

Domination, access, diversity and design: a synthesis for Critical Literacy education

Janks, H. (2000) Domination, access, diversity and design: a synthesis model for for critical literacy education. *Educational Review*. Volume 52, Number 2, June 2000 pages 175-186.

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Abstract

Critical literacy education, based on a socio-cultural theory of language, is particularly concerned with teaching learners to understand and manage the relationship between language and power. However, different realisations of critical literacy operate with different conceptions of this relationship by foregrounding one or other of domination, access, diversity or design. This article argues that these different orientations in critical literacy education are crucially interdependent. This interdependence is then illustrated with three examples.

Introduction

I cut my critical literacy teeth in the struggle against apartheid. I saw my own work as both a moral and a political project which valued education as an important factor in achieving a just society. In the days of apartheid it was easy to understand power as a negative force which constructed and maintained relations of domination by protecting the interests of the small white minority (to which I belonged). To the extent that a critical language education could investigate 'the ways in which meaning ... serves to sustain relations of domination' (Thompson, 1984:35), my work set out to deconstruct the language of the oppressor, and to search for an 'emancipatory discourse' (Janks and Ivanic, 1992). I now recognise that I claimed more than I could demonstrate, but it was a time of high ideals and defiant rhetoric.

In South Africa after the first democratic elections in 1994, and the second elections in 1999, language is no less important, but the project is different. I am having to re-imagine what critical literacy might be in this time of reconstruction and development. How can a critical awareness of language contribute to our re-inventing our nation and ourselves? In my context this re-

evaluation of critical literacy is driven by dramatic social and historical change. Other forces in different contexts are also working to keep critical literacy on its toes.

Mellor and Patterson (1994) and Patterson (1997) have asked important questions about critical literacy as a new 'reading regime', following Hunter's work (1987; 1997) on normativity.

Misson and Morgan (1999 and forthcoming), working with strongly theorised notions of pleasure, are rethinking critical literacy in relation to the aesthetic.

Foucault's work (1978) suggests that we think carefully about power as productive and not simply as a negative force of domination.

Globalisation has resulted in the domination of English and Pennycook (1994) has addressed questions raised by the 'cultural politics of English as an international language' which affect how we teach English as an additional language in both second and foreign language teaching contexts.

Newly independent countries, such as South Africa, as well as new political and economic formations, such as the European Union for example, are having to take language policy, and the power relations between languages, in multilingual contexts seriously.

Changes in technology are changing the communication landscape.

Critical literacy education, based on a socio-cultural theory of language, is particularly concerned with teaching learners to understand and manage the relationship between language and power. However, different realisations of critical literacy operate with different conceptualisations of this relationship by foregrounding one or other of domination, access, diversity or design.

Domination

Theorists working with this view of power see language, other symbolic forms, and discourse more broadly, as a powerful means of maintaining and reproducing relations of domination. According to Eagleton (1991) 'men and women fight out their social and political battles at the level of signs,

meanings and representations' (11). Critical discourse analysis is used to understand how language works to position readers in the interests of power. It assumes a critical theory of ideology (Thompson, 1990) which sees power as negative and productive of inequitable social relations. The pedagogy associated with it, called Critical Language Awareness (CLA), originated in Lancaster and is primarily associated with the work of Clark et al (1987) and Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995).

Critical Language Awareness emphasises the fact that texts are constructed. Anything that has been constructed can be deconstructed. This unmaking or unpicking of the text increases our awareness of the choices¹ that the writer or speaker has made. Every choice foregrounds what was selected and hides, silences or backgrounds what was not selected. Awareness of this prepares the reader to ask critical questions: why did the writer or speaker make these choices? Whose interests do they serve? Who is empowered or disempowered by the language used? (Janks, 1993: iii)

Access

Dominance and access come together in a different question that confronts teachers of language and literacy. How does one provide access to dominant forms, while at the same time valuing and promoting the diverse languages and literacies of our students and in the broader society? If we provide students with access to dominant forms, this contributes to maintaining their dominance. If, on the other hand, we deny students access, we perpetuate their marginalisation in a society that continues to recognise the value and importance of these forms. This is what Lodge (1997) refers to as the 'access paradox'. These dominant forms include dominant languages, dominant varieties, dominant Discourses (Gee, 1990)², dominant literacies and knowledges, dominant genres, dominant modes of visual representation and a range of cultural practices related to social interaction.

