Editorial: Critical literacy revisited: Writing as critique

HILARY JANKS
Wits School of Education, University of Witwatersrand

VIVIAN VASQUEZ
College of Arts & Sciences, American University, Washington DC

Freire's *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1970), which explains the ideas that underpin his critical approach to education in general and literacy pedagogy in particular, was first published in English over thirty years ago. Since then, critical literacy, a tradition of language and literacy education that takes seriously the relationship between language, literacy and power, has built upon his work in relation to developments in the field of language and literacy education, in relation to the possibilities and constraints in different contexts, and in relation to new technologies.

In the Freirean tradition (1970), becoming literate is linked to naming and renaming the world, in other words to social transformation. In the United Kingdom, the focus was once primarily on critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis and has since moved to semiotics and multimodality. The focus of critical literacy was on reading texts critically in relation to the ways in which they work to position readers (Janks, 1993); subsequently there was a turn to the teaching of writing from a critical perspective (Ivanič, 1998; Kamler, 2001) and ultimately to multi-modal design, analysis and re-design (New London Group, 2000). Now critical literacy is concerned with both the consumption and production of texts broadly defined (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2010). Even with a shift in focus, the project remains the same – understanding the relationship between texts, meaning-making and power in order to undertake transformative social action that contributes to the achievement of a more equitable social order.

All the texts selected for this special edition (with the exception of "Articles in dialogue") focus on work that contributes to the development of this project. For instance, Hall used digital storytelling as a tool for honoring the identities and cultural ways of knowing of a group of African American women. Tate and Enciso both used Morrell's (2003) critical text production to illuminate racial and social inequalities in their settings.

We framed the call for papers with an understanding that easy access to digital technologies in many parts of the world has changed the conditions of possibility for literacy events resulting in the development of new practices. Books can be downloaded, music and images can be re-mixed and immediately retrieved using quick response codes. Web 2.0 has given young people a global audience for anything they choose to upload. There are new spaces in which they can produce and re-produce identities and enter global online communities. Social networking has produced new forms of interacting, where users can share ideas, activities, events and interests. New forms of language and new kinds of multimodal texts have also been produced. And because change is so rapid, it is difficult to imagine what the landscape will look like by the time the generation currently in school will graduate.

At the same time, the digital divide means that where in some homes very young children are able to manipulate and create texts for touch screen smart phones, participate in massively multi-player online games such as Lego Universe™, and play interactive games on computers, others remain without food, shelter, running water, and electricity. If mobility is a class marker (Janks & Comber, 2006), so is connectivity. Social differences produce differential access to the world. According to Wu (2010) in *Time Magazine*, bandwidth is the new black gold and it produces new and diverse forms of inclusion and exclusion.

CHALLENGING OR DEFENDING THE VALUE OF A CRITICAL LITERACY PERSPECTIVE

We believe these changes, along with the possibilities presented by the new communication landscape, new modes of meaning making, the ongoing transformation of digital texts, the interactivity and immediacy of access, for some, to the information highway, continue to provide challenges to language and literacy teachers at all levels of education. These challenges and possibilities create spaces for new and exciting opportunities to further explore critical literacies. We are both critical literacy educators who believe that none of these changes minimise the need for an understanding of the social effects of textual practices. If anything, we would argue that the more complex and multimodal texts become, the more important it is for "readers" to understand the politics of semiosis and the textual instantiations of power (Janks, 2010, 1993; Vasquez, 2010, 2004).

However, we know that this view is not shared and that there are literacy educators whom we respect who believe that critical literacy has passed its sell-by date. For instance, Kress (2010), in his theory of design, rejects theories of communicative competence and theories of critique. He rejects competence because it "anchors communication in convention as social regulation" (p. 6) and critique because of its engagement "with the past actions of others and their effects" (p. 6). For him "competence leaves arrangements unchallenged" (p. 6) and critique is oriented backwards, towards superior power, and concerned with only present effects of the past actions of others.

Fairclough (1992) showed some time ago that what counts as appropriate and who decides are questions of power. This offers a fundamental challenge to Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence. "Appropriateness", like other language and text conventions, is tied to the social order and subject to challenge and change. Kress' position on critique as oriented backwards is internally contradictory. How can it be oriented backwards, if it is concerned with present effects? Kress further contradicts himself when he says that the understanding developed through critique is essential in the practices of design (p. 6). His arguments rest on his sense that current forms of knowledge production, of text-making and of social and semiotic boundaries are unstable (Kress, 2010, p. 23). The move from knowledge consumption to knowledge production evident on Web 2.0, has removed previous forms of authorisation and ownership, as seen with such online texts as Wikipedia. Authorship is further challenged by new forms of text-making: mixing, mashing, cutting, pasting and re-contextualising are taken-for-granted practices of the net-generation. These

processes result in easy and on-going textual transformation that destabilise the very notion of "a text".

