

CRITICAL LITERACY IN AUSTRALIA

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A matter of context and standpoint

What happens when a 'radical' educational idea moves from the political outlands to become a key concept in state curriculum? Postcolonial, feminist and sociological theory of the last two decades proposes a critical educational project as a key step in challenging and transforming dominant discourses and ideologies in postindustrial economies. Yet at the same time there has been heated dialogue at IRA conferences and events about US state and school-board controversies when literacy educators take public stances around issues of the recognition of difference and "social justice" (Young, 1995). What happens when a radical approach to literacy education moves into the tent of a secular state education system? Does it lose its critical edge? Is it a matter of appropriation, repressive tolerance and 'selling out'? These are the central questions – perhaps obsessions – in this article.

This article is an introduction to theories and practices of critical literacy (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997; Lankshear, 1997; Walton, 1996). It also asks an unresolved question about educational reform in New Times: about the sustainability of a socially-critical, discourse/text based approach to literacy in an conservative educational climate, one characterised not only by moral uncertainty and cultural redefinition, new and renewed forms of economic exclusion and disadvantage, but also by tight-fisted, managerialist responses to diminishing government resources (Apple, 1999; Luke, in press). The unwritten subtitle of this article, then, should probably be something like: Is critical literacy in a state-based educational system an oxymoron? Or: Is that really 'critical literacy' or just a watered down version of educational progressivism? Or, for those educational reformers who suddenly find themselves handed the keys to the car: We have we met the enemy and it is us.

First, some cautionary advice about the lineage of this article. It is distinctively Australian, a broad outline of the moves to develop critical literacy as an educational project over the past 15 years. Many of us learned a costly lesson from the centre/margin relationships of international educational research: that it is dangerous to generalize any educational approach from one national/regional and cultural context to another. So I'm not proposing the extension of what we've done in Australia to other national, regional or local school systems. That is for you to decide, if indeed there are points of convergence and possibility with the cultural practices and textual work of your institutions, and with your normative beliefs about what should count as literacy.

A key lesson from the history and sociology of literacy is that literacy education is always a situated response to particular political economies of education (Baker & Luke, 1991). By political economies, I refer to the institutional and governmental arrangements, and the distribution of discourse, material and spatial resources within societies that govern educational reform. In terms of literacy education, we can view our work in state schools as a

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principal way in which the state (and, increasingly, the multinational and the NGO¹) enables and disables – whether through intention or accident – the spread of particular textual practices: from the reading of novels to the writing of scientific prose, from the critique of the press to the writing of nationalist essays, from the study of religious myths to the construction of WebPages. The economies and cultures of New Times rely upon discourses and texts – retro and nouveau, official and face-to-face – as principal modes of work, consumption and leisure, everyday exchange. Discourses and texts are forms of capital for exchange in these economies. Who gets access to them, who can manipulate and construct them, who can critique, refute, second guess them are *the* key educational issues of the next century.

From a sociological perspective, the work of literacy teachers is not about enhancing ‘individual growth’, ‘personal voice’, or ‘skill development’. It is principally about building access to literate practices and discourse resources, about setting the enabling pedagogic conditions for students to use their existing and new discourse resources for social exchange in the social fields where texts and discourses matter. These constitute the social semiotic ‘tool kit’ that one puts to work in educational, occupational and civic life (see James Gee’s article in this volume). Rather than debates over method, we could profitably engage in debates over the actual components of the toolkit, and the enabling conditions for engagement with and transformation of that toolkit. How we select and frame these resources in our teaching has consequences for our students’ capacity to become active designers and agents in shaping their social futures and those of their communities and cultures (New London Group, 1997). How we build these components with and for students is, further, as much a question of system-wide curriculum policy, school reform and pedagogic leadership, enabling and disabling institutional systems, school and classroom cultures as it is about ‘method’ per se (Newman and Associates, 1995; Gamoran, Secada & Marrett, in press). Literacy education, then, is about institutional access and inclusion, and potentially about discrimination and exclusion. It is about setting the conditions for students to engage in textual relationships of power.

You’ll notice that I’ve used that sneaky pronoun ‘we’: “we... in Australian education”. Critical discourse analysis teaches us to be highly suspect about such pronouns of solidarity: Is this the ‘royal we’ that the Queen uses in her New Years address? Is it the ‘we’ that politicians use (e.g., My fellow Americans)? Is there some kind of imaginary construction of all Australian educators standing behind this article? Who does ‘we’ silence, who does it ‘give voice’ to? (Many Queensland teachers teach aspects of functional grammar (Halliday, 1994), drawing attention to ideological uses of pronominalisation as part of a critical literacy agenda).