The genre theorists (Martin, Christie and Rothery, 1987; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Kress, 1999) have done important work in describing the features of dominant genres many of which, prior to their work, we somehow assumed students could see and do. Genre pedagogy has asked us to think about how

and whether to make generic features visible in order to give students from marginalised discourses greater access to them.

Explicit pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990; Delpit, 1988) and access are among the key issues that confront educationists working in the area of Academic Development in institutions with increasingly diverse student populations, in South Africa and elsewhere. (Starfield, 1994; Dison and Rule, 1996; de Groot and Dison, 1996; Lodge, 1997).

Diversity

Different ways of reading and writing the world in a range of modalities³ are a central resource for changing consciousness. Because Discourses are linked to a wide range of social identities and are embedded in diverse social institutions, they provide the need and the means for reflecting on our own taken-for-granted ways of saying, doing, thinking and valuing (Gee, 1990). The difference between discourses is a productive power. As individual human subjects enter into new discourses they acquire alternative and additional ways of being in the world - that is, new social identities. Kress (1995) says that diversity in schools could be an important means for making students

feel at ease with continuous, intense change; comfortable with sharp differences of culture and social values met every day; [so that they] treat them as normal, as unremarkable and natural; and above all, as an essential productive resource for innovation rather than as a cause for anxiety and anger (6).

However, difference tends to be organised in dominance, and it can lead as easily to domination and conflict as to change and innovation. The New Literacy Studies (Street, 1994, 1996; Prinsloo and Breir, 1996; Gee, 1994) and work on multilingual education in South Africa (Heugh et al, 1995; Welch, T. et al, 1996) show the necessity for education to be more inclusive of students' diverse languages and literacies. In the interests of equity inclusivity ensures that students' different 'ways with words' (Heath, 1983) have a place

in the classroom. In addition, difference increases the creative resources that students can draw on.

Design

Design encompasses the idea of productive power - the ability to harness the multiplicity of semiotic systems across diverse cultural locations to challenge and change existing Discourses. It recognises the importance of human creativity and students' ability to generate an infinite number of new meanings. The New London Group's (1996) work in multiliteracies stresses that students have to be taught how to use and select from all the available semiotic resources for representation in order to make meaning, while at the same time combining and recombining these resources so as to create possibilities for transformation and reconstruction (Cope and Kalantzis, 1997). This is what the New London Group calls design. The multiliteracies project is influenced by developments in media education, cultural studies, new technologies and information literacy in a context of globalisation, all of which together are revolutionising students' literacy practices and the nature of work. While critical literacy that focused on domination tended to emphasise critical 'reading' and deconstruction across a range of modalities, the work on design emphasises multi-modal production and reconstruction using a range of media.

The interdependence of domination, access, diversity and design

I argue that all of these orientations to literacy education are important and, moreover, that *they are crucially interdependent*. They should not be seen as separate enterprises. Critical literacy has to take seriously the ways in which meaning systems are implicated in reproducing domination and it has to provide access to dominant languages, literacies and genres while simultaneously using diversity as a productive resource for redesigning social futures and for changing the horizon of possibility (Simon, 1992). This includes both changing dominant discourses as well as changing which discourses are dominant. Any one of domination, diversity, access or design without the others, creates a problematic imbalance. Genre theory without creativity runs the risk of reifying existing genres; deconstruction without

reconstruction or design reduces human agency; diversity without access ghettoises students. Domination without difference and diversity loses the ruptures that produce contestation and change. Reconstruction needs deconstruction in order to understand ‘the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production’ (Foucault, 1978:94). This interdependence is presented systematically in Table 1.

Table 1: The interdependence of domination, diversity, access and design

Domination without access	This maintains the exclusionary force of dominant discourses.
Domination without diversity	Domination without difference and diversity, loses the ruptures that produce contestation and change.
Domination without design	The deconstruction of dominance, without reconstruction or design, removes human agency.
Access without domination	Access without a theory of domination leads to the naturalisation of powerful discourses without an understanding of how these powerful forms came to be powerful.
Access without	This fails to

diversity recognise that difference fundamentally affects pathways to access and involves issues of both history, identity and value.

