Editorial: The construction of academic literacy and difference

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Any discussion of literacy is necessarily selective and is likely to engender or respond to debates. This issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* is no exception. Our aim is to respond to the ongoing discussion of challenges and contradictions that are inherent in teaching and learning academic literacy in a contemporary world – the world characterized by the proliferation of new identities, meanings, ways of life and learning environments. In such conditions, the cultural space of a nation is becoming a complex mixture of global and local forces that disturb the frameworks of nation-state modernity, including its project of cultural-linguistic normalization and ordering differences through literacy education. Modernity has laboured under the myth of cultural essentialism, hung on tenaciously to the view that the division between self and the Other is a natural and therefore unproblematic fact of life. It has excluded and oppressed people who have had to bear the burden of this legacy because their perceived cultural and linguistic differences have been constructed as inferior and stigmatized.

The normative construction of literacy in late-modern nation-states presents one of the major challenges for literacy educators who take issues of difference and power seriously and who are mindful about the paradoxical nature of providing access to the dominant discourses of meaning-making. As Janks (2004) argues, many literacy educators see the provision of access to the dominant literacy as a way of empowering the marginalized and the disadvantaged. This social and political position drives their moral responsibility for educating the Other. Yet, the "access paradox" lies precisely in the following contradiction: "if you provide more people with access to the dominant variety of the dominant language [and literacy], you contribute to perpetuating and increasing its dominance. If, on the other hand, you deny students access, you perpetuate their marginalisation in a society that continues to recognise this language as a mark of distinction" (Janks, 2004, p. 33).

One way of addressing this contradiction is clearly to provide access to the powerful discourses and academic literacy but, in doing so, also to engage in the project of democratic education that is both culturally inclusive and socially critical. Students need to know not only the powerful "ways with words" but also how discourses of power operate to become the normative constructs of meaning-making that govern literate behaviour within specific social and institutional domains. This involves the uncovering of a particular ideology of normative, academic literacy that carries with it certain expectations for using language and, indeed, for becoming a particular kind of person, a citizen of a nation-state.

Situated in the cultural politics of educating the nation, schooled or academic literacy has been a decisive tool of homogenization. By defining literacy as a set of technical and decontextualized skills, reading and writing have been traditionally understood as essential qualities of abstract reason that are based on the culturally dominant ways of

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encoding and decoding texts. In turn, the acquisition of such skills has been conceived by governments and policy-makers as essential for each citizen to have, not only to communicate within the boundaries of nation-states, but also to reproduce authoritative discourses and meanings across the cultural space of these territorial units. The construction of schooled literacy as a set of abstract skills is inherently connected to the (re)production of cultural space for an "imagined community" of like-minded people.

The connection between the unificatory idea of a single culture and schooled literacy, for example, is particularly explicit in a conservative framework of cultural literacy (Hirsh, 1987; 1999) and its subsequent development by the cultural literacy movement. Because the Other is misrecognised in this model, the rationale behind the concept of cultural literacy lies in the acquisition of unexamined, canonized and universally shared information, seen as needed for all competent speakers, readers and writers to function effectively in society. The transmission of canonical literacy in schools is then believed to play a key role in ensuring national development and communication among a diverse population divided by ethnic, political and social differences. While putting emphasis on cultural unity, this model of literacy promotes the unconditional assimilation of ethnic and linguistic minorities to dominant cultural codes. In this view, there is no need for multicultural education because, as Hirsch (1987, p. 21) argues, it interferes with the primary focus of national education and schools' responsibility to ensure the children's mastery of the common cultural literacy – that is, the literary canon of "the most democratic culture". This view of "democratic" schooling makes one wonder what the proponents of this model of literacy mean by "democracy" in multicultural conditions.