I’m writing from a curious position of a critical educational researcher and minority educator who is now employed as an educational bureaucrat. For the past six months, I have been working as Deputy Director General of Education for the state of Queensland. While completing a large-scale study of school reform in Queensland (Ladwig, Lingard, Luke, Mills, Hayes & Gore, 1996), we are developing a prototype for futures-oriented curriculum reform within Queensland. I won’t bore you with the ethnographic details of the changes in

¹ One of the major characteristics of globalisation has been the appropriation of what were previously governmental functions by transnational Non Government Organisations. It is worth noting that organisations like the World Bank and Asia Development Bank are among the largest sponsors and developers of literacy and educational development programs internationally, guiding program goals and targets, curriculum design, selection of providers and program evaluation.

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perspective that occur when one moves from the classroom to the academy to the bureaucracy. Whether and how critical educators should be ‘getting their hands dirty’ by engaging with governments is a story for another time. (One of Leonard Cohen’s more brilliant songs was an anthem for the civil service – ‘First We Take Manhattan’, which begins with a message to all baby boomers who have made the journey to the centre of government: “They’ve sentenced me to 20 years of boredom, for trying to change the system from within”.)

These matters of context and standpoint are important for JAAL readers who might be reading this issue and wondering, as Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos ask, “whether this would work in the heartland”. Many of the modest proposals by Elizabeth Moje, John Readance and colleagues, Gee, Alverman and Hagood, and Luke would not be considered ‘off the wall’ in Australian schools. They have already been implemented in state school systems. The mastery of multiple discourses of critique described by James Paul Gee is at the heart of many primary and secondary classrooms in Queensland and other Australian states, where the foci on analysis of the texts of popular culture described by Donna Alverman and Margaret Hagood have been in place for the past decade as part of English and Language Arts curricula. Finally, the melding of multimedia analysis with semiotic analysis of new media texts described by Carmen Luke features in many Australian teacher education programs and is being encouraged across key Queensland pilot schools in 2000. These innovations don’t always roll out smoothly, their piloting is contested (“These aren’t the basics I knew in school”), full of practical classroom glitches (“How do we set state standards to assess that webpage?”) and replete with full-blown ideological backlashes (“Does semiotics mean that we’re abandoning Shakespeare?”). But the practices and the debates over what might count as critical literacies and multiliteracies have been well underway here for over a decade.

What follows is a broad description of one particular version of critical literacy – there are many – that has had broad influence on how many Australian teachers in the states of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia teach reading and writing, or, better yet, how teachers teach texts and discourses (for key source books, see Knobel & Healy, 1997; Muspratt, Freebody & Luke, 1997; Lankshear, 1997; Hasan & Williams, 1997; Anstey & Bull, 1995; Comber & Simpson, in press; Freebody, Muspratt & Dwyer, in press). My story here outlines the theoretical moves, practical strategies, and political compromises involved. It is also meant as a bibliographical resource for North American readers unfamiliar with this work.

From theory to classroom practice

It is curious that the 1997 education reforms in Singapore called for a new focus on “critical thinking”. We could debate at length what might count as ‘critical thinking’ in south east Asian political and cultural contexts (Luke & Luke, in press). The principal concern of Singaporean policy was the need for a more innovative and creative class of highly skilled symbolic analysts to support its burgeoning high tech, information and finance sectors. Not surprisingly, the educational emphasis has been more akin to the forms of “lateral thinking” described by critical thinking entrepreneurs and cognitive scientists, and not on the critique of political economy and society in the sense that Freire (1995) proposed in his first work on literacy campaigns in postcolonial countries.

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For many North American reading educators, the term “critical literacy” refers to aspects of higher order comprehension. These range from both descriptions of metacognitive reading strategies to reader-response orientations towards, for example, “inferring endings”, “authorial intent”, “bias” or “stereotypes”. While they don’t disbar it, such approaches tend to sidestep a systematic analysis of the relations and fields of social, cultural and economic power where people actually use texts. Perhaps these are deemed ‘too hot to handle’ in relation to local school boards and state educational politics. But equally, they are the logical outcome of definitions of literacy as individual skills within human subjects, rather than as situated social practices in communities.

If there is an axiom that grounds approaches to critical literacy it is Freire’s initial claim that all reading is transitive – that by definition one reads and writes something. Nothing controversial in this, a claim that is wholly compatible with many cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives. But Freire ups the ante by arguing that in reading any particular text, one must by definition engage with “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). To expand the point sociologically: students’ use of texts and discourses has identifiable and dynamic “exchange value” in the interactional ‘fields’ of social institutions (e.g., workplaces, educational institutions, community sites, government and civic spheres) (Luke, 1997; Carrington, in press). Such fields are “linguistic markets” (Bourdieu, 1993), local economies of signs and symbols where different kinds of student practice translate into value and power in ways that are at once predictable and quite dynamic.

In Australia, then, critical literacy agendas have traveled a different pathway from North America, or for that matter from Singapore. They begin from the assumption that reading and writing are about social power and that a ‘critical’ literacy education would have to go beyond individual skill acquisition to engage students in the analysis and reconstruction of social fields. Teaching and learning literacy – shaping and constructing the uses of texts and discourses – requires a critical knowledge of and engagement with these fields.

