

Critical Literacy Revisited

Pam Green

The need for a critical stance with respect to literacy has long been argued by researchers, such as Freire (1970, 1973, 1983, 1985), Gilbert (1989a,b,c; 1990; 1993a,b,c), Krevotics (1985), Lankshear (1993), and Withers (1989). For instance, Withers states,

We are long beyond the stage of accepting basic literacy—the ability to read and write one's own name—as the norm for the general population. We have also passed beyond the stage of wanting functional literacy for all—a set of relatively simple abilities to comprehend and produce written text at home, in the streets and in the workplace. What we have come to realise is needed is “critical literacy”...the direction of those functional skills towards the ability to mount a personal critique of all those issues which surround us as we live, learn and work—to help us understand, comment on and ultimately control the direction of our lives. (p. 76)

Notions central to critical literacy approaches

In recent years, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, notions of critical literacy have emerged. However, what constitutes critical literacy varies within the literature. According to Knoblauch and Brannon (1993), the “sources of critical literacy and pedagogy are to be found in an assortment of Marxist, feminist, and postmodern intellectual positions” (p. 161). Lankshear (1994) does not see the sources as quite as clear-cut. In fact, he states that the calls for critical literacy come from “quite disparate theoretical positions; or, from no discernible theoretical position at all” (p. 4).

According to Donald (1993), the stance taken in terms of critical literacy depends on the kinds of questions that are asked. Comber (1993) takes a similar view and notes different orientations within the many forms that critical literacy can take. Each orientation has its own principles guiding the approach to critical literacy. These principles include repositioning students as researchers of language, respecting minority culture literacy practices, and problematising classroom and public texts. Arguably such principles do not account for all possibilities within critical literacy.

Furthermore, there may be overlap among the three. For instance, it is possible to place students in the position of language researchers by looking at available classroom texts with respect to how a particular minority group is represented. What becomes clear from the literature, therefore, is that critical literacy is a “contested educational ideal” and that there is “no final orthodoxy of critical literacy” (Lankshear, 1994, p. 4).

Despite the complexities about what such a critical literacy stance might entail, there are some common notions found in the general literature. The notions of text, literacy as social practice, and discourse, which have been discussed within cultural literacy, are also integral to critical literacy. For instance, Lankshear (1994) points out that critical literacy may involve a number of objects of critique, such as knowing literacy (or various literacies) critically, viewing particular texts critically, and/or having a critical perspective on the social practices involved in literacy use. Thus, text and literacy as social practices are highlighted within critical literacy.

A double-edged sword

The two-sided nature of literacy is a notion inherent to critical literacy. Literacy can be seen as a double-edged sword in that it can be enlightening or liberating but also may be restrictive or dominating (Edelsky & Harman, 1991; Shannon, 1992). In other words, there is a duality about literacy. For instance, within the context of the school, literacy can limit students. When textbooks are selected that portray a mainstream view of the world, and when traditional literacy practices, which often reduce literacy to copying and the completion of worksheets or assignment questions, are used, literacy is far from liberating. Instead, such curricula “tend to maintain, rather than improve, the status of subordinate [sic] groups” (Harman & Edelsky, 1989, p. 393). Furthermore, being able to “construct and make meaning from text may appear empowering, but in fact may open one to multiple channels of misinformation and exploitation: You may just become literate enough to get yourself badly in debt, exploited and locked out” (Luke, 1992, p. 19). Thus, literacy is not necessarily liberating, and it may be exploitative. This notion is central to critical literacy.

Literacy and empowerment

The metaphor of a double-edged sword is useful in that it serves to temper grandiose claims in which literacy is associated with “empower-

ment." As noted earlier, although there may be potential for liberation or empowerment, whether or not this is realised depends on many factors. For example, "Freire believes that literacy empowers people only when it renders them active questioners of the social reality around them" (Gee, 1989, p. 161). However, whether or not being an active questioner is sufficient to gain power is questionable. Although taking a critical stance may unravel or expose the power base of the society, it does not necessarily provide access to it. Robinson (1988) points out, "to achieve literacy does not necessarily earn one power, as we well know. But the powerful are usually themselves literate, or if not, they can purchase the services of those who are" (pp. 244–245). Thus, although being literate, and in particular adopting a critical stance with respect to literacy, may be seen as liberating or empowering, it does not afford any guarantees. As Luke (1992–1993) states,