Similarly, the persistence of "essayist literacy" (Gee, 1996) in education represents a culturally elitist *telos* of writing development, emphasising the mastery of rhetorical techniques that exemplify universal, Western rationality. While this conception of writing flows out of the notion of decontextualization, a standard or normative essay disguises the workings of power in its construction. This becomes obvious only against a background of a "constitutive outside" – a different form of writing that is often presented as a deviation from the norm, and this, in turn, is instrumental in understanding what counts as norm or standard. Thus, the notion of Western superiority in composing linear texts is implied in contrastive rhetoric studies, particularly in comparative-evaluative judgments made with regard to the "less" logical or coherent writing systems of other cultures. However, when we turn the cultural viewing lens back on these assumptions, it becomes clear that they are also based on the essentialised views of cultural literacy and "good" writing. They reflect, as Atkinson (2003) argues, the ideology of a relatively small segment of English-speaking people, who have disproportionate power in defining what writing should be, as well as those who come from middle-class groups which "place special emphasis on maintaining or elevating their socioeconomic status through educational 'achievement'" (p. 51). The assumptions of "good" writing are imbedded in the cultural politics of education that privileges textual practices and cultural values of powerful social groups and devalue different ways of textual meaning-making.

The normalizing culture of modernity was so successful that its political agenda has become fully apparent only recently through systematic critical and deconstructive work in rethinking the concept of alterity and its value for education. Over the last

three decades, postmodernist understandings of difference have opened new avenues for literacy researchers and educators in recognizing the right of the Other to remain different rather than being assimilated or normalized. Whether this concerns a dramatic shift in demographic landscapes of nation-states due to migration, the emergence of new cultural-semiotic and textual practices, or the development of multicultural policies in the broader society and in education, the idea is that difference cannot be eliminated but is rather here to stay. The shift in thinking about how to live with difference rather than getting rid of "strangers" is formulated in Bauman's critique of modernity:

> [A] new theoretical/ideological consensus is emerging, to replace another one, more than a century old. If the left and right, the progressivist and the reactionary of the modern period agreed that strangehood is abnormal and regrettable, and that the superior (because homogenous) order of the future would have no room for the strangers, postmodern times are marked by an almost universal agreement that difference is not merely unavoidable, but good, precious and in need of protection and cultivation (1997, p. 31).

Postmodern critique of modernity has triggered debates about responsibility towards the Other, thereby putting ethics before politics.

For literacy studies, the 1980s-1990s was a particularly important period in this regard as the increasing number of researchers and educators shifted their attention to different ways of using literacy in society and their implications for education. These developments have crystallized in the definition of literacy as social practice to capture the multiple and situated nature of meaning-making and to argue that literacy practices are inseparable from how people engage in identity work and what values and funds of knowledge they draw upon in their local communities. This concept of *literacies* has become inseparable from the politics of difference in multicultural states, and the work of sociocultural researchers in response to this politics has produced quite a significant impact on classroom pedagogy. The rise of critical approaches to literacy, genre-based pedagogy, bilingual education and the development of ethnic community schools in immigrant receiving countries are just some outcomes of a large-scale "social turn" in language and literacy education and policy-making.

However, after the relative prominence of these initiatives in the 1980-1990s, we witness today a change of direction. As Apple argues, "many of the rightist policies now taking centre stage in education and nearly everything else embody a tension between a neo-liberal emphasis on 'market values' on the one hand and a neoconservative attachment to 'traditional values' on the other" (2006, p. 21). Neo-liberal policies in education have precipitated numerous efforts to delegitimise public education by highlighting, or rather constructing, deficiencies of public schools and universities, often in the area of literacy education. Hence, neo-liberal reform efforts often build alliances with the neo-conservative forces that blame teachers for failing to teach "traditional values" and cultural literacy as well as teacher educators for failing to "train" pre-service teachers in how to transfer the "correct" knowledge better. This strategy of creating "moral panics" has been currently widely used in many countries to represent teaching as a low trust profession, thereby justifying the introduction of accountability regimes to monitor educators' performance and the curriculum. Academic literacy has become one of the primary aspects of schooling to

come under such accountability and monitoring measures in Australia, the US and the UK.

"Moral panics" about literacy education comes at a time of heightened security awareness in the post-9/11 world. The upsurge of international terrorism has led to increasing pressure on educators to adopt a more conservative approach to teaching in multicultural classrooms, particularly when suspected terrorists, for example in the UK and Germany, are apparently to be found among locally educated and middle-class, migrant families. In this context, we are witnessing a shift from the project of building egalitarian societies to the project of making community cohesive, with many suggesting a return to assimilation and requiring certain minority groups to make greater efforts to adapt to majority society. New politics of assimilation have come to dominate political debates, leading to the recasting of citizenship laws in accordance with security considerations and the reformulation of national identities as racially exclusive.