Of course, these agendas have a history of controversy. In the 1980s, dominant Australian approaches included traditional cultural heritage models. At the time, secondary English and primary school language arts were moving towards what Freebody and LoBianco (1997), in their major work *Australian Literacies*, refer to as “personal growth” models. This was marked by the national implementation of the Early Literacy In Service Program (ELIC) in the mid-1980s, introducing teachers to process writing, running records, and ‘immersion’ approaches to whole language. It was also based on the belief among many critical educators that reader response and personal voice approaches to literature study in the secondary school had emancipatory power for individuals and socioeconomically marginalised groups.² What Willinsky (1991) termed the “new literacy” – holistic approaches to reading and writing, pedagogical progressivism and “process” orientations in classrooms - was well established in many Australian state school classrooms and teacher education programs by the early 1990s.

Such descriptions of paradigm shift are, at best, sketchy. As any teacher knows, approaches old and new coexist within staffrooms and across schools despite the best attempts by material developers, researchers and governments to ‘swing’ the system in particular directions. Instead, the power and idiosyncrasy of the ‘local’ is at work in all curriculum

² This potential of literature and writing workshop approaches to enfranchise adult learners in ‘at risk’ communities is a powerful theme taken up in the US work of Mike Rose (1990) and in the Canadian feminist pedagogy of Jenny Horsman (1990).

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reform: in classrooms particular approaches tend to coexist next to each other, blending and creating hybrid approaches to teaching that no textbook developer, researcher or bureaucrat could have conceptualized. By definition, curriculum and pedagogic discourses have a way of taking on lives of their own once in circulation in schools. So while many of the dominant discourses, professional debates and research about literacy education moved towards whole language and personal growth in the mid to late 1980s in Australia, traditional approaches to literature study and basic skills approaches to reading remain – with (radioactive) ‘half-lives’ and continuing influence.

At the same time the national focus on whole language, process writing and personal growth was subjected to rigorous theoretical critique in the early 1990s, traces of which rarely surfaced in mainstream North American literacy journals or conferences. Note that the sources cited below are Australian in origin, many published by Commonwealth and European publishers³:

- The critique – from sociologists - that such models emphasised a new possessive individualism at the expense of an analysis of socioeconomic power (e.g., Baker & Luke, 1991; Freebody & Welch, 1992);
- The critique – from poststructuralists and feminists - that the emphasis on the ‘personal’ and ‘voice’ was undertaken at the expense of an understanding how discourses construct multiple and gendered forms of social identity (e.g., Gilbert, 1989; Green, 1993; Lee, 1996);
- The critique – from systemic functional linguists – that a focus on “immersion”, personal growth and literary narrative failed to provide the most disadvantaged students with explicit knowledges of how particular genres of intellectual and political power work, and how to strategically construct them (e.g., Christie, 1990; Cope & Kalantzis, 1995; Halliday & Martin, 1996).
- The critique – from cultural and media studies – that there was a systematic neglect of visual texts, texts of new information technologies and media and, most recently texts of new workplaces (e.g., Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1997; New London Group, 1997).

Such ‘critiques’ didn’t stay critiques for long. They were transformed into practical agendas and materials for teachers across Australia.⁴ New blendings of practice emerged. This involved a move from both individual skills and personal growth to a focus on “how texts work” (Derewianka, 1993). In the case of the *English Language Arts Syllabus, P-10* (Queensland Department of Education, 1993) syllabus, progressive approaches to classroom instruction were blended with an emphasis on texts and contexts.

For the critical literacy agenda, the field of critical discourse analysis (e.g., Kress & Hodge, 1978; Kress, 1989; Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Luke, 1996; Wodak, 1997)⁵ draws on a number of key theoretical positions:

³ This is a subtle, ‘hidden’ factor in literacy debates and national debates over educational policy. Even in globalised conditions, the political economy of publishing has powerful effects on the circulation of educational ideas, again favouring a ‘centre-out’, West to East, North to South movement.

⁴ The accelerated attempts by teachers to transform contemporary academic theory (e.g., poststructuralist feminism, systemic functional linguistics, critical multiculturalism) into classroom practice were and remain quite remarkable among Australian teachers. This is quite an extraordinary turn of events from the usual theory/practice, academic/school disjunctions and time-lags that typify teacher education and schooling (cf. Britzman & Dippe, in press).

⁵ The journal *Discourse and Society* is a useful resource on critical discourse analysis.