Access without design This maintains and reifies dominant forms without considering how they can be transformed.

Diversity without domination This leads to a celebration of diversity without any recognition that difference is structured in dominance and that not all discourses/genres/languages/literacies are equally powerful.

Diversity without access Diversity without access to powerful forms of language ghettoises students.

Diversity without design Diversity provides the means, the ideas, the alternative perspectives for reconstruction and transformation. Without design, the

	potential that diversity offers is not realised.
Design without domination	Design, without an understanding of how dominant discourses/practices perpetuate themselves, runs the risk of an unconscious reproduction of these forms.
Design without access	Runs the risk of whatever is designed remaining on the margins.
Design without diversity	This privileges dominant forms and fails to use the design resources provided by difference.

We need to find ways of holding all of these elements in productive tension to achieve what is a shared goal of all critical literacy work: equity and social justice. We need to weave them together in complex moves from deconstruction to reconstruction to deconstruction, from access to deconstruction to redesign, from diversity to deconstruction to new forms of access. These different moves need to contradict and balance one another.

Academic politics

In order to achieve this it is important to try and understand the forces that are keeping these strands apart? Why is it that in some contexts critical literacy theorists do not work more closely with genre theorists? Who is included and excluded from the multiliteracies project? Why is critical literacy more of an

issue in the teaching of English as a primary language than in TESOL? Why are some Communicative Language Teaching theorists hostile to CLA? These questions take us to the heart of academic politics. Any field of enquiry that does not grow and develop will die. Moreover, a field like critical literacy, that is essentially linked to dynamic changes in society, will rapidly cease to be meaningful. Knowledge cannot advance without contestation and movement. That said, it is also important for us to acknowledge the relations of power which operate in our own academic backyard. Bourdieu (1988) in *Homo Academicus*, examines the competition for symbolic capital in the academy. We have to recognise that academics mark out and protect their territories. More often than not, the important work of synthesis is done by teachers.

Let me turn then to some examples which illustrate the integration of these different critical literacy perspectives - domination, diversity, access and design, the first from an Institute that I ran, together with an Australian colleague, Pat Thomson, at a conference for Australian teachers and the last two from my own context, South Africa,

Institute for Australian teachers

Pat Thomson and I offered a pre-conference Institute at the joint national conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, the Australian Federation of Modern Languages Teachers and the Australian Literacy Educators conference, in 1999. For readers not familiar with these associations their membership is drawn from Australian secondary school English teachers, Australian teachers who teach languages other than English, and Australian Primary School teachers respectively. It was this mix that resulted in our attracting a highly diverse group of people to our critical literacy Institute. In this account I will focus on how we were able to use the concepts of domination, diversity, access and design for structuring the work that we did⁴.

In the first session we asked participants to introduce themselves by telling the group what narratives, knowledges and literacies they brought with them.

This took an hour and a half and showed how extensive the resources of the group were in terms of languages, lived first-hand experience and knowledge of different countries, religions, communities, cultural practices and different social locations in terms of class, gender, and an urban/rural consciousness.

We then asked participants to critically analyse an advertisement for Schick Razors⁵. See Figure 1. We deliberately chose this advertisement because of the multiple modalities of representation - visual, verbal, gestural, postural, clothing. All the groups produced readings which demonstrated the negative and sexist construction of women in this advertisement. Not one of the groups used the diversity of knowledge in the group. When asked to reread the advertisement using these knowledges as lenses, the group was able to see how the advertisement could also be read as immodest, Western, middle-class and ethno-centric, with little understanding of different values attached to body hair, clothing and privacy in

different cultures. There was an interesting discussion on countries in which participants had worked, where an advertisement like this could *not* be published. Participants knew how to read against the grain of a text, but they had not learnt how to use the full range of discourses that they had access to. Methods of critical discourse analysis had taught them to look for racism and sexism. In the workshop we called these 'dominant deconstructions'.

