in civic education in the Asian and Asia Pacific region (Print & Smith, 2000), and more generally as a facet of social and political-economic responses to globalization with implications for education and youth futures (see eg., Adler & Sim, 2005; Koh, 2001, 2004b, 2006; Kwok & Low, 2002; Luke et al, 2005; Ryan & Rossi, 2006; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002). The question of whether it is possible to teach 'the critical' in Asia, or to argue a dichotomous problem over 'West versus East' versions of what 'the critical' is, however, is not the issue. The real question is whether or not it is possible to '*teach*' 'the critical', or more importantly, what setting out to achieve this goal looks like in government supported educational contexts where civics and citizenship education are taught through the Social Studies curriculum, and what the implications of that enterprise may be for people's civic identities in those places.

The paper is designed to shed some light on a series of questions arising from these issues:

- How have State-led educational policy and curricular changes supporting 'critical thinking' translated across to pedagogical practice at classroom level at this point in time?
- What can an analysis of the discourse of the Secondary Social Studies classroom reveal about critical thinking as a developmental goal in response to Globalisation?
- Is (real) open dialogue and critique about critical practices in the classroom, whether in Singapore, or in other nation states in Asia whom subjected to stronger degrees of control by their governments, not only possible, but desirable?

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[1] Address by **Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan**, "Fabric of the Nation: The Role of the Young Generation in Weaving and Strengthening the Tapestry of Singapore." Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, and Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry, Nanyang Auditorium, Tuesday 22nd March, 2005.

- Does critical inquiry contribute to 'strengthening the fabric of a nation' (Balakrishnan, 2005) or might it serve to slowly unravel otherwise functional, successful and colourful tapestries from the fringes?

Using Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1990, 1999) this paper examines the role of critical pedagogy as an object-concept/agenda for productivity in the new forms of work, social relations and identity that currently shape New Asia's social construction of literacy. In part, it aims to get right at the heart of 'thinking about thinking'. It examines models of critical literacy and critical pedagogy and their transfer to educational systems with different histories, cultural traditions and student bodies. The cultural location of such notions is then considered in the context of questions such as; 'can a systematic approach produce thinkers?' (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002: 162), by investigating a specific historical-contextual snapshot of one system 'in transition' (Luke et al, 2005). The possibility of a critical culture is situated against the enacted practices of the classroom system relative to models of 'critical thinking' and the managerial discourses of the education system/the State. Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989) is used within this methodological framework to examine how managerial discourses impact on what teachers and students can say and do at the level of enacted curriculum (Comber, 1997). The resultant analytic model is subjected to critique and reformulation, revealing tensions and contradictions as points of departure for a consideration of the ways and extent to which critical thinking can be developed as a key pedagogical aim.

On a local level, the study reflects on the impact of curriculum policies and National Education (NE) content, the use of Social Studies as a specific platform for NE, pedagogical initiatives such as infusing 'thinking skills' across the curriculum, and discourses of evaluation as they are reflected in classroom discourses, roles and identities. At international level Critical Literacy's continued relevance to Literacy and Social Studies education is queried, reflecting on a larger issue: the success or otherwise of critical inquiry in government supported educational contexts and the public implications of such.

The structure of the paper is as follows.

Firstly, I provide a brief overview of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a tradition of practice. Throughout that description I illustrate the capabilities of CHAT as practical theory by describing the mediation of 'critical pedagogy' in the Social Studies classroom in Activity Theoretical terms. Focusing on one classroom as an example of a multi-voiced, object-oriented activity system, I demonstrate through discursive analysis the systemic contradictions in 'critical thinking' reflected in the day to day practice of the Social Studies classroom. Using this analysis as a point of departure, I conclude the paper by delineating how points of contradiction can be identified as potential avenues for expansive change with implications in the public interest.

Activity Theory: investigating local practice for qualitative change

This study uses a conceptual framework influenced by research on Activity Theory developed Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1978, 1981) by Engeström (1987, 1990) and others (Luria, 1982) to facilitate analysis of joint activity as it has evolved over time. Historically, Activity Theory has been used to track tensions in networks where the ideals of fostering democratic discourse and strengthening civil society are engaged in the developmental (re)building of epistemic communities. Providing a multi-perspectival, practice-based, grounded approach to academic inquiry, it focuses on organizational processes as conceptualizations of an enterprise, the negotiation of relations within a network, the dialogical construction of a common object, and the creation of tools with which to engage in collective activity.[2]. This makes it suitable for an examination of the range of *epistemological* challenges and conflicts associated with implementing critical pedagogy whilst mediating the managerialist and technocratic discourses that can shape citizenship education.

One of the greatest strengths of Activity Theory is its capacity to enable new ways to understand change (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999). Through grounding its analyses in the cultural and historical mediation of artifact situated action, there are at least two ways in which Activity Theory is distinctive (Engeström, 1999c). Firstly, it affords deeply contextual and historically derived understanding of the

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[2] For a more lengthy of Activity Theory see Barab, S.A., Evans, M.A., & Baek, E-O. (2004). Activity Theory as a lens for characterizing the participatory unit, In D. Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook of Research for Educational Communications and Technology,* (pp.199-214), New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

objects, artifact mediation and social organization of specific local practices (Geertz, 1983; Canagarajah, 2002; Cole & Engeström, 1993). Secondly Activity Theory has the capacity to explain and influence changes in human practice over time (Engeström, 1999c: 377-78). In these ways Activity Theory provides a framework for system-level analysis of culturally and historically situated, artifact-mediated sets of relations by which the socially mediated world of the classroom is discursively enacted. As its application to classrooms as 'activity systems' is a relatively new concept (see eg., Bereiter, 2002; Davydov & Kerr, 1995; Edwards, 2001; Engeström, Engeström, & Suntio, 2002;   Wells, 1999), I will present a brief overview of the aspects utilized in this study.

A Cultural-Historical method for analysing discourses as mediated activity:

Lev Vygotsky (1978) first conceived of the idea of artifact-mediated action. Action, according to Vygotsky, consists of a subject (or actor), an object (either an entity or a goal), and mediational tools (either material or conceptual).   (See Figure 1 below). Language, methods, models, and other forms of cultural artifacts can be tools, as can textbooks and worksheets. It is generally accepted that Leont'ev (1978) developed Vygotsky's notions of mediated social processes into what is known as Activity Theory by distinguishing between actions, operations, and activity. However, an exploration of the debate over Leont'ev's (re)interpretations of Vygotsky's work on mediated activity are not within the scope of this paper.
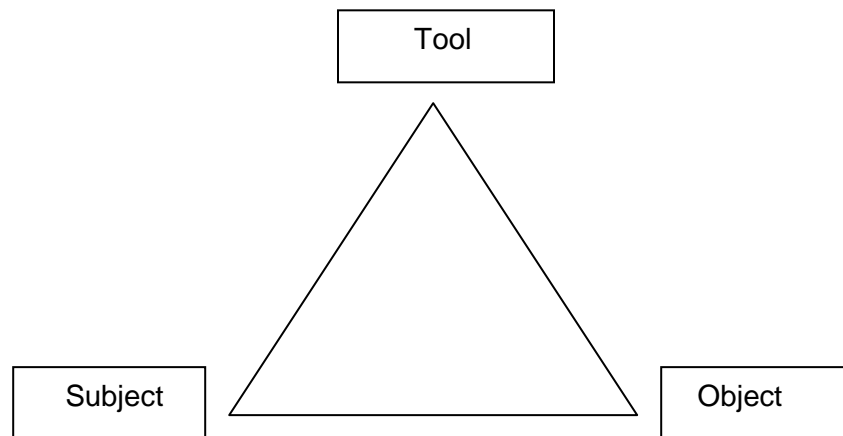

Figure 1. Vygotskian model of tool-mediated action (1978, 1987).

Activity systems are realized through interlinked, tool-mediated actions by which actors collectively engage, enact and pursue an evolving object. This understanding of object stems from the Vygotskian view of human development as an active social process rather than an individual, cognitive and largely passive one. An activity is a unit of analysis for understanding a larger flow of human life. In the analysis of a milieu of human life, separate, specific activities can be isolated according to the criteria of objects and the motives that elicit them. Once an activity has been singled out, actions-- the processes that are subordinated to conscious goals-- can be isolated and analyzed. Finally, the operations that directly depend on the conditions of attaining concrete goals can be foregrounded for careful study.