Literacy is a necessary but not sufficient condition for participation and enfranchisement. While the human capital model doesn't work, literacy remains a significant gatekeeping factor in the everyday lives of Australians. In the current situation, not having credentialled levels of literate competence will increasingly lead to marginalisation. But having high levels of credentialled literacy doesn't necessarily lead to employment, power or wealth—for individuals or the nation. Literacy thus has become a kind of double-bind: Having it doesn't guarantee anything, but not having it systematically excludes one from cultural and economic power. (p. 21)

At this point, the need to consider what is meant by empowerment is apparent. What is considered empowerment is problematic (Gore, 1991; Lather, 1992), because the term is used in various ways within the literature. For instance, Simon (1992) states, "Empowerment literally means to give ability to, to permit or enable" (p. 143). He notes that this entails enabling students to use their own cultural resources and to explain the relationship between school and society. According to Fletcher (1987), empowerment refers to "a process which alters the individual's perception of themselves [sic] and the society in a particular way" (p. 10). Although these uses of the term *empowerment* acknowledge to varying degrees the individual and social aspects of power, they fail to explain them fully. As I have stated elsewhere,

The term *empowerment* is overused and often misused. It is misleading in that it creates images of social power, and whilst being able to read and to write enables the individual to function within our society, we do not gain access to the power bases of society just because we can read and write. (Green, 1992, p. 16)

The work of Delpit (1991) is useful here in that she distinguishes individual and social aspects of power in relation to literacy. She makes the distinction between personal literacy (literacy for one's own entertainment, thinking, emotions, and life) and power code literacy (literacy that gives access to the world beyond the personal). Delpit explains how some students have access to power as their intimates (those with whom they interact) are part of the culture of power, but for some access is blocked as their intimates are not part of that culture. Thus, it is apparent that although personal literacy may enable certain uses of language, it does not necessarily empower in terms of the power bases within society. Furthermore, even if access is achieved it is not free from the impact of the ideologies that control the kinds of literacies that are deemed powerful.

What a critical literacy perspective entails

Now that clarification of notions that are central to critical literacy has been offered, I will consider what a critical stance to literacy might entail. A critical perspective of literacy argues for an active, challenging approach to literacy. Exponents of critical literacy assert various potentials of such a perspective. One such potential pertains to the critical reading of texts, which can enable students to become aware of the way in which texts are constructed and how such constructions position the reader (Bigelow, 1992; Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke 1992, 1995). This potential leads us to the role of writing in critical literacy and therefore the connections between reading and writing.

The links between reading and writing are clearly evident in the literature. According to a number of researchers, including Freire (1985, 1985), Gilbert (1989a,b,c; 1990; 1993a,b,c), Green (1988), Kress (1985), and Rivalland (1989), the most effective way to develop critical readers is through writing. Such approaches to literacy offer potential for students to understand how language works, the ways in which various individuals and groups use literacy to their own ends, and the reasons behind such use. Furthermore, educators have the potential to critically examine what counts as literacy, the way in which texts are used, and the literacy demands made on students. In this way a critical approach to literacy has potential for the student and for educators. However, whether or not such potential is realised depends on the complexities involved in the context in which literacy occurs.

Critical literacy also offers potential for literacy across subject areas. There is a growing body of literature in this area (see, for example, Comber, Barnett, Badger, & Peters, 1991; Elkins, 1989; Freebody, 1989); at this point Green's (1988) work is used to summarize the potential of a critical perspective in this respect:

A socially critical stance on subject-specific literacy means providing individuals, at any level of schooling, with the means to reflect critically on what is being learned and taught in classrooms and to take an active role in the production of knowledge and meaning. It involves giving individuals the capacity to recognise the socially constructed and conventional nature of school knowledge, and to work collaboratively and constructively towards informed personal meanings. (p. 165)

The example of reading a textbook illustrates what such a stance entails. Green points out,

Rather than the single, authorised version of the textbook, for instance, students should have the capacity and be given the opportunity to consult different and sometimes conflicting sources of information, in order to arrive at personal understandings. The literate individual is someone who knows that there is more than one version available, and that what one is reading, or is given to read, represents both a selection and an abstraction from a larger context. (p. 63)

Thus, the juxtapositioning of texts (reading a range of texts on a given subject or topic) arguably enables students to perceive a range of viewpoints and to consider each in a critical way. Green continues to say that when students have the opportunity to make links between what is new and what is familiar, learning becomes more meaningful and school knowledge is transformed into active knowledge.