Having had a chance to critique a different Schick advertisement, this one addressed to a male market, participants were asked to design their own razor advertisement. Pat Thomson initiated this task by showing the group her redesign. Her advertisement showed pictures of Sinead O'Connor, Andre Agassi and the Dalai Lama all with shaved heads. Her slogan was: 'Schick goes to your head'. She then subjected this advertisement to further critical analysis as she considered people living with AIDS and cancer whom she had chosen to exclude from her gender neutral and culturally inclusive advertisement. The aim here was to show that each new design is also a construction that serves some interests at the expense of others (dominance).

Participants constructed and deconstructed their own group advertisements, now with a much greater awareness of the relationship between domination, diversity and design. We demonstrated the importance of access by a pedagogy that endeavoured to give participants from different language teaching backgrounds and contexts, multiple ways in to the ideas and practices that underpinned the workshop activities that relied on a range of knowledges and literacies.

Access to academic literacy

This example is taken from my own teaching at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa and concerns two highly intelligent post graduate students, Wayne Schell and Nomowabo Mntambo⁶. They came to my Masters level critical literacy class with very different histories. Each of them found access to academic discourse an ongoing struggle.

Wayne was a closet dyslexic. He says

Part of what made life difficult for me at University was because I would not tell anyone that there was a problem. I thought I could make it through University and no one would know that I was dyslexic. This was mainly because the majority of people with whom they came into contact would class people who have learning disabilities as mentally deficient. I could not let people think of me that way so I kept the secret quiet. (Schell, 19 October 1998).

Wayne is highly articulate but he finds writing slow and difficult

The real problem I have is that I cannot organise what it is I write. It starts with the small stuff ... like sentences. They are great when I say them in my head, somehow when they get onto the paper they sort of change and become something that does not seem good. I manage to get the syntax all wrong and they do not say on the paper what they say in my head ... Now the fun begins. When I put a group of these "syntactically challenged" sentences together, it is as if one and one makes three, I magically create a "logically challenged" paragraph. (Schell, 19 October, 1998)

Nomowabo is a mature black woman from the rural Eastern Cape. Her primary language is Xhosa and although she speaks completely fluent English, she finds reading academic English demanding.

When I first got to the University I had to start at a slight disadvantage because I had so much catching up to do ... all the discourses were new to me. I have never felt so stupid in my life. I had all this reading to do and much of it made no sense to me ... I began to wonder if I had ever understood English. (Mntambo, 1998)

Like Wayne, she feels the need to hide her 'inabilities'

For a long time I could not even write the two page responses that she [the lecturer] required us to because I felt all my stupidity would be there for all to see. At least if I did not respond to questions in class nobody would know how "dumb" I felt. (Mntambo, 1998).

Both of these students, mature professionals in their own right, found this struggle painful because of how it made them feel about themselves and their

abilities. They experienced their *diversity* as giving them identities which were outside the mainstream; they recognised the *dominant* institutional genres and discourses as both hegemonic and desirable; they feared that they might never gain full *access* to them and they could not see that they had any resources for changing either the discourses or themselves. Moreover each read the other as already through the 'discourse gates'. Nomowabo saw Wayne as an advantaged white male, and Wayne saw Nomowabo as my doctoral student.

I think the turning point for both of them came with the reading of Gee's *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (1990)⁷. On the first page of his introduction Gee says

You learn the Discourse by becoming a member of the group: you start as a 'beginner', watch what's done, go along with the group *as if you know what you are doing when you don't*, and eventually you can do it on your own (my italics).

This is what Gee calls 'mushfaking' (1990:159). Suddenly Wayne and Nomowabo realised that they were not alone. Not only were *both of them* trying to walk the walk and talk the talk, but that this is how any one gains access to a secondary Discourse. What they also realised is that entering a new Discourse did not necessitate their rejecting the Discourses they already had. They began to revalue and reclaim their primary Discourses as well as the other Discourses they inhabited. Nomowabo, it should be noted, speaks four languages, is currently learning Sesotho, and is in addition a successful teacher educator. Wayne in the concluding entry to his academic log explains it thus

As I look back along this academic journey I have certainly learnt a lot. Perhaps the most important thing that I have learnt is that I am dyslexic. When I say that this is important because I have learnt that it is a characteristic of a Wayne and not the defining aspect of a Wayne. As I have learnt that this is just a part of a multifaceted person who is not one stable body but is made up of different parts in different Discourses. (Schell, 16 November, 1998).