In the case of the activity system of a Social Studies classroom, for example, it is arguable, among other things, that it is desirable for student members to 'develop a sense of nationhood' by 'knowing and understanding the history of their nation' and 'learning core values and attitudes' and 'developing the capacity for civic participation and engagement'. This process requires many conscious, tool-mediated actions on the behalf of the teacher, as facilitator and mediator of student learning, towards those object-concepts. Actions within an activity system constantly enact and reconstruct in various forms the object of activity. An object, in that case, is much like a goal, only one works continuously toward it as the activity. The ways in which object construction and redefinition occur in activity reflects the creative potential of the activity (Engeström, 1999b: 380-381).

Engeström (1987, 1990) envisages activity as dynamic, specific to human beings by virtue of being culturally mediated, able to represent the complexity of the whole and to be analysed in context. In

doing so he and his colleagues expanded Vygotsky's basic triangular model (subject-object-mediator) to account for social relations by including three additional components in his model of an activity system: rules that regulate the subject's actions towards an object and other participants in the activity, a community of people with shared interest in and involvement with the same object; and a division of labor that defines what is being done by whom toward the object, including division of tasks and division of power, positions, access to resources, and rewards. (See Figure 2 below).
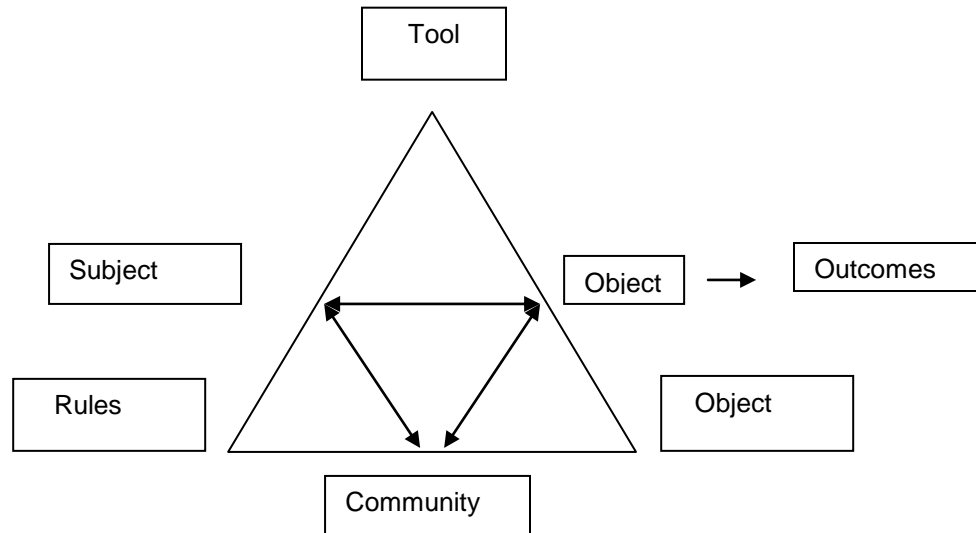

Figure 2. Model of Activity System adapted from Engeström (1987: 78).

Engeström's model makes the analysis of a multitude of relations within the triangular structure of the systemic whole of an activity possible. That is, one or more members of a group engaged in collective activity at any given moment may be viewed as a subject engaging the object of the activity through a particular action. Those who are part of the group oriented toward the same object, but are not engaging in that specific action are referred to as members of the "community of significant others." Thus throughout the course of an activity, the actual persons constituting the subject(s) and members of the community may interchange their "roles" frequently. The teasing apart of these relations in order to identify their dynamics is a complex analytical process requiring multiple kinds of data acquired over a relatively long period. This study subsequently uses a range of data such as Ministerial speeches, policy and mission statements, and definitions, syllabus documents, public discourses from the media, classroom data, and teacher and student interviews dating back to the beginning of the cycle for the implementation of critical pedagogy in Singapore in 1997.

According to Engeström and Miettenen (1999a), Cultural-Historical Activity Theory is a framework that enables observation and intervention through analysis and redesign. Traditionally used at a macro level to analyze one historically evolving Activity System in the context of its Network relations to other activity systems, application of the Theory enables consideration of both micro and macro level mental and material goal-directed actions and operations that contribute to the way in which a System works. Given that activity systems are constantly evolve and contain internal contradictions, using an Activity Theoretical approach allows for distinctions between short-lived goal-directed actions and more durable, object-oriented ones. Such a distinction allows for moments of tension and systemic contradiction to be identified and considered as potential sites for developmental transformation. This facet of potentiality will be taken up in more detail in the second half of the paper.

Potentiality for 'critical pedagogy paradox': Citizenship Education, Social Studies, Critical pedagogy and Singapore

In Singapore, as in many countries around the world, education, and particularly Social Studies classrooms are utilized by governments as instrumental sites for citizenship education (Print, 2000;

Gonzales et al, 2001). Interest in citizenship and civic education as notions with inherent contradictions has grown recently, especially in the Asian region, where there are a number of recently democratized countries, newly formed nation states and/or those with limited historical precedents. In these places the contradictions of commitment to the State and active citizenship are often very publicly realized. The goals of citizenship education, or 'National Education' (NE) as it is called in Singapore, are namely to 'nation-build' through 'developing a sense of national cohesion, the instinct for survival and confidence in the future' via four sub-objectives:

- Fostering a sense of identity, pride and self respect in being Singaporean;
- Relation the Singapore story: how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation;
- Understanding Singapore's unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities;
- Instilling core values of the Singaporean way of life and the will to prevail to ensure continued success and well being.

(MOE, 2005b)

These goals are many, perhaps conflated and ultimately driven by geo-political economic and social concerns. Despite how it is defined, discourses of educational reform, restructuring and innovation that have curricular and pedagogical interventions with implications for the redesign of assessment are these days regarded as a direct response to globalisation, (Johnson & Kress, 2003; Koh, 2004b, 2000a, forthcoming; Gopinathan, 1996, 1999; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002). The Ministry of Education, for example, has responded to the pressure of Globalisation through the vision of '*Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* (TSLN), which was aimed at creating "a nation of thinking and committed citizens capable of meeting the challenges of the future, and an education system geared to the needs of the 21st century." (MOE, 2005a). The curricular and pedagogical changes implemented in Singapore, including the focus on critical thinking, were specifically implemented to enhance Singapore's 'collective tolerance for change' and capacity to 'adapt constantly to a rapidly changing world.' Coupled with National Education, it is a goal of the State to equip students with skills, knowledge of their country's 'common history, vulnerabilities and constraints', 'cultural heritage and mother tongues', and the 'right values and attitudes', including understanding and respect for the different racial, religious, cultural and language backgrounds of their fellow citizens', and a sense of shared identity, destiny and instinct to assure the livelihood of the country's national interests, survival and success. (MOE, 2005a). In Social Studies this is realized through specific concentrated focus on the complex objectives of;

- 'developing national cohesion …
- a sense of identity pride and self-respect …
- knowledge of the [national] story …
- understanding of [the nation's] unique challenges, constraints and vulnerabilities…
- instilling the core values of [our] way of life …
- the instinct for survival and confidence in [the] future; and
- …to ensure continued success and well being' (Lee, 1997)
- by 'engendering a shared sense of nation hood, understanding of how [the] past is relevant to [the] present and future, appealing to heart and mind' (Goh, 1996); and
- 'develop[ing] a shared sense of nationhood' by 'systematically transmitting these instincts and attitudes to succeeding cohorts' (Lee, 1997).

A deliberate microcosm for the infusion of NE and thinking skills across the curriculum, subject Social Studies was established in Singapore as a major platform to drive the above-mentioned objectives. Because the content of Social Studies, generally speaking, is about the nation's history, governance, and values, it is most often delivered using a top-down approach of knowledge and information transmission. Prime Minister Lee's comment about systematic transmission' is an acknowledgement of that. Nonetheless, partially to avoid being seen to take a 'propogandist' approach, but primarily in response to the pressures of preparing today's youth for a very different future in a globalised world, the State implemented a suite of pedagogical policies under the banner of 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (MOE, 1997). Asides from a focus on Information Technology (IT), the policy was focused on

establishing an 'infusion of critical thinking' across the curriculum so that Singapore could become "a nation of thinking and committed citizens capable of meeting the challenges of the future." (MOE, 2005a).

This paper focuses on the pedagogical practice of 'teaching critical thinking' in relation to aspects of citizenship education in Social Studies that are potential sites of contradiction. The values of placing the nation and society before oneself, and adopting a pragmatic economic rationalist approach to governance, for example, are meant to emphasizes harmony, consensus and cohesion. However, in some Asian countries, particularly nations that enjoy relative prosperity, they can have a tendency to promote a form of political passivity and materialistic individualism at odds with the goals of citizenship education, especially among highly affluent and politically apathetic youth. Introducing the capacity to question assumptions as a desirable attribute, in this vein, can appear to have the potential to further exacerbate any existing tensions in that regard. For this reason, what form of critique is adopted and supported in such contexts is in many ways crucial not only to meeting the goal of nation-building, but also to how prepared future generations are for the changes and challenges of a Globalised world.