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- Voloshinov and Bahktin's views that instances of language use are not the sacred production of a single 'voice' or perspective but in fact are instances of "heteroglossia" where differential ideologies, struggles over difference and unruly social relations come into play. Practically, this translates into a classroom focus on identifying diverse and multiple "voices" at work in texts, on giving students explicit access to these cultural and historical positions, and discussing whose interests such texts might serve.
- Foucault's view that discourse is not the sovereign production of human subjects, but in fact takes on a life of its own, constructing peoples' identities, realities, and social relations; that is, that we are produced by discourse as much as we are producers of discourse. Practically, this translates into a classroom focus on identifying the dominant cultural discourses – themes, ideologies – in texts and discussing how these discourses attempt to position and construct readers, their understandings and representations of the world, their social relations, and their identities.
- Derrida's views that texts cannot be the objects of definitive interpretations, but involve the play of inclusions and exclusions, presences and silences. Practically, this translates into a classroom focus on multiple possible 'readings' of texts, on what ideas, themes, characterizations, and possible readers are silent or marginalised.
- Bourdieu's view that language is one form of cultural capital with variable exchange value in social fields of institutions and communities. Practically, this translates into a classroom focus on identifying the social relations, sources of power and authority, of the institutions (e.g., mass media, workplaces, corporations, governments, educational institutions) where particular texts are used.
- Freire's view that literacy education can generate tools and conditions for people to reposition themselves in relation to economies, cultures and dominant ideologies. Practically, this translates into a classroom focus on critique, problem-solving and the production of broad range of texts, traditional and contemporary, canonical and popular, aesthetic and functional from a range of cultures and institutions.

These theoretical perspectives – an unruly and at times discordant blend - mark out a shift in educational focus from the 'self' to how texts work in contexts. The practical aim is to generate vigorous classroom debates over what texts attempt to do, which ideologies are represented, and how students can use them in different social fields. The agenda is not about the imposition of a particular political ideology – rather it is about beginning from the supposition of the embeddedness of reading and writing, of all texts and discourses, within normative fields of power, value, exchange. It also moves towards an explicit pedagogy of critical vocabularies for talking about what reading and writing and texts and discourses can do in everyday life. The agenda sets out to teach students to read backwards from texts to the contexts of their social construction (i.e., economies of text production), and to write forwards from texts to their social use, interpretation and analysis (i.e., economies of text use).

The focus of much previous critical literacy work in schools tended to focus at the level of the whole text or social context, stressing ideological contents and bias. The Australian work in critical literacy was augmented by

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- the systemic linguistic theory of M.A.K. Halliday (1994) which argues that the lexical and grammatical operations of texts can be systematically traced to ideological representations (field), social relations (tenor) and textual formations (mode).

Practically, this translates into a classroom focus on talking about the technical characteristics, social functions and contexts of texts. In other words, Australian approaches to critical literacy have developed a sophisticated metalanguage for students to use in developing understandings of and control over lexicon, sentence-level grammar, and text genres – but a metalanguage that ties language to function, text to context, theme to ideology, and discourse to society and culture.

The aim is a classroom environment where students and teachers together work to: (a) see how the worlds of texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures and identities in powerful, often overtly ideological ways; and, (b) use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds. Hence the redefinition of critical literacy focuses on: teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students towards active “position-takings”⁶ with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work.

The four resources model

The theoretical debates and practical directions noted above have generated a vast array of classroom approaches to critical literacy. There is a growing literature on classroom ‘methods’ and materials used to explore analysis of texts of popular culture and media, literature, social studies and science education (e.g., Fairclough, 1993; Comber, 1993; Janks, 1983a, 1983b; Anstey & Bull, 1995; Knobel & Healy, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Comber & Simpson, in press; Patterson & Mellor, in press). These include practical starting points for initial reading instruction with functional texts, teaching English as a Foreign and Second Language, teaching functional grammar through the analysis of popular musical texts, and critical approaches to indigenous education. Yet the general approach outlined above is not a ‘method’ in the sense understood by basal reader developers and many teacher educators. Fortunately, no formula for ‘doing’ critical literacy in the classroom has emerged, and many have attempted to actively combat the distillation of critical literacy into a single step method, or a commodity for publishers. If anything, critical literacy education involves a theoretical and practical ‘attitude’ towards texts *and* the social world, and a commitment to the use of textual practices for social analysis and transformation.

One of the early problems with the implementation of critical literacy programs concerned the classroom imperatives for initial and basic reading instruction (Wallace, 1993). While the emphasis on functional grammar and discourse analysis to deconstruct texts was well suited for adolescent readers and it provided grounds for project and thematic analysis in elementary school language arts programs, it said little about initial reading. Indeed, many Queensland teachers teach aspects of pronominalisation, mode, modality, and transitivity (Fairclough, 1989) to prepare students to: (a) identify, analyse and reconstruct identifiable textual “genres”; and (b) analyse how these same texts construct potentially ideological versions of the world. An example of this is presented below. But how these versions of

⁶ Describing human subjects in social fields, Bourdieu (1998) distinguishes between the embodied skills, competences realize in the field (“dispositions”), how one is situated in relations of power within the field (“positionings”), and the agency that one is able to assert within the field (“position-takings”).

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‘critical literacy’ might sit in relation to conventional approaches to reading remained a problem for many teachers.