As Fekete's (2004) analysis of Islamophobia in the Western World demonstrates, the reinforcement of the security state through cultural homogenization and assimilation spells the death of multiculturalism. Similarly, the rise of rightist policies in literacy education spells the death of multiliteracies. The return to basics in language and literacy education similarly works against the use, valuing and acknowledgement of multiple languages and literacies, and therefore reflects a return to the modern tradition in education that is arguably inseparable from a culture of normalization that is desperate for order and uncomfortable with difference and strangers.

Here lies another paradox: at a time when classrooms are becoming increasingly culturally diverse, and the literacies practised by students are becoming progressively varied, multilingual and multimodal, education faculties are urged to prepare teachers who would discourage difference, see it as polluting traditional values and beliefs and, hence, as something that should be positively repressed through "proper" and "basic" education. This neo-conservative vision of teacher education entails a typically modern design of dealing with difference through nation(alist) order-making. As Bauman once put it "the [modern] nation state is designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers" (1991, p. 63). It does this by using two strategies – anthropophagic (assimilation) and anthropoemic (exclusion). Both strategies are central to the process of nation-building described by Anderson (1991) as "imagining" sameness by homogenising differences and expelling strangers beyond the borders of managed and manageable territory. Needless to say, current international trends in educational policy, particularly in the area of academic literacy, seem to be driven by the nationalist project of managing differences, for, if strangers are products of a certain cultural or social upbringing, they are amenable to reshaping through some sort of explicitly normative curriculum.

However, in the context of an unfinished nation-building project and globalization, educating the nation becomes more elusive then ever before. Framing the curriculum around dominant cultural literacy and establishing communal homogeneity, whilst de-legitimizing the Other and announcing ever-new strangers, is not feasible in these circumstances. This is because the category of the stranger stands in opposition to the modern framework of education that presupposes a unified "we-horizon" (Husserl, 1970). There is an increasing need to resist these conservative tendencies and to

continue a socially critical model of literacy education that is more response-able to the lives of strangers and other forms of difference in a late-modern, globalized society at the same time that it provides opportunities for all students to expand their communicative repertoires and to gain agency in the "design of their social futures" (New London Group, 2000). Articles in this issue respond in different ways to such an agenda.

In the first article in this issue, Mariana Achugar, Mary Schleppegrell, and Teresa Oteíza provide a vision of how teachers in multilingual classrooms can help their students systematically analyze academic language and develop critical language awareness. The authors describe three teacher professional development programmes in the United States aimed at helping teachers understand and teach discipline-based, academic language patterns through functional linguistics. The authors demonstrate that the teachers who participated in the professional development programmes became more aware of the essential links between language and academic content, gained a greater critical understanding of their academic disciplines, used the metalanguage of functional linguistics to engage in more student-centered pedagogies, and gained confidence in helping English Language Learners both understand and critique academic literacy practices.

Robyn Henderson and Elizabeth Hirst remind us that well-meaning efforts to help historically marginalized students engage in academic literacies may not always foster critical perspectives on such literacies or draw fully upon students' existing language and literacy practices. The authors use Gee's notion of "affinity spaces" to reanalyze the "success" of a tertiary short course in academic literacy that they taught, a course that was aimed at increasing the success and retention rates of students from low socio-economic, rural and indigenous backgrounds. The authors find that although their course enhanced students' motivation and engagement in academic literacy, it fell short of giving students the opportunity to critique academic literacies or construct hybrid texts. The article provides a model of reflection by teacher-researchers who carefully reexamine their own work in order to better understand its successes and its shortfalls.

Rosemary Viete and Phan Le Ha make a similar argument in their article, calling for the creation of "thirdspaces" in educational contexts where students who bring language and literacy practices that are perceived as "different" can create hybrid academic texts that draw upon their multiple "voices". Viete and Phan Le Ha share narratives of their experiences as a postgraduate student (Phan Le Ha) and a university supervisor (Viete) as they worked together on the writing of Phan Le Ha's Masters thesis. The narratives, and the authors' analysis of excerpts of Phan Le Ha's thesis, provide compelling examples of what academic writing in a thirdspace can look like and how university faculty can mentor young scholars, especially those who are positioned as "Other" based on their cultural, linguistic or national affiliations, to produce such powerful hybrid academic texts.