Versions of 'the critical': 'Critical' in what way(s)?

Historically Social Studies has been dominated by research strategies that are descriptive and explanatory, but rarely critical. Relatively little time, if at all, is spent analyzing modes and possibilities for dissent, resistance, and revision. For example, one form of critical pedagogy commonly utilized in subject Social Studies for the purposes of contributing to citizenship education is the evaluation of source material and information. This section of the paper provisionally categorises two forms of critical practice: that which seeks to 'problematise' knowledge (see eg., Freire, 1970; Koh, 2000b, 2002; Luke & Walton, 1995; Pennycook, 2001) and another which views 'critique' as a problem-solving skill (Bailin et al, 1999; Print & Smith, 2000; Sim & Adler, 2004). In doing so it examines models of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. The cultural location of such notions is then considered in the context of questions such as; 'can a systematic approach produce thinkers?' (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002: 162). Discussion of the tensions and contradictions of these models of approach are meant to provide a context for the analysis and discussion of the implications that follows.

There is a great deal of literature on critical thinking, much of which conceptualizes it across a spectrum of skills, processes, behaviours and dispositions, procedures and practice. A quick review indicates critical thinking is either referred to as cognitive or thinking skills, or equated with certain mental processes or procedures that can be improved through practice. In fact, it would appear that it is intuitively appealing to describe critical thinking in terms of how an individual might go about it. Yet, such an approach often grossly understates the significance of contextual factors and how they affect decisions about the pedagogical practice of teaching (and learning) critical thinking.

Many educators and theorists view the task of teaching critical thinking as a matter of developing thinking skills, or cognitive skills in interpretations, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation (Bailin et al, 1999: 270-72). Underlying this is the tendency to divide educational goals into knowledge, skills and attitudes (values), which assigns critical thinking to the category of skills. It is based on a conception of skill as a generic and discretely identifiable set of processes, procedures or operations. That is, once learned, they can be applied in other knowledge domains. The Singaporean curriculum, for example, currently emphasizes "thinking skills" as one of eight integral core skills and values that form a framework for its various syllabuses (Whitby et al, 2005). Regarded in isolation, this perspective appears to separate critical thinking from the development of knowledge, understanding and attitudes.

Another view of critical thinking is that it is a matter of being proficient at certain mental processes such as classifying, inferring, observing, evaluating, synthesizing and hypothesizing. Of course, mental processes can only be assumed by via their products, which means they are hypothesized as process-product changes, purposeful task achievement actions or orient-reception relations and then reified after the fact (Bailin et al, 1999: 273-75). To differentiate them means to distinguish among certain kinds of upshots or accomplishments rather than observing the mysterious antecedent features of the processes. Traditionally Social Studies has in part been enamoured with the functionalist ideology of regarding methods of critique as appropriate means to an end. Regardless of this, critical thinking 'processes' are still referred to in education in general, possibly because the term is nicely ambiguous and fits in with the concept of transferable abilities and can be spoken of as both a process and a task. For these reasons, this conception of critical thinking works well with the goal of providing curricula where students learn to 'do' certain 'processes' such as abstract, analyse, classify, evaluate, sequence, synthesize, translate and so on, believed to be common to all critical thinking situations 'across the curriculum' and then (hopefully)

transfer them to use in a range of activities in their lives outside of school and the future. The Ministry of Education in Singapore, for example, has also taken this approach with the 'infusion of thinking skills' across the curriculum as part of its response to the pressures of globalisation. In this instance the State appears to subscribe to a definition of thinking as skills and processes that has been adapted from Marzano and associates' *Dimensions of Thinking: A Framework for Curriculum and Instruction* (1988). In the MOE corporate 'vision and mission statement', thinking skills are broadly summarized as 'constantly challenging assumptions, and seeking better ways of doing things through participation, creativity and innovation': a 'spirit of learning [that] should accompany [our] students even after they leave school.' (MOE, 2005a).

To speak of critical thinking as a formal set of steps, stages or phases in a general procedure is another common approach. In this sense, critical thinking is discussed as inquiry (ie. 'Scientific method'), problem solving and decision making involving concept and/or principle formation, comprehension, decision within a heuristic or algorithm (Bailin et al, 1999: 276-79). The Ministry of Education also supports this form of critical thinking, more commonly referring to it as Problem Based Learning, under which educational methodologies which 'emphasise real world challenges, problem-solving, inventive thinking, higher order inquiry skills, multi-disciplinary learning, independent learning, e-learning, information and knowledge management and collaborative skills' are categorized (see for eg. National Institute of Education, Post Graduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDHE), 2005). Some like to differentiate even further between critical thinking and creative thinking in this regard. In any case, this approach makes critical thinking appear as a manageable, potential number of sometimes fixed-ordered, highly reliable habitual procedures that are helpful in addressing a range of situations a student needs to resolve and should be mastered (and by implication, taught).

Performing tasks such as thinking of reasons for and against a position, or brainstorming alternatives, does not guarantee that a person is thinking critically. The challenge, according to Bailin and others (1999: 279), is in teaching students "to do such tasks well by increasing their capacity and inclination to make judgments by reference to criteria and standards that distinguish thoughtful evaluations from sloppy ones, fruitful classification schemes from trivial ones, and so on". This view evaluates critical thinking by standards of performance. To illustrate, the Singaporean Upper Secondary Social Studies syllabus requires students to interpret and evaluate sources and given information, and construct explanations in order to display higher-order critical thinking skills assessed according to a standardized marking scheme (LORMS – Level of Response marking scheme).

One counter argument to both this lock-step approach, and a 'skills' perspective, is that generally, proficiency in any form of critical thinking involves, among other things, a disposition to engage in good thinking, and the acquisition of certain sorts of knowledge that are often domain specific alongside an understanding of various principles that govern good thinking in particular areas. An extension of this perspective might support a conception of critical thinking in terms of teaching a 'working-hypothesis approach'; that is, a repertoire or array of semi-ordered alternatives. Whilst this view allows for a certain degree of flexibility, it is not necessarily sufficient to ensure that what occurs in classrooms counts as critical thinking.

Never-the-less, without wanting to rationalize a decision-making model, it points to the necessity of regarding critical thinking as a polymorphous exercise where what is made an appropriate approach is determined by the nature of the problem and its context (Print & Smith, 2000: 108). This is not a claim that teaching about general procedures is an inappropriate way to promote critical thinking. What makes any approach to good thinking effective, according to the reviews, is through it being able to develop greater capacity for determining appropriate approaches in particular contexts: a capacity that cannot be separated from the nature and purpose of the task the person is trying to accomplish. This means avoiding practices that are mechanical and repetitious in favour of ones that foster the habits of mind, commitments or sensitivities for a being able to fully understand and engage in critical reasoning. The relatively recent infusion of a 'thinking skills programme' across the curriculum in Singapore is rationalized in such a way. This view tends to give the impression of 'leaving the doors open' to a multiplicity of critical thinking approaches, resulting in a perspective that sees critical thinking as: the understanding and application of basic principles and approaches, including problem solving, that seeks to take into account the necessity of creating conducive environments for doing so, and fosters 'skills', 'strategies' *and* 'habits of mind'. In addition to the versions of problem-solving 'critical thinking' that I have just presented, there are other perspectives that support practices which increase the scope and definition of the concept of 'critique', not as skill or process, but as a facet of literacy. One such version is Critical Literacy.

Critical approaches to Literacy

Given time and space constraints it is not my intention to go into a detailed review of the various models of critical literacy and critical pedagogy and their constituent theories here (for a review, see Pennycook, 2001). Instead I consider the model of critical literacy that has been put forth by Koh (2000) and others (Kramer-Dahl, 2001) as a form of civic literacy (Ryan & Rossi, 2006) against the version of critical practice previously outlined in the managerial discourses of the State and a mediated version of 'critical practice' enacted in the Social Studies classroom.

The literature on suitable environments for promoting the development of critical thinking suggests a variety of means such as direct instruction, teacher modeling, creating an environment where critical inquiry is valued and nurtured, providing frequent opportunities for students to think critically about meaningful challenges and issues with appropriate feedback (see eg., Print & Smith, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Dynesson, 1992; Patrick & Hodge, 1991). This implies attempts on the part of the learner and the teacher to improve critical practice according to performance criteria, frequent feedback and evaluation with respect to the quality of thinking that is the goal. One academic who has devoted considerable time to critical discussion of these topics is Dr Aaron Koh.