Critical literacy in the classroom

Although clearly a number of potentials exist within critical literacy, the translation of such theory into practice is not easy. For instance, Gilbert (1993a) alerts us to the difficulties associated with implementing critical literacy in the classroom. She admits that

classroom practices that will engage students with the social context of literacy are difficult to construct and to enact. The social context of literacy learning has still, as work by Kress (1985), or Gee (1990), or Luke (1993) amply demonstrates, some distance to travel in classrooms, because the issues associated with a "criti-

cal" literacy are complex. How, for instance, can students learn about the social context of language, unless they are able to experience the impact of actual language practices in contexts that are of interest and concern to them? (p. 324)

Within the context of the classroom, critical literacy offers a critical approach to text, a language of critique or a critical discourse, and examination of literacy across content areas. However, before critical literacy can occur within the classroom, students need the opportunity to engage in meaningful use of literacy, or in other words, to use literacy in ways that relate to their interests and needs. Without the opportunity to write and read for a range of purposes, with access to a variety of texts, there is no basis upon which critical discussion of and reflection on literacy can occur. Such opportunities are essential if students are to begin to examine the ways in which texts are constructed, and for what purposes.

REFERENCES

- Bigelow, W. (1992). Once upon a genocide: Christopher Columbus in children's literature. *Language Arts*, 69, 112–120.
- Comber, B. (1993). Literacy and social justice. In A. Reid & B. Johnson (Eds.), *Critical issues in Australian education in the 1990s* (pp. 112–124). Adelaide, Australia: Painter Prints.
- Comber, B., Barnett, J., Badger, L., & Peters, J. (1991). *Literacy and language professional development in disadvantaged schools: A statewide survey*. Adelaide, Australia: University of South Australia.
- Delpit, L. (1991). A conversation with Lisa Delpit. *Language Arts*, 68, 541–547.
- Donald, J. (1993). Literacy and the limits of democracy. In B. Green (Ed.), *The insistence of the letter: Literacy studies and curriculum theorizing* (pp. 120–136). London: Falmer Press.
- Edelsky, C., & Harman, S. (1991). Risks and possibilities of whole language literacy: Alienation and connection. In C. Edelsky (Ed.), *With literacy and justice for all: Rethinking the social in language and education* (pp. 127–140). London: Falmer Press.
- Elkins, J. (1989). Literacy and transition to secondary school. *Australian Journal of Reading*, 12(4), 300–305.
- Fletcher, R. (1987). Empowerment and adult education. *Australian Journal of Adult Education*, 27(1), 9–12.
- Freebody, P. (1987). What counts as "knowing content"? *Australian Journal of Reading*, 12(4), 350–358.
- Freebody, P., & Luke, A. (1990). "Literacies" programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect*, 5(3), 7–16.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. (1983). The importance of the act of reading. *Journal of Education*, 165(1), 5–11.
- Freire, P. (1985). Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with Paulo Freire. *Language Arts*, 62(1), 15–21.

