The importance of critical literacy[1]

HILARY JANKS
Wits University, South Africa

ABSTRACT: *This paper is divided into three parts. It begins by making an argument for the ongoing importance of critical literacy at a moment when there are mutterings about its being passé. The second part of the paper formulates the argument with the use of illustrative texts. It concludes with examples of critical literacy activities that I argue, are still necessary in classrooms around the world.*

KEYWORDS: *Critical literacy; text; image; discourse; critique; Orientalism; education; design; re-design; pedagogy.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper makes an argument for the ongoing importance of critical literacy at a moment when there are mutterings about its being passé. Foucault (1972, p.123) argues that "discourse is the power which is to be seized" because he recognises its ability to produce us as particular kinds of human subjects. In an age where the production of meaning is being democratised by Web 2, social networking sites and portable connectivity, powerful discourses continue to speak us and to speak through us. We often become unconscious agents of their distribution. At the same time, these new media have been used for disseminating counter discourses, for mobilising opposition, for questioning and destabilising power. This is the context within which we need to consider the role of critical literacy in education. The second part of the paper formulates the argument. The 2010 World Press award photograph together with Said's analysis of Orientalism as examples of the power of image and discourse and the "Mountains of Kong" as a metaphor for the power of text and the force of images, are all used as evidence that an ability to understand the social effects of texts is important. The last part of the paper draws on a new set of materials that I am currently working on, as examples of the kind of work, that I would argue, is still necessary in classrooms around the world.

In a peaceful world without the threat of global warming or conflict or war, where everyone has access to education, health care, food and a dignified life, there would still be a need for critical literacy. In a world that is rich with difference, there is still likely to be intolerance and fear of the other. Because difference is structured in relation to power, unequal access to resources based on gender, race, ethnicity, language, ability, sexuality, nationality and class will continue to produce privilege and resentment. Even in a world where socially constructed relations of power have been flattened, we will still have to manage the politics of our daily lives. I have called these politics little *p* politics to distinguish them from big *P* politics (Janks, 2010, p. 186).

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Politics with a capital *P* is about government and world trade agreements and the United Nations' peace-keeping forces; it is about ethnic or religious genocide and world tribunals; it is about apartheid and global capitalism, money laundering and linguistic imperialism. It is about the inequities between the political North and the political South. It is about oil, the ozone layer, genetic engineering and cloning. It is about the danger of global warming. It is about globalisation, the new work order and sweat shops in Asia.

Little *p* politics, on the other hand, is about the micro-politics of everyday life. It is about the minute-by-minute choices and decisions that make us who we are. It is about desire and fear; how we construct them and how they construct us. It is about the politics of identity and place; it is about small triumphs and defeats; it is about winners and losers, haves and have-nots, school bullies and their victims; it is about how we treat other people day by day; it is about whether or not we learn someone else's language or recycle our own garbage. Little *p* politics is about taking seriously the feminist perspective that the personal *is* the political.

This is not to suggest that *p*olitics has nothing to do with *P*olitics. On the contrary, the socio-historical and economic contexts in which we live produce different conditions of possibility and constraint that we all have to negotiate as meaningfully as we can. While the social constructs who we are, so do we construct the social. This dialectic relationship is fluid and dynamic, creating possibilities for social action and change.

THE ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST CRITIQUE

I take the position that a critical stance to language, text and discourse cannot be dismissed as no longer relevant and I have taken some trouble to understand the arguments that suggest this. Kress (2010), in his theory of design, rejects theories of both communicative competence and theories of critique: *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". This is not a new idea. Fairclough's article on "The appropriacy of 'appropriateness'" (1992, p. 33) showed that what counts as appropriate and who decides are questions of power, thus providing a fundamental challenge to Dell Hymes' theory of communicative competence. "Appropriateness", like other language and text conventions, is tied to the social order and is subject to challenge and change.