In a series of papers, Koh (2000b, 2002) has directly considered the conundrum of creating 'thinking Singaporeans' through critical pedagogy. Weighing up paradigms of critical thinking influenced by such logical philosophical and psychological cognitive problem solving models as were outlined earlier in this paper, Koh situates the Singaporean approach as one that resembles a merger of these two traditions with emphasis on specific skill related critical thinking strategies influenced by Edward de Bono (1992), appropriate disposition and inclination toward thinking and the necessity of a culture promoting critical thinking (Koh, 2000b: 95-96). What is crucial to this form of approach is that it views the acquisition of knowledge as necessary before any critical thinking can take place. As a means by which to overcome this transmissionist approach, to open up the Social Studies classroom to a view of knowledge and thinking that is more multi-discursive, and therefore to engage in a 'far more purposeful' promotion of the thinking culture that is desired by the 'Thinking Schools…' initiative, Koh proposed teaching Singaporean students Critical Literacy. Critical Literacy in this sense is best described as the pedagogical practice of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the classroom.[3]

Briefly, Critical Literacy is not a unitary approach, but a form of politically oriented critique put forward by Paolo Freire (1970), and others (Greene, 1994; Fairclough, 1989; Muspratt, Freebody & Luke, 1997; Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; Morgan, 1997: Wallace, 1999) which aims to provide students with a critical analytic framework, or 'tools', to assist in them in reflection on their own language experiences and practices, those of others in the institution which they are a part, and wider society as 'texts' in context. It is a pedagogy that encourages the creation of consciousness and questioning of social practices and arrangements that promote ruling interests by putting them into crisis (Kress, 1990). In the classroom, this means teaching students to focus on issues of power and the ways they have shaped the voices, meanings, and experiences of marginalized others through critical reflection. Teachers engaged in this form of critical pedagogy, either implicitly or explicitly, consciously strive to encourage students to consider life possibilities and the capacity and choices they have to achieve their goals. At the utmost level, this means the possibility of encouraging students to challenge individual and group social forms regarded as dominant and 'oppressive' via that critique.

In Koh's view, Critical Literacy would empower students to challenge taken-for-granted meanings and 'truths' about the ways of thinking, reading and writing about Singapore and the world being taught to students under the auspices of National Education in Social Studies (Koh, 2000b: 96-100). The assumption underlying Koh's suggestion is that in its true form of practice, Critical Literacy questions the neutrality of power relations within discourses. (There are, of course, other literacies that are equally as important, but for now I shall stick with discussing enacted versions of Critical Literacy as the key concern of this paper). This would mean addressing a system of beliefs about the social and cultural world of Singapore. The problem here is one of how this is realized in the local context where the Social Studies teacher and students are mediating the managerial discourses of the State in the classroom which expect them to privilege that information for the sake of nation-building. This is where an analysis informed by the principles of Activity Theory becomes useful. However, before I go on to conduct the analysis, let me say a little about the data used for this study, by way of background.

Research Methods

As a framework for analysis, employing Activity Theory in the study of critical pedagogy in Social Studies in Singapore has significant methodological implications. To identify the activity system's object and analyse it within a developmental cycle requires a range of data sources. Besides interviewing participants about their activity, their actions and opinions need to be interpreted through careful reflection. Primary data was therefore collected through ethnographic methods such as participant observation, interviews, and discussions in real life settings.

The teacher was interviewed about the ways in which she taught and understood the literacy and curricular goals and demands of her subject. The interview questions were framed in ways that asked her to reflect on these understandings, the curriculum and her pedagogical practice in the Social studies classroom in terms of the relative 'newness' of subject Social Studies and her role in facilitating the curricular agendas inherent of that subject. Students were also interviewed in order to ascertain their understandings and views on the types of topics, literacy tasks and cognitive demands required of them for successful learning in subject Social Studies. Several informal discussions with the participating teacher and a more structured post unit delivery reflection session also took place. This 'interview' data provided additional insights and contrasts to what was observed in the classroom practice.

Necessarily, the study draws on principles of ethnomethodology for a context sensitive research paradigm immersed in local knowledge of the situation itself (Geertz, 1983: 34) in order to examine classroom interaction data alongside notions of 'what counts' as critical literacy and critical practice (Freebody & Luke, 1990, 1999) within the network. Its focus on teacher and student talk enables the deconstruction of features of classroom interaction and micro-analysis of particular aspects of the talk. This is done in order to ascertain how critical practices were performed, achieved and negotiated in the every-day context of one Social Studies classroom.

Data collection and Analysis

The data presented here is drawn from the corpus of a Specific Focus [research] Project titled *Literacy Practices in Secondary Schools: Expanding Textual Repertoires* (Kramer Dahl et al, 2004). The Project involved the observation and coding of Secondary School classroom lessons in curriculum areas with higher literacy demands affected by the State-led educational policy initiative *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* (1997). A primary focus of the observations in accordance with the goals of the Project was on the curricular agenda of classroom talk (Freiberg & Freebody, 1995). The corpus principally focused on classroom lessons from Secondary School Levels 2 – 4 (approximately 8-10th grades) in English Language, Science and Social Studies classes. The discipline-specific Social Studies data was drawn from a series of lessons taught as a unit, over two consecutive years, by three different teachers. Units of teaching and learning, rather than single lessons, were selected on the basis that it was more beneficial to observe ongoing sequences of lessons rather than single ones because it provided a more accurate picture of how students were afforded and take up critically literate practices, and the extent to which the intended and enacted curricula match (Mercer, 1995; Gibbons, 2003).

Specific teachers and lessons were sub-sampled for closer discourse analysis as single case subject-specific curriculum, ethnographic and narrative classroom discourse descriptions. One of those teacher case studies, that of Pei Lin Chia*, was chosen specifically for the purposes of this paper. The Activity system of Ms Chia's Social Studies classroom was tracked through the primary participant-observation period of the larger study from March 2004 – March 2005. The case study data presented here is taken from the second half of that period; after the implementation of an intervention program designed to expand repertoires of textual practices in the classroom. One aspect of that program was focused on improving both student and teacher capacity to engage in the problematisation of knowledge (Kramer-Dahl et al, 2005) vis-à-vis expanding their literacy practice repertoire. The participants in the classroom system under study are in this case one Social Studies teacher and her class of 32* students. For the teacher and students, the primary requirements for membership in the Network being able to demonstrate teaching and learning towards the curricular goal of developing citizenship education and nation-building. One particularly desired pedagogical outcome of this activity, as expressed by the State, was the teaching and

learning of' critical thinking' for the goal of developing 'creative, thinking and autonomous students' (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002: 151).

At the time of the study Ms Chia, Pei Lin, was a teacher with 17* years of rich teaching experience, with two of those years experience in teaching the relatively new subject Social Studies. Her ratings across almost all the coding items for the Project were in general quite high. In fact, they were the highest of all the Social Studies teachers participating in the Project on the individual item; 'Problematising knowledge', which coded the 'degree [to which] knowledge/text [was] approached as socially constructed, as open to question, with multiple, at times conflicting viewpoints and/or solutions given' in the classroom discourse (Kramer-Dahl, 2004). (See Figure 3):

Problematic knowledge:
To what degree is knowledge/text approached as socially constructed, as open to question, with multiple, at times conflicting viewpoints and/or solutions given?
1 = No knowledge/text is problematised. All knowledge/text is presented as static, as a body of truth to be acquired/internalized by students.
2 = Some aspects of text or knowledge viewed as problematic, with teacher accommodating alternative interpretations recognized as variations on a stable theme.
3 = Teacher actively encourages students to evaluate texts/knowledge, but with little evidence of students being able to see texts or knowledge as problematic or open to challenge
4 = Most knowledge/text as problematic. Students are able to see knowledge/text as socially constructed, as always in someone's interest, and open to question and critique.

Figure 3. Coding for Intellectual Quality: 'Problematising knowledge',
(Kramer-Dahl et al, 2005).

Pei Lin's rankings on the coding categories, coupled with first-hand observational experience of her teaching through the classroom observations led the research team to believe that she did an exceptional job of delivering the aims and intentions of the Social Studies syllabus to her students. As such, if the policy agenda of 'Critical Thinking' for creativity and innovation, and more particularly, 'problematising knowledge' through the teaching of critical thinking skills, were taking place, it was agreed that they would most likely be found in Ms Chia's classroom practice.

Transcripts of classroom discourse were analysed to identify common and disparate themes from the data. Contraposed to this are analytically interpreted teacher and student readings of the classroom discourse relative to the epistemological and pedagogical intentions of the State. The critique was conducted using various levels of micro and macro critical discourse analyses. The resultant analysis illuminates a theoretical discussion about how notions of 'the critical' are realized in local contexts vis a vis whether it is possible to teach critical literacy in new nation states in Asia.