Freebody and Luke (1990) developed a four tiered approach to early reading instruction that has now been widely adapted across Australian schools. We proposed that there are four necessary but not sufficient sets of social practices requisite for critical literacy. A recent version of the model offered the following descriptions (Freebody, 1992; Luke & Freebody, 1997):

- *Coding Practices: Developing Resources as a Code Beaker* - How do I crack this text? How does it work? What are its patterns and conventions? How do the sounds and the marks relate, singly and in combinations?
- *Text-Meaning Practices: Developing Resources as a Text Participant* - How do the ideas represented in the text string together? What cultural resources can be brought to bear on the text? What are the cultural meanings and possible readings that can be constructed from this text?
- *Pragmatic Practices: Developing Resources as Text User* - How do the uses of this text shape its composition? What do I do with this text, here and now? What will others do with it? What are my options and alternatives?
- *Critical Practices: Developing Resources as Text Analyst and Critic* - What kind of person, with what interests and values, could both write and read this naively and unproblematically? What is this text trying to do to me? In whose interests? Which positions, voices and interests are at play? Which are silent and absent?

Our view is that the great debate over which of these aspects of literacy is the true and proper way to teach is fundamentally spurious. Coding, text-meaning, pragmatic and critical practices are necessary but not sufficient in-and-of themselves for literate participation in a semiotic economies and cultures. Nor does the model propose a developmental hierarchy whereby one moves from ‘coding’ to the ‘critical’, from the ‘basics’ to ‘higher order thinking’, from initial reading to advanced literature study. In classrooms, lessons can address these different dimensions simultaneously at the earliest stages of literacy education.

At the same time, the model provides a useful template for weighing up and questioning the emphases of current classroom literacy programs. It may well be that you are running a ‘coding’-based program with little attention to critical practices; that your ‘literature-rich’ program stops short of engaging with the pragmatic needs of everyday literacy events; or, for that matter, that your adult education program focuses exclusively on the critical discussions of ideologies and has neglected to provide direct access to how rudimentary textual codes work.

In terms of coding practices, students bring diverse cultural, community and linguistic resources to bear in the classroom, including background linguistic knowledge of how oral and written language works (Luke, 1994). Some have been “schooled before schooling” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) in ways that give them what appears to be organic or privileged access to the kinds of literacy practiced in schools. Given the diversity of writing systems and their specific print-knowledges, and the culture-specificity of text genres and

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conventions, we argue that in a culturally diverse society, many students will require explicit introduction to the code (Freebody et al. 1997). But that introduction needn't be decontextualised, monocultural and monolingual, run apart from a critical literacy agenda. Nor will it in and of itself generate the kinds of critical literacy noted above. Code knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for a critical literacy.

In terms of text meaning practices, we argue that readers' schemata and background knowledge are not in the first instance individual differences, but can be viewed as cultural, community-specific and gendered ideologies developed through preschool linguistic and literate socialization. If this is the case, teaching students to comprehend texts and engage with textual genres, macrostructures, and schemata is a practice of making "situated meanings" (Gee, 1999), whereby particular discourse resources are brought to bear by readers to construct meanings from particular texts. Hence our term "text participant". This may well be a cognitive and psycholinguistic process, but it is in the first instance a profoundly cultural and social one, insofar as the macrostructures of literary and expository texts are codings of particular ideologies, and the cultural "toolkits" of discourses (Gee, 1996; Lemke, 1996) that readers bring to classrooms are the products of their engagement with the cultures around them, residual and emergent, traditional and popular. At the same time, an emphasis on coding and meaning-making – at the heart of much current classroom practice – doesn't necessarily deal with the everyday literacy events and practices that students must engage with.

In terms of pragmatic practice, this model describes the need to introduce students to the contexts of use of everyday literacy materials. As noted above, texts are always situated in fields of power, with economic, cultural and social exchange involved. Further, if there is a lesson from the various ethnographies of literacy of the last two decades (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998), it is that solitary literary reading is but one aspect of literate practice in postindustrial societies and indeed that individual comprehension and writing more often than not entails decision making about what to 'do' with the text involved. Teaching pragmatic practices involves enabling students to 'read' contexts of everyday use, assess how the technical features (e.g., genre, grammar, lexicon) of a text might be realized in these contexts, and size up the variables, power relations and their options in that context. This has been a focus of language experience, English as a Second Language instruction, concentrated language encounters and approaches that involve the 'acting out' communicative competence. However, pragmatic competence – teaching students how to do things with texts – often is subordinated in programs with heavy coding or comprehension emphases.