Critique, on the other hand, is rejected by Kress because it is "oriented *backwards* and towards superior power, concerned with the *present* effects of the past actions of others" (p. 6 my italics). Not only is this internally contradictory – how can it be oriented backwards if it is concerned with present effects; Kress later contradicts himself when two lines later 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. (Wikipedia is a good

example.) 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 apt representation; together with establishing the best means of dissemination. (Kress, 2010, p. 26, my italics)

Kress 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).

I would argue that Kress' description of the rhetor has always been the case, with different modes assuming prominence at different moments in history. Nevertheless, there are important aspects of this description that it is important to challenge in defence of critique. First 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. An ability to recognise and critique the rhetor's interest and to estrange oneself from it is also necessary for re-design. 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 with and against the content, form and interests of the text in order to be able to redesign it.
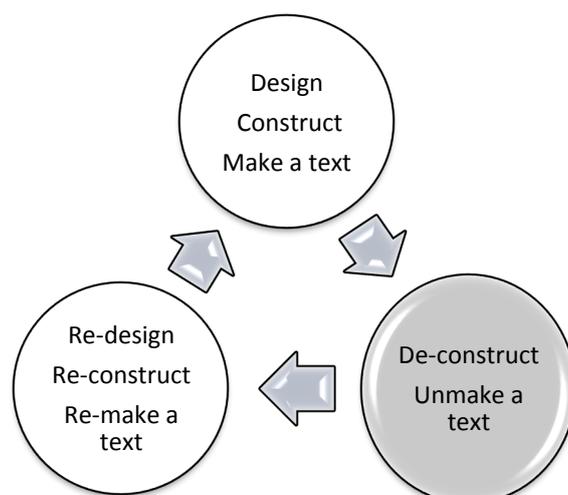

Figure 1. The redesign cycle (Janks, 2010, p. 183)

Critical literacy has for some time focused on both text consumption and text production as well as the relationship between the two and critique figures as an aspect of both. This can be represented by the redesign cycle (Janks, 2010) (see Figure 1). In this cycle, deconstruction (that is, critique) sits between design and redesign. Figure 2 shows how deconstruction looks backwards to the text and forwards to its re-design.
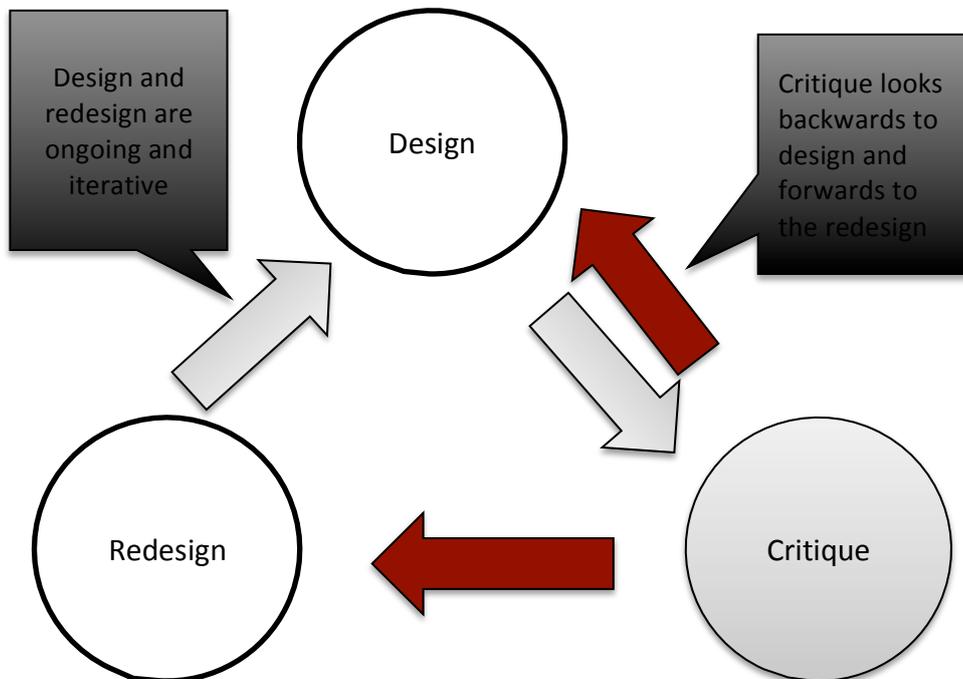
Figure 2. Critique is oriented backwards to design and forwards to redesign