(*All names of schools, teacher and student participants are represented as pseudonyms in the interests of respecting the terms of the Project's research ethics agreement and the participants' agreement to participate in the study under those terms).

Contradictions

One important aspect of Activity theory is that it acknowledges contradictions as inevitable but useful tools of analysis in the functioning of any system. Within any human activity, contradictions emerge and evolve within and between each of the six aspects of the activity triangle: subject, tool/artifact, object, rules, community, and division of labor (Engeström, 1987). Activities are not isolated units; they are influenced by other activities and other changes in their environment, and also by external influences. The term 'contradiction' is used to indicate conflicts, tensions, clashes or problems that are manifested within and between elements, between different activities, or between different developmental phases of a single activity. The concept can be compared with the notion of 'paradox' which also regards organizations as dynamic, and subject to continual change processes (Quinn & Cameron, 1988).

Internal contradictions precipitate the development of an activity system and reveal opportunities for new and innovative ways of structuring and enacting the activity. In this positive sense, they are signs of the capacity of an activity to develop; opportunities through which participants in an activity can reflect

on their activity system's developmental trajectory and understand its dynamics, rather than deficits, obstacles or points where the activity system has failed in achieving its goals. As such, they cannot be quickly 'fixed' by technical solutions such as throwing more money at the participants to achieve goals, establishing a new division of labor, or creating new tools. In fact, to intervene in those ways in isolation may aggravate existing contradictions or result in the emergence of new ones. To work out contradictions at various levels in a system and network can contribute to achieving social and institutional change. Attention to such discoordinations can provide a collective mirror for those involved in the activity, helping them to identify the sites or sources of the tension, and suggesting potential avenues for expansive change (Engeström, 1990). Analysing identified contradictions is the first step in initiating a cycle of learning which begin with questioning the existing standard practice and proceeds to examining and implementing a new model in practice. Expansive learning of this kind necessarily requires debate, negotiation and the hybridization of different perspectives and conceptualizations.

Activity in classrooms as mediation of 'message systems'.

The need for a theory that aligned the pedagogical practices that were observed in the activity system of the classroom with other discourse and activity systems of the State Network, I felt, was necessary given that Activity Theory does not have a well developed history of having been applied to Classroom educational contexts. Bernstein's 'message system' theory was helpful for conceptualizing the contradictions found through the Activity Theoretical analysis. Here I have adapted Engeström's (1999: 383, 1987: 322) focus on individuals as starting point for questioning accepted practices within the activity system but incorporated Bernstein's (1975) concept of the 'message systems' of schooling for assistance in conceptualizing any potential sites for change.

In Bernstein's terms, the work of schools, and by inference, the work carried out in classrooms, can be considered as focused on three practices: curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Each of these 'message systems'(Bernstein, 1975:85) is contestable and changes in the fields of production and symbolic control within the wider society inevitably bring pressures to bear for change in the school (Bernstein, 1990) and by inference in the enacted practices of teachers and students as participants and/or the community in the classroom. In that sense, the State can have quite elaborate procedures for ensuring that changes take place via the curriculum, which in this case I have taken, broadly, to also include statements are referrals to aspects of policies and programmes for pedagogical practice that have been 'infused' across and into the curriculum such as NE and 'creative and critical thinking'); and assessment (or evaluation).

Recent changes to officially sanctioned curricular, pedagogical and assessment practices such as the creation of NE and the policy suite of TSLN, including the 'critical thinking' infusion, are evidence of this. Such changes usually set in motion in response to the transformation of production; in this case related to the effects of globalization – a form of competitive concern about cultural/economic capital, and concerns about social order and cohesion. The typical response is to set about restructuring the educational message systems to focus on the production of skills required by the new economy; in this case literacy, thinking skills and information technology (IT), and those social and behavioural skills required to maintain an inclusive society such as the construction of people of high motivation, commitment and acquiescence. The result in Singapore is that the curricular message system has been put under pressure to cater to an essentially skills oriented focus where what counts as knowledge is defined in terms of what will be 'productive'. (Perhaps) unusually added to this has been the National Education content and values, (more usually seen as an invisible pedagogy in the past) to serve the purposes of moral and social order. To compliment these multiple curriculum messages, the pedagogical message system has become a vehicle for a visible pedagogy that facilitates desired skills and attitudes such as 'creativity, innovation and critical thinking'. Alongside and in response to this, assessment message systems engage in frequent and public comparisons of performances of students, teachers, schools and other institutions of higher learning according to high stakes standards and criteria. Where these three message systems don't completely align, existing as apparently contradictory strands, and particularly where one enjoys dominance as a discourse and/or has high stakes implications, tensions, like Engeström's 'contradictions', arise. This was kept in mind during the following analysis.

Findings: Analysis and Discussion

When discussing the findings we should take into consideration that Singapore as compared to other counterparts in the Asia-Pacific such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan or even mainland China, is of late

beginning to enjoy various freedoms characterized by the support of school-based curriculum development, organization and pedagogical implementation, the expansion of opportunities, and encouragement of innovation (Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002) afforded by transitional moves towards a more active 'ability-driven' participative pedagogical model of education. Further, whilst the teacher case study presented in this paper cannot be regarded as representative of Secondary Social Science teachers in Singapore, or in Asia, factors resulting from the analysis do present some interesting issues and questions.

In the examples of classroom discourse that follow, the introduction and 're-assemblage'(Ong, 2005: 338) of 'critical thinking' pedagogy in education has seemingly precipitated an evolving 'new' mode of joint activity between students and teacher via the teacher's mediated relations with the State. It has contributed to some systemic resolutions in unique ways and also created other contradictions. The inculcation of critical thinking capacity in citizens (students) and the teaching of National Education for the purpose of serving the moral, civic, and political economic concerns of the State as object-concepts in building an epistemic community have strong use value in their achievement as aims. However, the data also demonstrates that primary contradictions were manifested in the State's object.

It is evident that in the case of Ms Chia*, the difference between her role as transmitter of knowledge reified as truth and as facilitator of critical awareness was not entirely clear cut. The analysis of the classroom discourse and the interviews revealed that the students and teacher allowed themselves to be challenged by ideas and events, information and arguments as co-learners engaged in knowledge manipulation. The teacher:

- asked questions designed to encourage critical thinking;
- encouraged students to have a voice and take the floor in classroom discussion:
- clearly indicated that the students should take up managing the direction of the discourse on several occasions;
- and challenged students to substantiate their thoughts and opinions;

She also aimed to consistently allow student knowledge and experiences to connect to the content of Social Studies as relevant and meaningful in their lives and concerns beyond the classroom, frequently reminding them of experiences they had shared, and linking the curriculum content to their own lives and families. Remarkedly, despite the tensions and contradictions in the object concepts and goals the teacher was mandated to carry out, she did an exceptional good job of implementing all that was asked of her. It is proposed that she mediated those managerial discourse demands in the followings ways.

The teacher appears to have 'domesticated' the critical as a formula for processing information, generating ideas and organizing them appropriately for reading and writing in her role as normative reproducer of governmental cultural technologies (Luke, 1994; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Kramer-Dahl, 2001). That is, she facilitated the students in the critical practices of: reading and analyzing to identify key points, agree or disagree and give reasoning, express opinions, make recommendations or develop informed alternatives and solutions to show their understanding of core material, to engage in role play simulations with assigned roles, and to reach consensus through discussion and weighing up of options and solutions to make a decision (Sim & Adler, 2004: 161) - those practices recognized by more traditional versions of critical thinking practice as they are outlined in the Syllabus document and State policy rhetoric. Yet, in line with the goals of the conception of critical pedagogy supported by the intervention project, the teacher arranged activities such as groupwork, role play, policy evaluation and the juxtaposed proffering and discussion of individual student opinions as alternative and contrasting knowledges, sources and opinions, but only up until the point where some sort of explicit meta-critique of those discourses may have taken place. Upon closer analysis it became evident that the teacher and students generated an unusual monologic form of dialogic communication (Bakhtin, 1981; Greene, 1994; Wallace, 1999). That is, the classroom discourse was seemingly substantively deep on the surface, but was actually clipped; restricted at points of radical departure and/or presented by juxtaposition, but not explicitly queried whilst remaining harnessed to the goals of assessment driven textual practices. The following illustrates this observation.

The teacher began the unit by privileging the information in the textbook through its placement in the first lesson of the unit, and through her treatment of it as a source of knowledge:

1. T   Ok, right..

Hwee Ngah? Can you please nominate your people to answer the question. Please..

[Some commotions in class]

Very good. Karen is the first one. Ve..ry good.