This example shows how the issue of access is linked to the diverse subjectivities that students bring with them to the learning situation; how powerful discourses are simultaneously both a threat and the object of desire; how secondary Discourses provide us with other ways of knowing the world, that is, with the productive diversity necessary for reconstruction and redesign. In reconstructing themselves, these students found positions from which to speak. Their stories reveal a synthesis of access, diversity, dominance and design.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established by an act of parliament, began work in December 1995. For a period of two and a half years the Commission heard testimony from countless South Africans, from all sides in the struggle. The final TRC report which was presented to President Nelson Mandela on 29 October 1998 threads its way through multiple perspectives in which truth is elusive, reconciliation a hope and history is being written by the oral testimony of ordinary people.

I have chosen to use the TRC report because of what it has to say about language and power, language and access, diversity and re-design. Most of the testimony relates to gross violations of human rights and makes explicit the extensive use of brute power of all kinds. In the chapter which tries to make sense of the causes, motives and perspectives, the Report offers a sophisticated analysis of the role played by language.

It is a common place to treat language as mere words, not deeds, therefore language is taken to play a minimal role in understanding violence. The Commission wishes to take a different view here. Language, discourse and rhetoric does things: it constructs social categories, it gives orders, it persuades us, it justifies, explains, gives reasons, excuses. It constructs reality. It moves people against other people. (TRC:7,124,294).

Language in its many and varied forms, is the central element in ideology as power. ... In the South African context it is important to understand how multiple discourses combined, intersected and intertwined to create climates of violence. In this respect the ideologies of racism, patriarchy, religions, capitalism, apartheid and

militarism all intertwined to “manufacture” people capable of violence. (TRC: 7,131,296).

In examining the language of the State, the security apparatus and the liberation movement the commissioners conclude that ‘a spiral of discourses increasingly dehumanised the “other”, creating the conditions for violence’ (TRC: 7,125,295). What this suggests is that one needs to look at how competing discourses affect and infect one another. It is not enough to look at the language of the oppressor in isolation. Both sides in the struggle used language to support their positions. The Commission has a view of power very similar to that of Foucault who sees power as relational (1978:95). For Foucault

discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (1978:101).

Not only did the Commission work with a sophisticated theory of the relationship between discourse, *dominance* and power as a basis for their analysis of the testimony they heard, its practices and processes showed a full grasp of the language-related questions of *access* and *diversity*. The hearings demanded neither dominant literacy - neither written testimony, nor established genres - nor the use of a dominant language. For the first time South Africans from all sides could tell their stories in their own tongues with Commissioners appointed to listen and to record. The proceedings were open to the public and were widely reported on radio and television. This was a fundamentally dialogic process in which the listener was crucial; the hearing as important as the telling.

The last part of the report deals with recommendations and reconciliation. For many, including me, reconciliation is a hard solution to accept. The Report, however, asks us to think of it as the foundation on which we can build our future.

Reconciliation does not wipe away the memories of the past. Indeed it is motivated by a form of memory that stresses the need to remember without debilitating pain, bitterness, revenge fear or guilt. It understands the vital importance of learning from and redressing past violations for the sake of our shared present and our children's future. (TRC: 9,149,434).

It is possible to think of the TRC's work as a deconstruction of the past without which reconstruction is impossible. We need to learn from the past to design a different future.

Conclusion

In South Africa, the project of remaking our social identities and designing our social futures is an enormous one. I honed my critical literacy skills as 'weapons' of oppositional politics in a country ruled by apartheid. Since 1994, I have had to rethink how the different strands of work in language and social justice can be brought together to emphasise power as productive in a time of redress, truth and reconciliation. I have had to re-describe my critical literacy skills as 'tools' that can enable me, and my fellow South Africans, to use our diverse systems of representation to reinvent ourselves and the society in which we live. Maybe this synthesis can be of use to others.

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