Finally Kress points to the social and semiotic blurring of frames and boundaries. Conventions, grammar, genres, semiotic forms are all in a state of flux and the boundaries between information and knowledge, fact and fiction are fluid. For Kress, the rhetor as the maker of a message now makes an assessment of all aspects of the communicational situation: of his or her interest; of the characteristics of the audience; the semiotic requirements of the issue at stake; and the resources available for representation; together with establishing the best means of dissemination (Kress, 2010, p.26). He goes on to say that once the message has been designed and produced, it is open to re-making and transformation by those who "review, comment and engage with it" (Kress, 2010, p. 27).

In a recent keynote address, Janks argued that Kress' description of the rhetor has always been the case, with different modes assuming prominence at different moments in history. She continued by stating, there are important aspects of this description that are important to challenge in defence of critique. The first aspect she noted is the assumption that the rhetor's choices are both conscious and freely made, when there is evidence to suggest that our choices are circumscribed by the ways of thinking, believing and valuing inscribed in the discourses that we inhabit. Without critique, the possibility of disrupting these discourses is reduced. In addition, convention, genre and grammar have always been subject to change; this does not mean that they no longer constrain our semiotic choices in all domains of communication. Equally important are the resources needed for "review". Engagement is not enough. The interest of the interpreter is not enough. Recognition of the rhetor's interest and estrangement are also necessary for re-design. Finally, Janks argues that one has to have a sense of how the text could be different and this requires something in addition to engagement. One has to be able to read the content, form and interests of the text, however unconsciously, in order to be able to redesign it.

Regardless of our stance on Kress' arguments, we believe it is important to consider such arguments in order for us to continue to explore possibilities for our work and so, in this special edition of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, we invited contributions that challenge or defend the value of a critical literacy perspective which includes the use of new digital technologies. In particular, we were concerned to attract contributions that work at the interface of semiotics, language, identity, access and power in the interest of a more just society. We were unfortunately unsuccessful in soliciting articles from the main proponents of this position, and most of what we received were articles that argue that critical literacy has an important contribution to make to literacy education.

OVERVIEW ON THE ARTICLES CHOSEN FOR THIS SPECIAL EDITION

In *designing from their own social worlds: the digital story of three african american young women*, Hall takes us into an after-school university program for middle- and high-school youth, where spaces are created for students to conceptualise, script and perform their own media productions about issues they deem important to their lives.

He takes, as a point of departure, Janks' (2000) idea that mere access to dominant forms of literacy, in this case digital literacy, is not enough, noting we must also create opportunities for students to enact culturally specific forms of agency. In his article, he shares how a group of African American women digital storytellers represent themselves and re-imagine their social worlds through the use of technology to create counter-narratives to dominant discourses on their race, gender and community, as a way of honouring their identities and cultural ways of knowing.

Building on the work developed by Morrell (2003) on critical textual production, Tate's narrative, *Equity and Access Through Literacy Development and Instruction: The use of critical text to transform student writing and identity within a research seminar,* focuses on what she refers to as a critical text produced by a tertiary student during a summer research seminar at a West Coast University. Her narrative is on the process of critical textual production and how she used a critical literacy framework as a way for students to create high quality writing and subvert mainstream discourses in pursuit of illuminating the racial and social inequalities in their schools.

Similarly, in the second article, *Storytelling in critical literacy pedagogy: Removing the walls between immigrant and non-immigrant youth,* Enciso also makes use of Morrell's critical text production as she examines the story forms and contexts that immigrant and non-immigrant youth used as they worked with their teachers and Enciso to tell stories of advocacy and bigotry that reflected the everyday realities and relationships they had formed in their school and community. Enciso notes that in classrooms where a highly heterogeneous cultural and linguistic group of children constitute the student population, teachers can create dynamic spaces for critical textual production, where students can imagine and make manifest "a not-yet-realised present" (Morrell 2008), through storytelling, dramatic improvisation and the use of digital tools.

Also with an interest in studying the use of digital tools, the following articles by Burnett and Merchant, and by Reid, focus on the use of new textual forms made possible by digitial technologies and the Internet. In *Is there a space for critical literacy in the context of social media?*, Burnett and Merchant agree with Kress, arguing that these new forms of communication make critical literacy outdated. Reid, in her article, *"We don't twitter, we facebook": An alternative pedagogical space that enables critical practices in relation to writing,* applies Janks' interdependent model (2010) of critical literacy to her research data in order to argue that social networking provides greater access for her students, transforms existing relations of power, results in communication across diversity and enables semiotic and linguistic play and redesign.