2.	SS	Whoa.. [with some clapping]
3.	T	Uh.. [praising tone]

Ok all the guys huh..

All right. Ok, this is what will happen.

Now, as they begin to share… Mei Yin…

As they begin to share, this is what I want you to do. Look at your answer. And then, look at your textbook and the notes given.

And we're going to make sure that the information is more or less.. consistent. Ok? That's important.

Karen, why don't you start with-

1945.. you all know the world war two ended and let's move to 1965. What happened in 1965, Karen?

4.	Karen	Independent [soft projection]
5.	T	Cannot hear you=
6.	Karen	=Independent
7.	T	Ok, no problem with that. Everybody?

Ok, move on.

What else? Nineteen sixty.. six.

In the second lesson of the unit, when the class began to consider alternative approaches to policies addressing the problems of ageing population, the teacher called on few non-Singaporean students in the class to share their views and understandings about the issue in their country, thereby deliberately juxtaposing those narratives to the information on Singapore that had been discussed in the first lesson, and earlier in this second lesson;

T	I'm going to side track a little bit huh.
	Abhijay, let's hear from you.
	You come from India. Come, share with us about your country.
	Do you find that your country is.. over populated? How do you know it's over populated?
	Okay, let's hear from Abhijay. (He) is our guest speaker.
Abhijay	(XXXX) because many people are (very) (XXXX)
T	Excuse me?
Abhijay	In the streets-
	On the streets (XXXX)
T	Yah, on the streets.
	So the fact that there are many people on the streets. [Class laughed]
Abhijay	(XXXX) actually you don't see it [Teacher prompting class to be quiet] unless you visit some foreign country.
T	What- What do you mean?
	You want to explain?
Abhijay	When I came here, then I realize that it is very populated.
	(Otherwise), we just-
	It's a normal life. So-
T	Oh, so to you when you were there is very normal? People on the street, is.. normal?
	But when you came here-
Abhijay	When I came here, (XXXX) it is so populated here, you seldom see any people walking around.
T	Here, or?
Abhijay	In some streets.

T	Here or your own country?
Abhijay	Here
S	Huh?
T	So, Singapore is very populated?
Abhijay	No, I mean in my country. [Class laughed]
S	(XXXX) comparing of country (XXXX) India.
T	Ok, so if you were to tell us, what then is the government doing about it?
	In your country, do you know?
	You don't know?
Abhijay	(I mean,) they are trying to reduce birth rate.
T	Trying to reduce birth rate. Ok..
Abhijay	So.. it's so populated that they are out- is out of control.
T	Out of control ok? [Class laughed]
	Know his word is "Out of control" huh.
	Ok, Abhijay. If You have a chance..
	Shhh!
	To be the government and you said "I'm going to do something about the population", what will you do? [Some commotion in class]
Abhijay	Use this measure.
T	You will use this measure.
	What is this measure?
Abhijay	Erm, give.. give.. set up (XXXX).
	Set up family planning and population (growth)
T	Ok, so this minister says that he will set up the family planning board huh.
	Ok, would you, Abhijay, want to implement a policy in China?
	Anybody knows what's happening in China's population policy?
SS	One.
T	One. You're very sure?
S	Yes.
T	Ok, would you want to- want to, erm, implement the one child policy, Abhijay?

However, when the discourse began to move towards a situation where the student contributor was asked to openly critique their government at the teacher's request, the teacher would conclude that phase of the lesson's discussion and move on to the next contributor;

Abhijay	I think- I think the (government) is..
	I mean, they're more interested in money than the welfare of the people.
	Some of them.
T	Ok, so money instead of welfare.
	All right, //thank you. Let's thank.. //
Abhijay	// (XXXXXXXXXXXX//
T	Sorry, sorry.
Abhijay	That's the government.
	Because in different states, it's different people who are elected by the citizens in that state.
T	Ok, so would you say your state is-
Abhijay	Maybe some states is (better), some states is.. not good.
T	Where do you come from again? Which state?
Abhijay	(XXXX)
T	Maha.. Maharastra.
	So do you-
	What do you think of your government there?
	Are they more welfare-
Abhijay	For some years the person (who) was elected was very good.
	But next year again, some other person was elected. He wasn't good.

	So you can see. And he writes really good things like, makes the roads better (and all..)
	Sometimes, then it becomes even worse.
	Like the condition deproves.
	But now I think it's (XXXX) is good.
T	Is good, and you're quite happy with it?
	Would you- you'll be going back to India, or you're going to stay here for a period.. for a while?
Abhijay	I'm… [student pauses …seems uncertain]
T	You're not sure yet.
	Ok, let's thank him for being so sporting to share with us. [Class clapped]
	Thank you very much.
	All right, Maleah. Your turn.. You can't run away.
	The rest of you are Singapore citizens right?
	Ok, Maleah come.
	I should have asked you.. and Jonathon is it?
	Ok, Maleah.
	Ok, you have a question for Maleah, anybody?

Here's another example, when the students are asking the critical questions in the teacher's place;

T	Yes, Han Wei you have a question for Maleah.
Han Wei	Erm, are you happy with the government (rules)?
Maleah	Er.. not really.
T	Louder, they cannot hear you.
Maleah	Because.. Not really. Because I think, erm, the government is //not very strict// in enforcing the laws and orders, including the population growth.
T	//Louder//
Maleah	Yah.. and.. //I think// Orh, I think after the.. new president, I mean after the Suharto president, quite a lot of things went out of the.. er, rules because the presidents are trying to get more votes.
T	//Louder. Louder//
Maleah	So, they can't really enforce really strict laws to the people as they'll lose all the supporters.
	So they have to be very careful in planning and to be honest, not many of them did a very good job.
T	Ok, another question for her.
	That's a very, very deep insight from.. from Maleah. Yes, Jonathon. You have a question. [Class laughed]
Jonathon	(XXX) right, the president is, er, su.. SBY.
	Susilo Bangbang Yunoyuno.
	What do you- What do you think of him, and his government?
Maleah	I'm not really sure about his ruling system because he's.. he's quite new and it's too early for me to say whether he's very good in ruling our country or what. But I think he has made quite a good start now from all the recent [School bell rang in the background] (er, war) that (XXX).
T	Ok, one more question.
	Yes, Eric?
	You look like you have a question on your face.
	Yes, Eric?
Eric	Erm, tell me about the population there.
Maleah	Er, population.
	I think Indonesia had, erm..
	Had-
	Has the.. I think has the fifth largest population in the world.
	Yah, if I'm not mistaken.

So, yah, it's very.. it's very large lah. The population is very large [in a giggling tone].
And.. although the president Suharto once has had, erm, implemented a policy, we called it (gar barage) is KD.
It means to have planning in your families.
Like (it's) quite similar to the Singapore's one and it was quite successful at that point of time where the population really decreased.

But again, the teacher resumed control of the discussion and implemented another activity that brought the focus back to the role of the government, situating that knowledge as truth:

T	Now Maleah, if you have a chance to come up with a policy regarding population, what would that be?
	The rest of you better listen uh.. I just gonna call on you afterwards.
	What- What will that be?
Maleah	I think will be similar to the family planning, have two.
	But, erm, the government should provide more welfares to the children.
T	Welfare to the children.
Maleah	Yah, so that they can grow, er, to become more useful and loyal to the country.
	So that they can contribute.
	Unlike just to have, erm, more children and the population increase (while) they cannot solve the problems in the country and then creating a lot of mess.
T	Ok, she's been speaking a lot, erm, and these people have benefitted.
	The rest of you I don't know how you have benefitted but she said a lot.
	And let's thank her. [Class clapped]
	She has a very good insight of her own country.
	Ok, now. I'm not going to ask anymore ok.
	Or else I'll go on forever.
	But let's stop here for a while.
	And let's look very carefully.
	The first thing-
	Quite a lot of things have been said.
	The 1945, all the way to 1980s, you notice that we're trying to address a problem of increasing population.
	And how do we do it?
	No- Notice the word I left on the board is government.
	In fact, if you- If you've heard correctly, Abhijay also said something about government and Maleah said something about government.
	Now, you **need** the government to **ensure** or to be the driving force behind this. All right?

Each of these examples, although slightly different, end in more or less the same way – they are clipped at points of potential for radical departure – closing down or shifting away from any space that may have been created for meta-critique. It is these type of moments in the classroom discourse that I have regarded as representing, in activity theoretical terms, 'contradictions'.