Critique enables participants to engage *consciously* with the ways in which semiotic resources have been harnessed to serve the interests of the producer and how different resources could be harnessed to re-design and re-position the text. It is both backward- and forward-looking.

It is important to recognise that re-design, like design, can be used ethically or unethically to advance the interests of some at the expense of others. The democratisation of text production reinforces Foucault's (1980) notion of power as something that circulates rather than the Marxist notion of power as a form of domination and subordination. I believe that both forms of power are evident in the world in which we live and that both 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 2010 WORLD PRESS AWARD AS AN EXAMPLE OF ORIENTALISM

Let us consider the effects of the re-contextualisation of the photograph of Bibi Aisha taken by Jodi Bieber. Bibi Aisha is an Afghan woman whose eyes and ears were cut off for running away from her husband's home, where she suffered from abuse.

Bieber explains that she did not want to portray Bibi Aisha as victim but as a beautiful woman.[2] Mutilation is a violation of a woman's human rights. Would the mutilation have been less reprehensible if Aisha had not been young and beautiful? How does the photograph use and reproduce discourses of youth and women's beauty to make its point? Because Aisha has been photographed looking at the viewer, the image demands that we engage with her and do not see her as simply a victim-object. While this has, in my view, been achieved in the original photograph, this is not true of its use on the cover of *Time.* See Figure 3.

Original photograph	Recontextualised on the cover *Time,* 9 August 2010	World Press Photo of the Year, 2010.

Figure 3

On the *Time* cover Aisha has been constructed as an iconic victim of the Afghan-other, with the US as the defender against barbarism. The US as saviour, is further developed by her being moved to the US for reconstructive surgery. David Campbell argues that the individual portrait

> more often than not decontextualizes and depoliticises the situation being depicted, leaving it to accompanying headlines and texts to temporarily anchor meaning. (Campbell, 2011, para 4).

Campbell uses Jim Johnson's remix of the Time cover to show how this works. Notice how the fake cover appropriates the original *Time* cover and redesigns it to produce a critique of the original. The fake cover breaches normal conventions of copyright, it is disseminated easily on the internet and it reaches an audience larger than that of the original *Time* cover (see Figure 4). The *point* about re-contextualisation is that the new context changes the meaning of the original. While Jodi Bieber was the author of the original portrait, the moment she sold it to *Time*, she lost ownership and control of the message.

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[2] See http://www.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,294175100001_2007267,00.html

Figure 4

This raises interesting critical literacy questions

- How much control do photographers have over how their images are used? How much power does a photographer have in relation to a media giant like *Time*?
- Should photographers refuse to comment on the politics of use?
- How much control does anyone have over how their texts are re-mashed, re-designed, re-mixed?
- Should critique be about the author's position or about the effects of the text in difference contexts of production and reception?
- Why is a discussion of effects backward-looking, when they continue into the future? Will Aisha's life ever be the same?
- What are the ethical considerations of this kind of photography. Is Aisha's consent to being photographed informed consent? Could this young rural woman have imagined or really understood how the photograph would change her life?

David Campbell agrees with John Johnson that the

> World Press Award has performed another decontextualisation and depoliticisation of the Bieber photograph. The award process has extracted the image from the political issues it became associated with, re-constituted the picture as a discreet object, and reattached it to Jodi Bieber as the author (2011, para 7)

Is this in fact so? Can a text be divorced from its intertextual connections with other contexts of use or does each re-design carry traces of its history? Unlike Kress, I would argue that an understanding of the power of texts to shape identities and

construct knowledge, is perhaps even more pressing in an interconnected globalised world with ever more complex forms of text production, re-production and dissemination.