Finally, our assumption is that ostensibly successful programs might make one just literate enough to get in real trouble. That is, one could master the code, learn to make meaning, learn how to read contexts, just sufficiently to get ripped off, ideologically deceived in a text-based culture and economy that attempts to define, position at every turn. Here we have tried to offer teachers an alternative to the conventional approaches of "identify bias", "stereotypes" to, once again, focus students' view of texts both on technical detail and on social context. By asking who could have written or read this text "naively and unproblematically", we are asking students to second guess the conditions of text production and of text reception. If they don't like a particular text, for example, we can encourage them to speculate on what kind of person, in what kind of cultural or historical context might have written such a text? Further, we can encourage them to focus on how a text might indeed construct its "ideal reader": that a particular class or group of people might indeed prefer

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such a text, or find their interests and desires represented in such a text. Finally, the focus on “what a text is trying to do to me” opens up discussions of the intention, force and effects of texts upon particular audiences.

A secondary school example

Critical literacy programs have been undertaken at all age-grade levels in Australia. Adelaide primary school teacher Jennifer O’Brien (1994) describes working with year one students to teach them to inspect mothers’ day junk mail and ask such questions as: Who was this written for? Whose parents are omitted? What is this text trying to do to me? In other instances, students are engaged in critical literacy activities to navigate the redundant and untrustworthy texts encountered on the internet (Lankshear & Snyder, in press). What follows is a capsule critical literacy lesson that many of our beginning teachers use in secondary schools. It illustrates many of the approaches described here. Please note that its implementation will require some knowledge of critical discourse analysis. To use it, you would add some selected textbook passages for analysis.

LESSON: ANALYSING TEXTBOOK IDEOLOGIES

All text uses a variety of textual devices to (a) textually construct reality (a “possible world”) and (b) to position readers (in a relationship of power to that possible world). These include some of the following devices:

- **lexicon:** the **wordings, namings, metaphors**, and meanings that authors use make for a textual ‘classification scheme’. This scheme constructs a version of the ‘possible world’ of the text. [including pronominalisation, and the use of “we”, “us”, “they” to construct the ‘self’, the ‘Other’, and everybody else].
- **syntax:** syntax constructs agency and foregrounds who is doing what to whom. The use of the **passive and active voices**, the use of **modality**, and the use of different sentence modes (e.g., **declarative, imperative, interrogatives**) describes the world in particular ways that foreground actors, actions and effected entities differently (e.g., “I hit you” is a different account of an auto accident than “You were hit”).
- **cohesive ties:** of the various kinds of cohesion (e.g., conjunctions, referents to other words in the text), we looked at **linking words** (e.g., thus, therefore, but), which show logical relations between propositions and ideas, and deictics (e.g., then, now, there, here), which show reference to time and space.
- **discourses:** a range of discourses – systematic clusters of themes, statements, ideas and ideologies - come into play in the text. These set up **intertextual relations**, allusions and references to other texts in the reader’s environment and to other texts she or he might have read previously. How wordings, statements and discourses are set up in relation to each other (e.g., as opposites, as

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coequals, as hierarchical in dominant-versus-subordinate relationship) influences the message of the text.

- **top level/generic/propositional structure:** the larger 'chunks' and units of a text – beginnings, middles, ends, that usually have particular cultural and ideological values built into them.

TEXTBOOKS: The school textbook - whether basal (beginning) reading series, or high school history book - is a distinct genre with various characteristics. We are taught and like to think of textbooks as authoritative sources of knowledge, as clear bodies of 'truths' and 'Facts' written objectively, dispassionately, free of 'bias'. But by now you've become aware that all texts textually construct reality (field) and position readers to read in particular ways (tenor). Like any newspaper or magazine article, textbooks position readers in relation to a particular world view of **IDEOLOGY**.

This is a simple fact of life about texts: they take and project particular ideologies, a '**selective tradition**' of culture, and they silence others. But while it is easy enough to say that a textbook expresses a selective tradition of culture, it is more difficult to explain how the language of the textbook includes and omits particular values, versions of human identity, human action, histories, races, cultures and social classes.

Let's discuss a textbook passage line by line (Source: R. Ritchie, 1988, *Australian Geography*)

- 1 We will start by discussing some general types of impacts on the**
- 2 physical environment.**
- 3 We will then look at particular types of environments, such as coastal**
- 4 lands, alpine areas, arid lands and cultural sites.**
- 5 The construction of a resort or a complex of resorts and facilities is**
- 6 the most obvious of tourist impacts.**
- 7 Very significant changes in land use result.**
- 8 Areas of natural vegetation might be cleared.**
- 9 Existing land-uses such as agriculture might be displaced. Older**
- 10 parts of cities might be demolished ...**
- 11 One very important fact to remember is that natural environments**
- 12 (such as mangroves, rainforests and water catchments) are valuable**
- 13 in their natural states.**
- 14 They all play a part in the ecological processes from which we**
- 15 benefit.**
- 16 It is now recognised that ultimately these ecological processes**
- 17 provide economic benefits.**

In lines 1 & 3: who is "we"?

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Lines 3 & 4: are all the items on the list equivalent, opposites, dominant? How do “cultural sites” fit in with the other things on the list?