Running concurrent to these moments of juxtaposition in the discourse, the selection and usage of authentic textual resources situated as an alternative to the textbook, syllabus and NE material further support the observation that the prospect of challenging dominant texts and positions was a very real possibility in Ms Chia's* Social Studies classroom. In a later lesson, the teacher introduced some material on how other countries handle issues of population by way of preparation for a debate about population policy in Singapore. The online material, although selected by the teacher in the interests of saving time, was not required by the syllabus to establish further contrast as there was already contrast with Japan made in the textbook. The teacher felt the introduction of the material was:

...useful because we realize that they read beyond the textbook eh I mean they were
forced to read beyond the textbook - and they were forced to understand ... the problems
in the country; they could relate; some of them were relating their own experiences so
you find that they were really thinking about it and not just doing the textbook reading.

(Teacher Interview, 2004)

Similarly, in their interview, the students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to move away from the textbook material:

Interviewer	:	Ok, good. Very good answers. Erm… IN ONE OF THE, hold on… er ok, IN ONE OF THE LESSONS, Ms Chia* used er newspaper articles and things from the Internet that wasn't necessarily from the textbook. What did you learn about using those other texts beside the textbook?
B	:	The textbook is limited information. It's more to the [xxx]
Interviewer	:	Anything else?
E	:	The difference is it can give us something more recent.. ah.. to be applicable for the content.
G	:	To understand the similarities and differences in Singapore's, in Singapore's content and other countries.
Interviewer	:	Ok, erm. DO YOU LIKE USING TEXTS OTHER THAN THE TEXTBOOK?
Several male students in unison	:	Yes.
Interviewer	:	Why?
D	:	The textbook's a little stuffy.
Interviewer	:	What makes it stuffy?
D	:	Well, i-it has a one-sided view and it's just the same stuff.

These type of responses where the students' articulated of their awareness of the dominant discourses privileged in the textbook and in Social Studies caused the research team to take a second look at the data. Once re-examined for points of contradiction, it became clear that by contrast to what they had voiced in their interview, the students were not really being given opportunities to critique the discourses of the state and the activity system of their own classroom. However, this dialogue was taking place outside the activity system of the classroom.

To use an analogy, it would seem that both teachers and students appeared to be 'players in a game' where they knew the rules, and played along accordingly up the point where private-discourse-made-public may have jeopardized the perceived 'safety' of their roles, identities and goals within the education system. Neither the teacher or the students seemed to be prepared to be ultimately seen as criticizing the State whilst their livelihood, future academic and life prospects were dependent upon their performance, reflected or actual, in the Cambridge 'O' Level examinations. (The influence of high stakes examinations on the discourses and practices of the classroom has been discussed at length elsewhere.)[4] This was evident in their actions as system participants.

The teacher variously harnessed 'critical thinking' as a tool for the administrative ends of meeting the State's mandate for 'doing critical thinking', as a strategy for motivation and engagement, and to offer her students an enhanced methodological strategy for demonstrating their handling of information in the high stakes examinations, but not to completely openly and explicitly critique the State, or to take public action. In giving students these tools, and in their taking up of that form of critical practice, the teacher and students appear to have re-appropriated the more political form of critique suggested by the juxtaposition and the moments of critique that were 'left hanging' for their own private usage. In their interviews, for example, the students noted that their teacher was doing things that made them think 'critically' in a different way:

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[4] For a detailed discussion of the impact of examination culture in Singapore, see Chea Cheah, Yin Mee. (1998). The examination culture and its impact on literacy innovations: The case of Singapore. *Language and Education 12*, pp.192-209.

E (female)	:	Mm, and I think that Ms Chia* makes us to think and stretch our thoughts in I mean, not only the information we get from the textbooks. But we think, we analyze and then find solutions in a practical way, especially about the cases I mean the case study in Singapore.
Interviewer	:	You think that's useful?
E	:	Yah, and we really understand it.. well. Not only memorizing all the facts.

The students could articulate their awareness of their roles as participants in the activity system of the Social Studies classroom when given the space to voice their opinions:

Interviewer	:	Ah, any of those things. If someone asked you what you just did in the last 5 lessons. What was all that about? How would you answer him?
G [5]	:	How different countries handle different population growth. Especially ageing population and birth rate.
Interviewer	:	Ok. The content. Anything else?
B	:	We did group learning. Learn as a group and..
C	:	Erm the impacts of ageing population and how the governments er implement the strategies and how effective it is from all the articles that we have read. So at least, we can provide the facts and the consequence of the strategies implemented.
Interviewer	:	Uh-hm. Why do you think she taught you this topic?
C	:	((laughter))It's very obvious that it's in the syllabus.
Male	:	// biggest..syllabus
Interviewer	:	… Is that the only reason?
C	:	Concerns about Singapore.
G	:	They need to prepare us for the future. Like we know what is going on.. in the, in Singapore and in the rest of the world.
F	:	Ya and also for the exams. Yah.
All	:	((laughter))
Interviewer	:	So erm exams is a big factor is it?
F	:	Yah, kind of.
H [6]	:	But it's a good thing, ya that we learn about all these. So that we ourselves may prepare for ou- for our future.
Interviewer	:	Ok. Any other comments?
E	:	So that we understand why the government is doing this. Why the government is implementing...implementing this policy instead of like doing nothing. That's why we understand the efforts.
Interviewer	:	Ah, so it prepares you er more er…
E	:	Cooperative.?
Interviewer	:	Er understanding citizen and how your place in Singapore and the world is. Ok. You think that makes you er gives you the capacity to be more active about what happens to you?
B	:	Yes, since you understand it more.

and of the relevant government policy and National Education rhetoric:

Interviewer	:	Alright, let's move on to the next question then. What do you think are some of the important things you should learn in the Social Studies lesson?
D	:	Stuff that applies to us, you know not something or things we generally don't understand at the moment.
Interviewer	:	Can you give an example?
Slang	:	As in why the government is having this kind erm the kind of policies that they are having. Erm and you know to try to understand the reasoning behind and understand the government I guess.

Interviewer	:	Ok. Anything from the previous unit. What did you study before population?
B	:	Education. But I feel that we should study a mixture of Singapore and other countries. Ya, er.. their situations so we can know, we can compare Singapore's situation with theirs, see what's the difference? What's the similarity? I don't think we should just concentrate on Singapore. Now Singapore's going global, we need to know about other.
Interviewer	:	Ok, what do you do with that information once you have made the comparison?
B	:	We can see how fortunate we are (laughs)
Interviewer	:	Ok. Any other comments?
D	:	Well, anyway, generally for the four of us. We are not from Singapore. We don't want to hear about Singapore all the time. Cuz it doesn't really apply to us. Like education.
F	:	//True.
E	:	//True ((in unison)) But I feel that social studies is still good for us non-Singaporeans because it gives us an insight of.. erm the general things we like..
F	:	… we don't know about Singapore.
E	:	Something like that.
A	:	Even other countries. Maybe India. Or in- our own country. We may not have learnt. But we are learning here. So it's an advantage.

The students were also aware that they followed a prescribed sequence of mandated content when asked what they thought they might study next in Social Studies;

Interviewer	:	Ok. Erm, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU WILL BE STUDYING NEXT IN THIS CLASS?
A	:	Next chapter.
The rest	:	((laughs))
Interviewer	:	The next chapter. Why?
J	:	Houses. I think it's housing.
Interviewer	:	Ok. Because that's what's next in the textbook?
B	:	Yes, I think it's really connected. I mean
G	:	//They are…
J	:	// The next three chapters are all connected.
G	:	// They are already arranged in such in a way that they are connected.
E	:	We don't skip chapters.
J	:	Logical order.
Interviewer	:	Erm, do you have to do it that way?
B	:	I suggest [xxx] we follow the sequence.

But most often the discussion returned to the fact that the students appreciated having opportunities and space to express their views and take on other possibilities during the Social Studies unit:

A	:	I think it's the, we getting the role of senior citizens. And some getting the role of social workers.
Interviewer	:	You like the role play?
E	:	Yah.
A	:	Yes.
Interviewer	:	What was good about it?
A	:	Because like it give us the chance to give ideas as if we are the people.
Interviewer	:	Oh.
C	:	Like as if we are voting. Like we are telling the government our needs.
Interviewer	:	You feel empowered, do you?
C	:	Erm.
Interviewer	:	You have a say.
C	:	I don't know but as you put yourself in the senior citizens' or the married couple's shoes, then you feel that this is important to them, erm this is what the government should do for them. So even if you're not a senior citizen, you can even erm, think more from your own position. Like I am a student. I am not a senior citizen, but now I can think more about it.

particularly when they positioned their teacher as the source of this difference in pedagogical approach against what they considered 'typical' in Social Studies;

E   :   Ms Chia* is different from the other teachers. You know, they just read from the textbooks. And didn't really give what's beyond like discussions and all that.
Interviewer :   Ok. And WERE THE LESSONS you just had TYPICAL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES or not?
J   :   It's typical. Because Social studies is about Singapore. It's typical for the textbook to compare with another country. Yah we did it last year. Some of the chapters we do compare with other countries.