The *Time* magazine cover can be read as an instantiation of Orientalism. For Said, Orientalism is a discourse for dealing with the Orient by "making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (1978, p. 3). It is predicated on "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison to all non-European peoples and cultures" (p. 3).

Said's (1978) study focused specifically on Western constructions of the near East, Arabs and Islam. He is able to show a continuity in the way Orientals are represented that goes back to the earliest European scholars, writing to guard against the threat that fanatical Muslim hordes posed to Christianity and civilisation (p. 344). Scholarship pertaining to the Orient was extended to the people of the Orient, their beliefs and their culture, producing in the late Nineteenth Century an essentialised and racist discourse of the Other as backward and degenerative (p. 206), irrational (p. 38), primitive (p. 231), and generally inferior to "white men" (p. 226). This was an instance of what came later to be described as the Great Divide theory in anthropology (Street, 1984).

What is remarkable about this discourse is its durability. Supporting a politics of European dominion, knowledge was necessary for the containment and rule of the colonised Other, particularly as, until the end of the Seventeenth Century, Islamic control over large parts of the near and far East, North Africa, Turkey and Europe, meant that Islam was feared and had come "to symbolise terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians" (Said, 1978, p. 59) and a constant threat to Western civilization. Little has changed three centuries later. Its as if this discourse was waiting fully formed to be mobilised after 9/11. This explains the paternalism and sense of superiority made manifest in the caption on the *Time* cover. This paternalism has been called into question by recent events in the middle East, now referred to as the Arab Spring, during which young people living in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Iraq, Bahrain, Iran and Libya have taken liberation into their own hands.

Another example, this time from Critical Geography, shows the power of both discourse and text. In a fascinating article "*From the best authorities*: the Mountains of Kong in the Cartography of West Africa", Bassett and Porter (1991) investigate the representations of mountains in West Africa in maps dating back to the Sixteenth Century. Named the Mountains of Kong in Rennell's 1978 map,

> they subsequently appear on nearly all the major commercial maps in the nineteenth century...ending in the early twentieth century. The Kong Mountains were popularly viewed as a great drainage divide separating streams flowing to the Niger River and the Atlantic...and an "insuperable barrier hindering commerce between the coast and the interior". What is intriguing about the Kong Mountains is that they never existed except in the imaginations of explorers, mapmakers and traders (Bassett & Porter, 1991, p 367).