Line 5 & 6: “most obvious” to whom? Note the nominalisation “construction”, who is doing the construction? Does the nominalization (a verb turned into a noun) hide the agent, the ‘doer’ of the action?

Lines 5-10: note use of passive: where is the agency (developer), Who is doing this?

Line 11: Who is supposed to “remember”

Lines 12-13: Notice again the list: are these equivalent items?

Line 14: Who is we?

Line 15: Recognised by whom?

MY READING OF THE IDEOLOGY: This is a very tricky passage. The major discourses brought into play are the discourse of geography, the discourse of ‘green’ ecological politics, and the discourse of tourist development. They're put together in what appears to be a cautionary, anti-development, pro-ecology position. However, a couple of clever lexical choices and grammatical devices are used: first by the use of ‘we’, the reader is positioned to read as someone who “benefits” from nature and the economy. Then, the actual developers and those who would profit from both tourism and agriculture are removed by the use of the passive and lots of nominalisations (e.g., “development”, “construction”). Notice that all of this is just ‘going on’, with all the human agents having been hidden or removed from the passage (Remember, a key question is always: who is absent from the text? What isn't being said?) Finally, the ‘wordings’ and sentence structure in the last two lines marks out the ecology and economic development as co-equal concerns. So what appears to be a pro-ecology passage can be read (by me at least!) as a pro-development passage, as a ‘selective tradition’ of pro-development. That's my reading, one of many possible.

TASK

As a tutorial group, go through the following textbook extracts and discuss the particular discourses and ideologies that are at work. Here are some key questions to briefly ask of each:

- Which/Whose version of events and the world is foregrounded?
- Which other versions are excluded? Whose interests are served by this representation?
- How (lexically, syntactically, etc.) does the text construct ‘reality’?
- How does the text try to position you in relation to its messages?

Practicing critical literacy in educational systems

I began with a question about how and when potentially radical educational innovations and projects actually might make a difference. Philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1971) used the term “repressive tolerance” to describe how modern, democratic capitalist states deal with dissent. He argued that instead of suppressing critique – the strategy developed in modern nation states was to tolerate it and therefore appropriate it, to mainstream it and thereby steal away

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its potential threat to existing economic and social relations. The interesting question that Marcuse's work raises is whether in the process of getting critical literacy into state schools, we have 'watered down' its potential for consequential social analysis and action.

An answer depends on how we envision the normative possibilities and limits of a critical literacy agenda. For genre-based approaches and for a pedagogy of multiliteracies – the principal aim is to enhance students' capacities to design social futures, to forge self-determining, 'agentive' pathways through text and discourse based communities and economies. At the same time, the Freirian agenda places great stock in the capacity of critical literacy to query and disrupt these same economies, and to mobilise larger social movements towards progressive, if not revolutionary social transformation. How we gauge the success and/or the assimilation of critical literacy into state schooling depends largely on how we negotiate its goals and possible consequences.

Thus far the development of critical literacy in Australia has been steady but uneven, with backlashes, critiques and no small amount of dispute among its advocates. In this context, many Australian students and teachers are engaged with the theories and practices I have described here. Versions of critical literacy are included in the state language and literacy syllabuses in most states. The four resources model has been adopted for use in New South Wales, the largest state. In 1991, the federally funded "Christie Report" (Christie et al. 1991) advocated the inclusion of functional grammar and genre study, critical literacy and text analysis, second language acquisition models and Vygotskian psychology as core components for teacher education. It generated national controversy among literacy educators. Although it never formally won government adoption, most Australian teacher education programs now feature these components. Most recently, the Federal government has moved strongly towards national benchmark standards and a standardised testing regime, claiming a crisis in the form of falling standards. This move – the manufacturing of a literacy crisis as a rationale for shift in public policy - has been part of a broader attack on state schooling and a shift in funding strategies towards Australia's large state-supported independent and religious school sector (Luke, Lingard, Green & Comber, 1999). In 1999, there was a brief controversy over the inclusion of many of the kinds of semiotic and critical literacy approaches noted here in the required Senior English Syllabi for Grades 11 and 12 in Queensland. A major critique came from those who argued that many teachers were not ready for the transition from cultural heritage and personal growth models.

What sets Australian approaches to critical literacy apart has been their insistence on direct instruction in a sophisticated technical language for talking about text. In the case of Queensland and, for a time, New South Wales, this meant the introduction of functional grammar and genre analysis (for an introduction, see Unsworth, 1999). This has had two key effects. First, it has enabled many teachers and schools to show conservative parents and communities how their children are engaging with grammar, language structure and use with a depth that their own schooling hadn't provided. Second, it has developed a constructive pathway between the most volatile issues that have polarised North American literacy education. Australian approaches to critical literacy have, whether through intention or simple teacher commonsense, moved to:

- blend direct instruction in ways of talking about texts with an emphasis on immersion and engagement with whole texts and substantive contexts;

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- blend explicit (reproductive) introduction to how conventional genres work, with an (counter-reproductive) emphasis on critique and transformation of these same genres, their ideologies and the social fields where they are used.