These interview responses suggest that the students had begun to 'critique' their classroom practices and the world in 'covert subversion'. This has several implications for the possibility of 'teaching the critical' in the public interest of preparing Singaporeans to face challenges in a globalised world.

Conclusions

The present study reveals that implementing Critical Practice in Singaporean Social Studies is far from easy. Indeed, it would appear that if a teacher of Ms Chia's experience and capacity engaged 'the critical' in such a manner, wrought as it is with such underlying tensions and contradictions, then other teachers may certainly find ways of ignoring, delaying or heavily adapting their engagement with critically literate practice in their classrooms. As noted by Gee (1990) discourses, both community and academic, dominant and subordinate, have limitations for self criticism because participation in those discourses requires operating within principles and definitions that are first regarded as given. Some more general reasons include that it is possible teachers may not 'buy into' the full political orientation of critical pedagogy, they may deem that their students 'aren't ready' for such complex political critique at the Lower Secondary School and pre Junior College level, may simply feel personally unwilling or unable to cope with what that form of critique represents, and don't want to jeopardize both their students and their own prospects as reflected in examination results by 'confusing the issue'. The issue presents a significant challenge.

The findings of this study support the observations of Koh (2000b, 2002), Sim and Adler (2004), and Adler and Sim (2005) that politically oriented forms of critique in the activity system of the Social Studies classroom are indeed problematic given the tensions and contradictions involved, and in more ways than one. The dual construction of the teacher's artifact of 'critical thinking' as a tool, and object concept, and an administrative goal reveals a primary contradiction in its use and exchange values for the members of the classroom community, and for the State as the creator or policy definitions for the network. Given this situation, perhaps it is possible to reconceptualise the possibility of 'teaching the critical' as reflections of versions-in-evolution: that is, a mediation of collaboration (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993), that works towards resistant versions of enactment.

Alternatively, there would still be those who argue that such 'uncritical' acceptance of the form of critical inquiry reflected upon in the data as the methodology of the field, and by inference, the variously public and hidden curriculums of the State, would seem to be an easier public path. Critical Literacy only has the capacity to empower when it is used to criticize the ways in which other texts contribute to and situate a person's identity (Gee, 1990: 153). To read these texts critically, then, means moving beyond developing a set of analytic techniques that support the embrace of particular perspectives and ideologies put forward by the State (Luke & Walton, 1997: 469). In the case of what we have seen in the data, Adler and Sim (2005), might explain this sort of behaviour by referring to factors such as: government guidelines for what is acceptable to challenge and what is not, the socialization of Singaporeans to hold sets of core societal values about racial and religious harmony, contradictions in the curriculum such as the concepts of nation before community, and society before self, the importance of harmony, cohesion and consensus, pride and loyalty in Singapore, the "paternalistic practice of the government's father knows best' attitude and a mentality to defer to the government among citizens" – a factor that some may seek to essentialise by attributing it to Confucian values such as respect for elders and authority and the exercise of modesty, and a reliance on the State for maintaining and environment in which their material well-being is secure. Han (2000: 69) also support this view that Singaporeans are aware that active engagement in "conflict with the establishment is likely to be unacceptable". It is an irony that what has resulted perhaps represents a type of critical thinking derived from problem solving techniques, but with more sources of information to

compare and contrast. Essentially it is still based on a relatively unquestioned collection of information that the State wished to move beyond when it launched 'Thinking Schools, Learning Nation' (1997). How the system manages this transition will have deep ramifications for the capacity of it's constituents to mediate the State's desire for nation-building.

On the one hand, the students in Ms Chia's* class were observed to be given more opportunities for voicing their opinions and forming criticism of the issues and implications studied in Social Studies. They felt empowered by these opportunities and appreciated them for the information they made available to them. In this sense, one of the goals of Social Studies, to foster greater and more effective participation in citizens, was being achieved. What happens to these opportunities after the research team leaves the class, the school year gets closer to the examinations, the students move on to another teacher's class, or after they leave school and take up employment remains to be seen. Where will their capacity for critique go? What forms of critique will they call on in which spaces? Perhaps they will continue to separate the critique they identify as 'allowable' in public spaces from a more political form they keep aside for their own interests in private spaces. The question of whether this is possible has been evidenced by the analysis in this paper. The question of whether it is desirable remains.

Possible?

The beginnings of what we have seen in the classroom discourse, and the comments and views of the students in their interview offer up several sites of potentiality for continued work in the area of critical thinking in Social Studies. The current rationale for critical thinking in education is as an investment in preparing Singaporeans for participation in a competitive global economy, not for criticizing the political and social means of achieving that ends. Critical thinking is intended to be a tool and capital, a 'currency' for the socio political and economic benefit of the nation. How to use it, in that sense, for developing a 'critical capacity habitus' in Singaporeans is perhaps best realized in a reconsideration of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment within the Bernsteinian paradigm (1990). The goals and outcomes of the Social Studies curriculum and policies such as *TSLN* may in fact require some form of re-evaluation and realignment with each other and the third message system of education: assessment. Teachers, policy makers and political leaders may need to re-consider their notions of what versions of 'critical thinking' work best to prepare the youth of Singapore for a globalised world. Koh (2004) and Ryan and Rossi (1996) argue that the current approach is inward looking and regulatory, a form of 'tactical globalisation' framed by local sociopolitical and cultural ideological needs as opposed to being as equally focused on the types of literacies and meaningful opportunities Singaporeans may need to situate the local against the backdrop of a larger, more complex global community. Intellectual pluralism will continue to exist in tension with a unitary concept of Singaporean identity. What this means is that the topics which are 'off-limits' such as race and religion, and the spaces to discuss them, may need to be progressively opened up. Otherwise any continued attempts to separate what is taught from how it is taught may work to disengage the Singaporeans of the future from the ideal of active citizenship.

Crucial to these endeavours is the ownership teachers have over the curriculum they deliver, the texts, textual practices and pedagogies used to teach it, and the assessment practices put in place. They need to feel that both themselves and the students have the public freedom to think, read, write and speak radically in new ways that can positively influence that which they might seek to critique (Luke, 1992) and open up spaces for them to want to participate in the social political life of their country. Certainly the student interview data would seem to indicate they have the capacity. The opening up of 'white space' in the curriculum with the aim of allowing students and teachers the space to explore, think and reflect, or 'teach less, learn more' (Lee, 2004; Thanagaratnum, 2005), in an effort to build of the systemic and structural changes begun by TSLN has in this case had some success. The teaching practices in Ms Chia's* Social Studies classroom were mainly oriented towards guiding, facilitating and modeling critical thinking processes and the asking of searching questions as opposed to 'telling' the students the facts and information, and keeping to the textbook, formulae and standard answers. But, while classroom practice is tied to the end goal of delivering quality results for high stakes examinations, the pedagogical practice of critical thinking may only open up limited vistas rather than wide open spaces in the Social Studies classroom.

Desirable?

Upon reflection, the form of critical pedagogy evidenced in the Social Studies classroom in this paper very much reflects the style of governance of the State: a form of 'soft' democracy. It dabbles in the

potential offered by Western-style practices in a milder, more gentle, but firm and clear way so as to avoid the risk of conflict often associated with fuller freedoms. It is focused on the long term goal rather than catering to conflicting views.   It is guided by pragmatism, but is capable of adjusting its approach in response to changes in the world as it carries forward. In his National Day Rally speech in 2004, Prime Minister Lee implored Singaporeans to "be prepared to accept the diversity of views, … to listen to debate, … to have this discussion, …to discuss all sorts of things and reopen long settled issues …always with a view to moving Singapore forward". In this sense, it is likely that to be successfully 'critical' would require continued 'tweaking' of (Lee, 2004) the educational paradigm shift that began with TSLN in 1997. Certainly the government has begun to make engaging the youth of the nation in the community and in national affairs a high priority in the last few years, and the National Education agenda plays a part in this goal.

At the level of the education system, teachers of Social Studies would require further and ongoing reconsideration of their convictions about their discipline, its processes and purposes. Their ownership of the directions taken and points where Freirean-like versions of critique may be taken up could stem from examination of their own practice. Classroom talk would have to be analysed more closely, and on a larger scale, for the discourses constructed therein. Analysis of a much larger data sample, triangulated against empirical analysis might give a clearer picture of whether critical pedagogy in the Social Studies classroom, and the new nation state in Asia, creates a space for Singaporeans to be 'active participants in their own emancipation'.

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