The existence of these mountains was confirmed by the accounts of subsequent explorers and merchants, who believed that they had found this chain of mountains. Expecting to find them, they did. Bassett and Porter take this as confirmation of the "extraordinary authority of maps" (1991, p. 370), which is based on the "public's belief that these images are accurate representations of reality" (Robinson, 1978, in Bassett & Porter, 1991, p. 370). Both the map as visual text, and the scientific discourses which authorises it, shape our knowledge of the landscape. Backed by the African Association, established to extend European knowledge of Africa, this construction of the terrain held sway until Binger's expedition in 1888, which could not find even a "ridge of hills" (Bassett & Porter, p. 395). Binger's new map of the region opened the area to trade and colonisation, by removing an impassable physical obstacle "that existed only in the mind of Europeans" (Basset & Porter, 1991, p. 398).
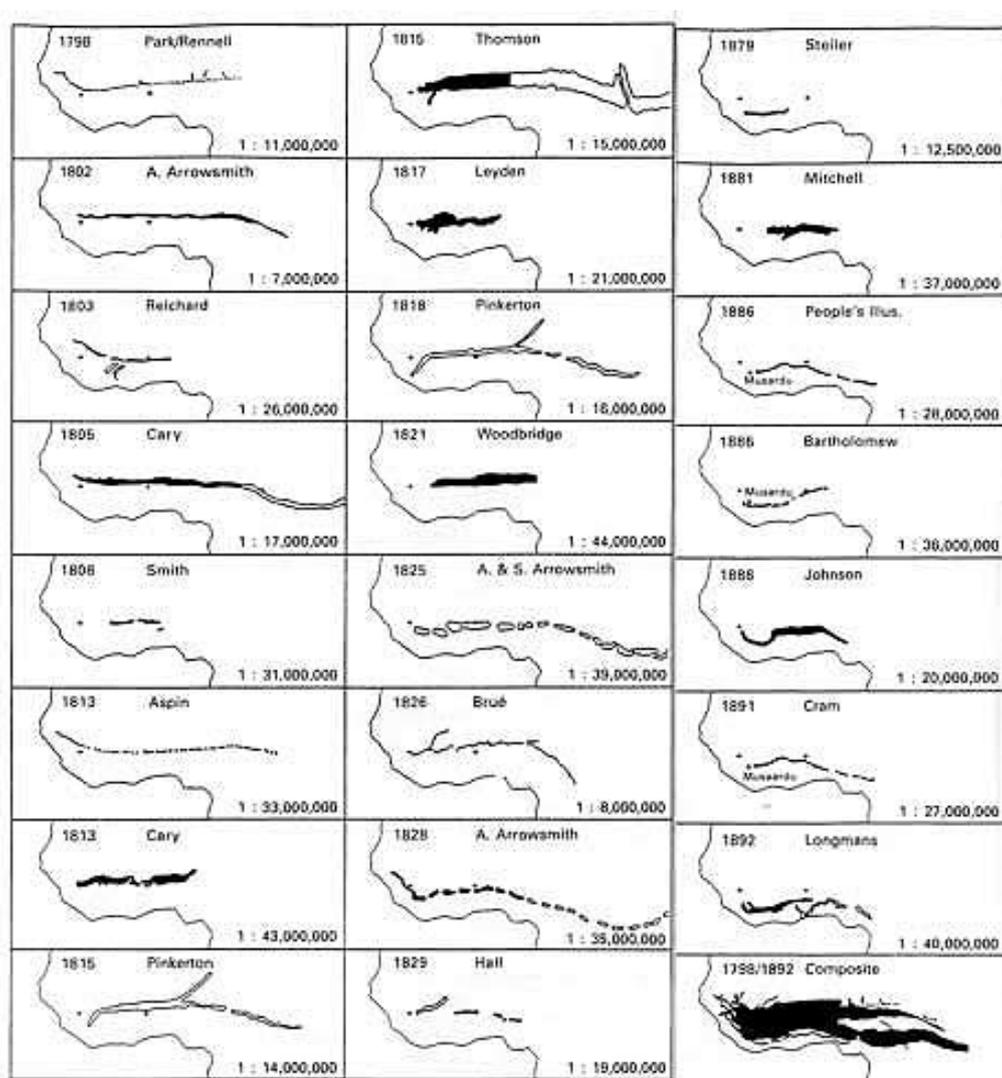

Figure 5. Composite of maps in Bassett and Porter, 1991, p 387-389
The Mountains of Kong: Representations from 1798 to 1892

In their article, Bassett and Porter include forty-eight different maps from 1798 to 1892, with their depictions of the varied width, height and extent of the Mountains of Kong. They comment wryly that the variation "might be expected for imaginary mountains" (p. 390). These maps (Figure 5) serve as a nineteenth century example of Kress' contention that once a 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). It also shows that text transformation is not a new phenomenon. It is also an extremely good example of how the transformations are subject to the underlying assumption that the mountains exist, an assumption that proved to be both wrong and remarkably durable.