Linda Shelton offers readers both a theoretical synthesis of scholarship on World Englishes and specific pedagogical strategies that promote multilingualism in educational contexts. She frames her article with the work of Suresh Canagarajah, asking how his theories can be "imported" to better understand language variety within local contexts and to shape academic literacy instruction. Using illustrative

examples from her own experiences as a university-level, English composition and grammar teacher, Shelton demonstrates that Canagarajah's concept of "code meshing" is particularly relevant to a reconceptualization of academic literacy within the context of the linguistic diversity of the United States. Shelton's argument, and her reflections upon her own interactions with students, are imbued with a strong sense of the ethical obligations all teachers have in their representation of and relationships with people they perceive as "Other".

Claire Charles investigates how popular discourses concerning academic literacy construct gender differences, dichotomizing and essentializing boys and girls through creating moral panics about boys' academic literacy achievement in comparison to girls'. Charles examines the academic literacy practices of girls in an elite school in Australia through the lens of another popular discourse on gender – that of "girl power". She finds that although the girls in her study emphasized the female independence and agency characteristic of "girl power" in their analysis of texts, they also placed heavy emphasis on their physical appearance and heterosexual desirability. Charles argues that girls, as well as boys, benefit from critical approaches to academic literacy that allow them to question and deconstruct powerful discourses of normative gender expectations and of gender "differences".

The two articles in the "Classroom Narratives" section of this issue also respond to the construction of difference and academic literacy. Betty Lanteigne reflects upon her own experiences as an Arabic language learner and an English language teacher to complicate the notion of the ideal "native speaker". Noting that many language learners assume that potentially inappropriate communicative behaviours of native speakers reflect cultural differences rather than intentional defiance of politeness conventions, or "rudeness", she describes both how she learned to recognize rudeness and how she teaches her students to distinguish rudeness from differing politeness conventions. Lanteigne's article argues that language learners need strategies for judging the appropriateness of native speakers' communicative behaviours so that they can respond appropriately, refrain from unintended imitations of impolite language-related behaviours, and thus better engage in successful dialogues and relationships with people from different language and cultural backgrounds.

Sue Halsey's classroom narrative looks at the possibilities of new technologies in transforming literacy learning in the primary classroom. She describes how the integration of web-based technology in classroom teaching can bridge the traditional divide between school and home literacy practices of young learners, thereby making literacy education responsive to children's popular culture and identities. This article looks at a range of classroom activities that have promoted collaborative learning and fostered students' creativity and their awareness of social purposes of writing. Importantly, Halsey envisages classrooms of the future that not only incorporate new technologies but also build on the textual practices and cultural world of children. This article urges teachers to examine what literacy activities our children are engaging with out of school and consider how we can form links between multiple sites of meaning-making to support their literacy learning.

This special issue of *ETPC* concludes with the book review written by Terry Locke. Unlike many traditional short reviews this is an extensive analysis of the recent book *Critical literacy and the aesthetic: Transforming the English classroom,* co-written by

Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan. This book reconfigures critical literacy so that it can give an adequate consideration to the aesthetic, which involves paying attention to such issues as identity, human emotion, creativity and the value of texts. Locke defines the book as a timely and important contribution to literacy pedagogy as it engages with the complexity of the critical-creative nexus, where political analysis is connected to the world of diverse experience in literary works (for example, tragic, comic, trivial, profound, and so on). Pedagogy that brings the critical and the aesthetic together, as the book argues, can promote students' understanding of diverse experiences better by placing their own experiences within that diversity. Therefore, in critical pedagogy, aesthetic texts matter because they engage us emotionally and help us ultimately connect, critically and creatively, with our selves.

Though the articles in this issue approach the topic of academic literacy and difference from varying perspectives, multiple cultural and national contexts, and different educational settings, all, in one way or another highlight the importance of critical literacy pedagogies and dialogic understandings of academic literacies. Taken together, the articles remind us that academic literacy is not a homogeneous social practice, but rather one that is dependent on social context, subject matter and participants. This heterogeneity makes it all the more essential that elementary, secondary and tertiary students are encouraged to develop and express critical perspectives on academic and other literacies. Most significantly, the articles in this issue demonstrate the potential of thirdspace, hybrid and code-meshing academic literacies to create richer, more ethical and more equitable educational environments that foster dialogue between self and Other.

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