There is evidence in the vast Australian research cited here that many classrooms are engaging students in talk about contemporary social issues, about ideologies, in the context of learning how to handle texts in more complex ways. Different kinds of literate practices are being produced in many classrooms. However, the larger and more persistent question for critical educators and for governments committed to equity is whether any of these classroom and curricular differences are ‘making a difference’ in the life pathways of students and, indeed whether those students traditionally marginalised by traditional approaches to literacy are any better off (Freebody et al. 1997; Comber et al. 1998). The search for definitive empirical evidence on the efficacy of critical literacy programs is underway. The problem is that while there are extensive qualitative descriptions of change, most of the conventional indicators of literate success – standardised tests – are themselves biased towards very different operational definitions of literacy. For what it’s worth, reading achievement test scores in Queensland have been improving (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999)– but whether and how this is attributable to any of these innovations is moot. It is only when we develop more task based, teacher-moderated assessments of the literate practices and textual products of students – a project we are currently working on – that we will be able to see the gauge the results of particular approaches to literacy in terms that are somewhat more appropriate to their aims and possibilities. How a state educational system evaluates and gauges approaches that ask to be judged on their realization of social transformation and change is, obviously, way beyond available regimes of surveillance and evaluation.⁷

To conclude: the approach to literacy described here is a two-tiered strategy. First, it emphasises teaching students from the most at risk groups about the practices and processes of exclusion and inclusion in social fields – that is, it had a strong emphasis on developing an analysis of power. Second, it emphasises direct instruction in the workings of mainstream texts of significant exchange value in these social fields: from canonical educational forms such as the scientific essay, to those aesthetic and functional texts that might have consequence in students’ further education and occupation. Yet its single most important theoretical and practical classroom effect is its shift in emphasis from the traditional view of literacy as skills, knowledges and cognitions *inside* the human subject – quite literally as something in students’ heads – to a vision of literacy as visible social practices with language, text and discourse. This social externalisation of literacy acts to preclude ‘deficit’ models of literacy. For as long as we locate literacy *within* human subjects, we will invariably find ‘lack’ and ‘deficit’.

Once we relocate literacy in the visible domains of language and social life, we can redefine the project of critical literacy as one of access and equity. The educational point, made repeatedly by Gee (1996, 1999), is that people bring variable discourse repertoires to bear in these contexts – curious, often unpredictable mixtures of community-based discourses, specialised academic and technical discourses. The practical pedagogical task is about teaching students to use discourses to ‘read’ and critique other discourses, about developing languages for talking about language – in ways in which those students whose access to

⁷ Whether anything can be made to count that can’t be counted in educational systems is the vexed question facing governments with declining resources for state education. I can just imagine someone trying to run ISO 2000 quality assurance checks on the production of socially transformative citizens.

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multiple discourses (from communities, from diverse cultural backgrounds and life histories) might have been viewed as a ‘lack’, can be taken as part of their toolkits for making sense of the world, taken and augmented, expanded and blended with new school-based discourses.

Speaking as a bureaucrat in a state system, for me the task is about shaping the policies and curricula for literacy education in ways that open out access to these fields where texts and discourses matter for all students. It is also about envisioning how they might be active, powerful and critical users of texts and discourses in text-based economies that are, for much of the population, increasingly risky and uncertain, but also complex and fraught with new kinds of difference. Given that educational policy and administration in current conditions principally is about regulation of the flows of discourse and material resources across systems, it is all too tempting to believe that such tasks can be achieved through direction from the centre.

Can one move an educational project that engages with critique of the worlds of work, community life, government, media, popular and traditional cultures into the mainstream of state-mandated curriculum?⁸ The jury is still out. But perhaps I began with the wrong questions. For what we’ve seen in Australia is not a single project, a dominant approach to critical literacy, but teachers and students, scholars and teachers blending, shaping and reshaping theories and practices in complex and clever, local and innovative ways. The capacity of teachers to engage with theory and the capacity of intellectuals – educationists, linguists, sociologists, psychologists, feminists, literary theorists – to talk theory in accessible ways has been crucial. Not surprisingly, there was no outstanding state or federal policy or legislation that enabled the developments I’ve described here. Perhaps the key factors were a system that did not vest high stakes testing and assessment around reductionist measures that would have precluded this development – and, a teaching force able and willing to engage new theory to advance its professional judgment.

Perhaps it is not a question of whether and how government might bring ‘critical literacy’ under an umbrella of state curriculum policy, but rather a matter of government getting out of the way so that ‘critical literacies’ can be invented in classrooms. Perhaps it is absence and silence from the centre that enables.

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⁸ Or perhaps this is the kind of logical paradox that Gregory Bateson (1999) once described as a “double bind”: that to require teachers and students to “be critical” in a state system is a bit like the paradoxical injunction: “be spontaneous!”

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