MAPS ARE TEXTS – TEXTS ARE REPRESENTATIONS

1   What is the difference between the next two maps? Which is more accurate?
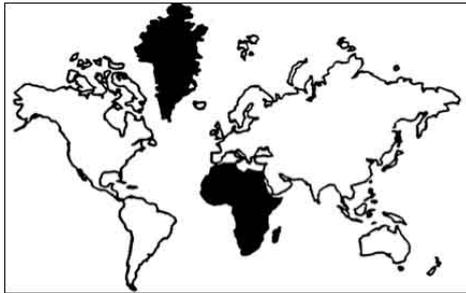
This map is known as the Mercator projection. It is the representation that is most familiar to us. This map maintains the shape of the continents but distorts their size.
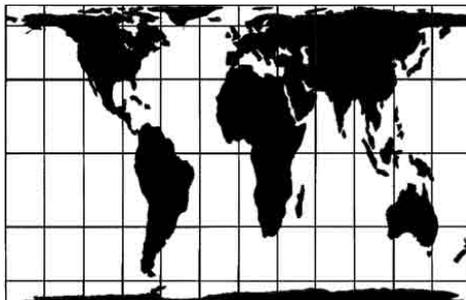
This map, known as the Peters projection, first appeared in 1974. This map maintains the relative size of the continents but distorts their shapes.

The earth is round. The challenge of any world map is to represent a round earth on a flat surface … The Mercator projection creates increasing distortions of size as you move away from the equator. Mapmakers call this "the Greenland Problem" because Greenland appears to be the same size as Africa, yet Africa is fourteen times larger. Because the Mercator distortion is worst at the poles it is common to leave Antarctica off the map. This results in the Northern Hemisphere appearing much larger than it really is. The equator appears about 60% of the way down the map, diminishing the size and importance of the developing countries.
http://www.diversophy.com.images/peters

Hmm… Two maps. More than one valid point of view…

2   Peters projection created a great deal of controversy when it was first published. Why do you think this was so? What do you think people argued about? Who would lose if Peters' map was recognised? Who stood to gain? Why?

Figure 6

In the final chapter of *Literacy and Power* (Janks, 2010), I provide an argument, which both defends the need for critical literacy and argues that in a world where the only thing that is certain, apart from death and taxes, is change itself, critical literacy has to be nimble enough to change as the situation changes. The argument assumes a critical literacy agenda that is responsive to the changing socio-historical and political context, the changing communication landscape, teachers' and students' investments, and shifts in theory and practice. Rather than repeat that argument here, I have chosen to provide a taste of *Doing Critical Literacy*, new classroom materials that I have been working on with colleagues, some of whom worked with me on the 1993 CLA Series (Janks, 1993).

1. Appendix 1 focuses on the need for critical literacy in understanding texts in relation to their socio-political contexts. This page from *Doing Critical Literacy*, provides an example from the U.S.
2. Appendix 2 is an example of material that focuses on the changing communication landscape.
3. The activities in Appendix 3 work with identity investments.

Perhaps what I mean by critique – the ability to recognise that the interests of texts do not always coincide with the interests of all and that they are open to reconstruction; the ability to understand that discourses produce us, speak through us and can nevertheless be challenged and changed; the ability to imagine the possible and actual effects of texts and to evaluate these in relation to an ethics of social justice and care – is not the same as for those who believe that critical literacy has had its day. In the world in which I live, critical engagement with the ways in which we produce and consume meaning, whose meanings count and whose are dismissed, who speaks and who is silenced, who benefits and who is disadvantaged – continue to suggest the importance of an education in critical literacy, and indeed critique.

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Appendix 1. Text and context

THE SPEAKER'S OR WRITER'S POSITION AND THE READER'S POSITION
Andre Bauer, the lieutenant governor of South Carolina

My grandmother was not a highly educated woman, but she told me as a child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed.

1   How does Bauer construct a position for his grandmother? Why does he do this?
2   What is Bauer's grandmother's position on stray animals?
3   Does Bauer agree with his grandmother?
4   Do you agree with Bauer and his grandmother?