- Gee, J.P. (1989). The legacies of literacy: From Plato to Freire through Harvey Graff. *Journal of Education*, 171(1), 147–165.
- Gee, J.P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Falmer Press.
- Gilbert, P. (1989a). *Writing, schooling, and deconstruction: From voice to text in the classroom*. London: Routledge.
- Gilbert, P. (1989b). Stoning the romance: Girls as resistant readers and writers. In *Writing in schools: Reader* (pp. 73–80). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Gilbert, P. (1989c). Student text as pedagogical text. In S. de Castell, A. Luke, & C. Luke (Eds.), *Language, authority and criticism: Readings on the school textbook* (pp. 195–202). London: Falmer Press.
- Gilbert, P. (1990). Personal growth or critical resistance? Self-esteem in the English curriculum. In J. Kenway & S. Willis (Eds.), *Hearts and minds: Self-esteem and the schooling of girls* (pp. 173–189). London: Falmer Press.
- Gilbert, P. (1993a). (Sub)versions: Using sexist language practices to explore critical literacy. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 16(4), 323–331.
- Gilbert, P. (1993b). Introduction. In P. Gilbert (Ed.), *Gender stories and the language classroom* (pp. 1–36). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Gilbert, P. (1993c). Dolly fiction(s): Teen romances downunder. In P. Gilbert (Ed.), *Gender stories and the language classroom* (pp. 66–85). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Gore, J. (1991). Neglected practices: A foucauldian critique of traditional and radical approaches to pedagogy. In *The Liberating Curriculum Conference, Paper 21* (pp. 2–13). Adelaide, Australia: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.
- Green, B. (1988). Subject-specific literacy and school learning: A focus on writing. *Australian Journal of Education*, 32(2), 156–179.
- Green, P. (1992). *A matter of fact: Using factual texts in the classroom*. Melbourne, Australia: Eleanor Curtain.
- Harman, S., & Edelsky, C. (1989). The risks of whole language literacy: Alienation and connection. *Language Arts*, 66(4), 392–406.
- Knoblauch, C.H., & Brannon, L. (1993). *Critical teaching and the idea of literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook.
- Kress, G. (1985). *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.
- Krevotics, J. (1985). Critical literacy: Challenging the assumptions of mainstream educational theory. *Journal of Education*, 167(2), 50–62.
- Lankshear, C. (1993). Curriculum as literacy: Reading and writing in “New Times.” In B. Green (Ed.), *The insistence of the letter: Literacy studies and curriculum theorizing* (pp. 154–174). London: Falmer Press.
- Lankshear, C. (1994). *Critical literacy*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Curriculum Studies Association.
- Lather, P. (1992). Post-critical pedagogies: A feminist reading. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminisms and critical pedagogy* (pp. 120–137). London: Routledge.
- Luke, A. (1992). *When basic skills and information processing just aren't enough: Rethinking reading in new times* (A.J.A. Nelson Address of the 1992 National Conference of the

- Australian Council for Adult Literacy, pp. 1–24). Townsville, North Queensland, Australia: Australian Council for Adult Literacy.
- Luke, A. (1992–1993). Literacy and human capital: Rethinking the equation. *Education Australia*, 19–20, 19–21.
- Luke, A. (1993). Stories of social regulation: The micropolitics of classroom narrative. In B. Green (Ed.), *The insistence of the letter: Literacy studies and curriculum theorizing* (pp. 137–153). London: Falmer Press.
- Luke, A. (1995). The social practice of reading. In J. Murray (Ed.), *Celebrating differences: Confronting literacies* (pp. 167–187). Sydney, Australia: Australian Reading Association.
- Rivalland, J. (1989). Meaningmaking: A juggling act. *Australian Journal of Literacy*, 12(4), 5–21.
- Robinson, J.L. (1988). The social context of literacy. In E.R. Kintgen, B.M. Kroll, & M. Rose (Eds.), *Perspectives on literacy* (pp. 243–253). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Shannon, P. (1992). Why become political? In P. Shannon (Ed.), *Becoming political: Readings and writings in the politics of literacy education* (pp. 1–11). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Simon, R.I. (1992). Empowerment as a pedagogy of possibility. In P. Shannon (Ed.), *Becoming political: Readings and writings in the politics of literacy education* (pp. 139–151). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Withers, G. (1989). Three versions of “critical literacy.” *English in Australia*, 89, 72–79.

Critical literacy is a central thinking skill that a tertiary education seeks to develop in students. It involves the questioning and examination of ideas, and requires you to synthesise, analyse, interpret, evaluate and respond to the texts you read or listen to. How do I start this process? Critical literacy starts with reading or listening. For the purposes of critical literacy in academic writing, we are generally talking about your work with reading texts. There are two parts to engaging with academic research or texts Purpose Critical literacy foregrounds the relationship between language and power by focusing on how texts work and in whose interests (Luke, 2012, p. 5). It is highlighted as an "important skill" within Scotland's national educational framework for 3-18 year olds, the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), yet, as this paper aims to show, what the concept means is far from. Critical literacy is the ability to find embedded discrimination in media. This is done by analyzing the messages promoting prejudiced power relationships found naturally in media and written material that go unnoticed otherwise by reading beyond the author's words and examining the manner in which the author has conveyed his or her ideas about society's norms to determine whether these ideas contain racial or gender inequality. If critical literacy is understood as social practice to be negotiated in contested sites of meaning production, Braga's paper focuses on a discussion of attitudes to the social implications of free software and proprietary operating systems in digital literacies and access to information technology in Brazil. Festino's paper looks at the development of critical literacy in Foreign Language Literature classrooms in the related forms of multicultural or trans-cultural literacies as