These two articles lead on nicely to Newfield's article, *From visual literacy to critical visual literacy: An analysis of educational materials*, and Hayik's article, *Critical visual analysis of multicultural sketches*. Newfield explores the development of her own understanding of how to transform visual literacy materials into critical visual literacy materials, such that readers are not only able to see how semiotic choices construct meaning but to explore the social consequences of these meanings. Hayik works with visual production, and a critical analysis of students' visual designs is based on reading children's stories critically. She interprets her work with children's

visual designs in her Palestinian classroom from a critical literacy perspective employing the framework developed by Lewison et al. (2002).

As noted previously, one of the arguments put forward by Kress (2010), which suggests that we need to move beyond the critical, has to do with the fact that texts are no longer stable. This is clearly not true with regard to literary texts. Locke and Cleary, in *Critical literacy as an approach to literary study in the multicultural, high-school classroom*, show what can be gained using a critical literacy perspective for the teaching of literature in schools. Huang's article, *Critical literacy helps wipe away the dirt off our glasses: Towards an understanding of reading as ideological practice*, invites tertiary students to reflect critically on EFL textbooks. Her work focuses on critical reading at the tertiary level.

Finally, this issue contains two "Articles in dialogue". Hennessy, Hinchion and McNamara report on research on aspects of the taching of poetry in Ireland. Their research reports on a marked imbalance in the prioritisation of pupil development, with many teachers privileging the cognitive development of pupils' poetic understanding over the affective. The focus of Garrett and Moltzen's article is on writing, with a particular focus on what it is that motivates gifted, adolescent female students to write. The participants in this study were asked to reflect on the development of their interest and ability in writing over time. Emerging from their feedback were two categories of catalysts: the intrapersonal and the environmental, with the former more influential to the realisation of their writing talent than the latter.

CRITIQUE IS NOT THE END-POINT

In her keynote address presented at the 10th conference of the International Federation of Teachers of English, in Auckland, New Zealand in April 2011, Hilary Janks argued the importance of critical literacy. She talked about the democratisation of text production as reinforcing Foucault's (1980) notion of power as something that circulates, rather than the Marxist theory of power as a form of domination and subordination. Both editors of this issue believe that both forms of power, which are evident in the world in which we live, should be subject to critique. What matters is that critique is not the end-point; transformative and ethical re-construction and social action are. The question is: What might this be like in different spaces and places, and what contribution can literacy make to this endeavour? Hall ends his article with the statement that, "Much more work needs to be done...". We completely agree and hope that the articles included in this issue create a space for you to imagine the work you might do to continue to explore possibilities for critical literacies in your setting.

REFERENCES

Fairclough, N. (1992). The appropriacy of appropriateness. In N. Fairclough (Ed.), *Critical Language Awareness* (pp. 133-168). London, UK: Longman.
Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings: 1972-1977.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1970). The order of discourse. Inaugural Lecture at the College de France. In M. Shapiro (Ed.), *Language and politics* (pp. 108-138). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell

Freire, P. (1970). *Cultural action for freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review and Center for the Study of Development and Social Change.

Ivanic, R. (1998) *Writing and identity.* Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Janks, H. (2011). *The importance of critical literacy.* Keynote Address at the 10th Conference of the International Federation of Teachers of English. Auckland, NZ.

Janks, H. (2010). *Literacy and Power.* London and New York: Routledge.

Janks, H., & Comber, B. (2006). Critical literacy across continents. In K. Pahl, & J. Rowsell (Eds.). *Travel notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of practice* (pp. 226-248). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Janks, H. (1993) *The Critical Language Awareness Series.* Johannesburg. RSA: Wits University Press and Hodder and Stoughton.

Kamler, B. (2001). *Relocating the personal.* Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Kress, G. (2010) *Multimodality*. London and New York: Routledge.

Lewison, M., Flint, A. S., & Van Sluys, K. (2002). Taking on critical literacy: The journey of newcomers. *Language Arts, 79*(5), 382-392.

Morrell, E. (2008). *Critical literacy and urban youth: Pedagogies of access, dissent, and liberation*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Morrell, E. (2003). *Writing the word and the world: Critical literacy as critical textual production.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, New York.

New London Group (2000). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Multiliteracies* (pp. 9-42). London, UK: Routledge.

Vasquez, V. (2010). *Getting beyond i like the book: Creating spaces for critical literacy in K-6 settings*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Vasquez, V. (2004). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. New York, NY: Routledge, Press.

Wu, T. (2010, March 22). Bandwidth is the new black gold. *TIME Magazine.* Retrieved May 19, 2011 from http://www.newamerica.net/node/29005.