> When you read what Bauer has said. If you
> • agree with everything he has said you are the *ideal reader* who is reading *with* the text.
> • disagree with what he says you are a *resistant reader* who is reading *against* the text.

If we place this quote in context, the story gets more interesting. According to *Time* (Verbatim, 8 February 2010), Bauer said this when he was 'criticizing policies that extend welfare benefits to the poor'.

1   How does Bauer use language to position poor people?
2   Do you agree with his position on welfare?
3   Why is an understanding of context important?

> When we listen to, read or view texts, it is important to *engage* with them. As critical readers we need to work out what the text is saying and to think about that in relation to our own beliefs and values.
> **But we also have to step back from the text to ask critical questions.**
> What positions is the writer constructing? What does he want us to think? Who is the *ideal reader?* What is the ideal reading position? Then we have to ask ourselves whose interests are being served? Who benefits? Who does not? If we do this we become *resistant readers* who do not blindly buy into the meanings text offer us.

Appendix 2. The changing communication landscape

1. Which of these sites do you use?

2. Choose 5 of these sites that are new ones for you. What do they enable you to do? What are their limitations?

3. Can you find one that no longer exists and suggest why.

4. What have you up-loaded on Web 2.0?

Web 2 http://cuip.uchicago.edu/~cac/ids/web2.0.jpg

In 2011, social networking sites such as Facebook and twitter played an important part in what *Time* magazine is calling 'the Arab spring' (4 April 2011). Use the internet to understand the part played by the new communication landscape in uprisings in Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Iraq, Bahrain, Iran, Libya.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The web is all about innovation. Investigate Web 3.0. What is it? What are the concerns relating to it?

Appendix 3. Identities

Construct the group positively. Show pride in who you are. This approach was adopted by the gay-pride movement and the black consciousness movement.

I am what I am
I am my own special creation
So come take a look
Give me the hook
Or the ovation
It's my world that I want to have a little pride in
My world and it's not a place I have to hide in
Life's not worth a damn
Till you can say
I am what I am

I am what I am
I don't want praise, I don't want pity
I bang my own drum
Some thinks it's noise
I think it's pretty
And so what if I love each sparkle and each bangle
Why not try to see things from a different angle
Your life is a sham till you can shout out
I am what I am

I am what I am
And what I am
Needs no excuses
I deal my own deck
Sometimes the ace
Sometimes the deuces
It's one life and there's no return and no deposit
One life so its time to open up your closet
Life's not worth a damn 'til you can shout out
I am what I am

I am what I am
And what I am needs no excuses
I deal my own deck
Sometimes the ace
Some times the deuces
It's one life and theres no return and no deposit
One life so its time to open up your closet
Life's not worth a damn
Till you can shout out
I am what I am.

http://lyrics.doheth.co.uk/

Biko: I think that the slogan "black is beautiful" is serving a very important aspect of our attempt to get at our humanity. You are challenging the very root of the back man's belief about himself. When you say "black is beautiful" what in fact you are saying to him is: man, you are okay as you are, begin to look being. In a sense the the term "black is beautiful" challenges exactly that belief which makes someone negate himself. ...

Judge: Now why do you refer to you people as 'black'?

Biko: Historically, we have been defined as black people, and when we reject the term non-white and we take ourselves the right to call ourselves what we think we are, we choose this one precisely because we feel it is most accommodating.upon upon yourself as a human.

Steve Biko. SASO/BPC Trial, May 1976

Black is beautiful is a cultural movement that began in the USA in the 60s by African Americans. It reclaims black as a positive marker of identity and it rejects the belief that black people's natural features such as skin color, facial features and hair are inherently ugly.

Why do you think gay pride adopted this song as its rallying cry?

1 What can be gained from constructing a positive self representation for one's group?

2 What are the limitations of this approach?

3 How have other oppressed groups used this approach to reconstruct their group's image?