



Critical Literacy

Being able to read critically and analytically is vital in contemporary society.

- Critical literacy examines the relationship between language, literacy and power.
- Teaching and learning about critical literacy recognises that texts reflect the position of the writer and aim also to position the reader.
- Critical literacy means evaluating and analysing texts to identify the choices made in constructing texts, the worldviews they represent and the social impact of those texts.

UKLA supports the view that critical literacy is vital for studying language, literacy and literature in contemporary society. Fundamentally concerned with the relationship between language, literacy and power, critical literacy is an approach to teaching and learning that recognises how texts are both positioned and positioning (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, Janks & Comber, 2019). In this sense, the word 'text' is used in its broadest sense (from traditional print texts, to multimodal varieties that include digital, performative, and visual narrative texts). Similarly, literacy is taken as processes of meaning-making rather than a discreet set of skills (Street, 2003; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996). Understanding literacy as a social practice, then, involves working with multiple texts, perspectives and social issues in the classroom.

Critical literacy requires reading evaluatively and analytically in order to carefully deconstruct the shape texts take, the choices text designers make in constructing texts, as well as the social impact of those texts (and the worldviews they represent), to reveal:

1. how they serve the interests of some and not others
2. how they include, exclude or silence particular voices
3. how they (mis)represent ideas, identities, communities
4. how these texts, and ways of representing, might be redesigned in more socially just ways.

Luke and Freebody's (1999) Four Resources model for critical reading is a particularly useful framework for thinking about and employing critical literacies across the curriculum. The framework requires that teachers and learners engage with texts as:

- 1) *Decoders*, where the specific sign systems of the texts (alphabets, sounds, word choices, sentence structures, images, etc.) are identified;
- 2) *Text Participants*, where prior and intertextual knowledge as well as research is used to unpack the meanings available in the text;
- 3) *Text Users*, where knowledge about genre conventions are used to interrogate the social functions of texts and particular uses of language; and
- 4) *Text Analysts*, where the ideological underpinnings and social impact of the text are evaluated in order to consider whether or not the text is a fair/just representation (see also Serafini, 2012).

Throughout this process, diversity and difference in perspectives, identities, cultural knowledge, and so on, are valued as resources for teaching and learning.

Fairclough's (2001) model for Critical Discourse Analysis also provides a critical lens through which to view language and literacy: that texts are products of processes of production/reception (i.e. the choices text designers make, and the meanings readers make) and conditions of production/reception (i.e. the role context plays in constraining or enabling whether or not particular meanings are possible). For example, how easily are postcolonial texts accepted into the canon of English literature studied in secondary schools across the UK? Similarly, under what conditions might it be possible to read, discuss, or write texts from LGBTI+ or refugee perspectives in schools?

Sources

Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (2000) *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London & New York: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (2001) *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

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

Luke, A., and Freebody, P. (1999) Further notes on the four resources model. *Reading online*, 3, pp.1-6.

New London Group. (1996) *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures*. Harvard Educational Review, 66 pp. 60-92.

Serafini, F. (2012) Expanding the four resources model: Reading visual and multi-modal texts. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 7(2) pp.150-164.

Street, B. (2003) What's "new" in New Literacy Studies? Critical approaches to literacy in theory and practice. *Current issues in comparative education*, 5(2), pp. 77-91.

Vasquez, V. M., Janks, H. & Comber, B. (2019) Critical Literacy as a Way of Doing and Being. *Language Arts*, 96(5) pp. 300-311.

Classroom example

Gender perspectives 1

In a class of 12 and 13 year olds, learners were studying fairy tales. The unit of work involved reading a selection of fairy tales with the aim for learners to write their own. The teacher focused on a fairy tale known by most of the learners in the class: *Little Red Riding Hood*. After reading the Grimm Brothers' version of the story as a class, the learners discussed how the story used particular tropes: the evil villain, the wise mother, the innocent child, and the heroic stranger. This then led onto a discussion about gender roles, context, and the social function (use) of fairy tale stories. Learners explored, with the teacher facilitating discussion and access to resources/research, how fairy tales typically constructed girls and women, as well as how the story of Little Red emerged from a series of gruesome kidnappings in Germany (where the story emerged). In contextualising the story, learners could then consider how the story could be re-written from a contemporary perspective that did not construct girls as weak or gullible and men as the typical hero. The teacher then read and discussed Roald Dahl's Red Riding Hood and the Wolf as an example of a redesign before allowing learners to construct their own redesigns using a fairy tale of their choice.

Gender perspectives 2

In a study with student teachers at a school of education, critical literacy was used as an approach to interrogate textual representations of gender and sexual diversity. The students were required, at the end of the course, to produce a short set of photocopy-ready teaching and learning materials that could be used in secondary schools. Throughout the course, students engaged with a range of texts in order to explore how cisnormative and heterosexual identities were constructed as 'normal' and 'natural'. The analysis of nonconforming gender and sexualities were then used to explore how 'alternative' perspectives might represent diversity. By rubbing texts together, the students were able to consider how to develop critical questions in their materials that:

1. required learners to think about how texts could work to reproduce problematic norms by identifying and explaining the features of certain everyday texts,
2. posed learners with ethical problems that required them to complicate their own viewpoints,
3. research 'alternative' perspectives and share them with the class, and
4. gain access to a range of everyday and school texts that would help them make decisions about what counts as fair or socially just representation.

Furthermore, the student teachers were required to interrogate their own (dis)comfort with the topics and texts in the course by keeping a journal. In this journal, students noted issues and even memories of their experiences with gender and sexuality in order to come to terms with their own beliefs, prejudices, and how this might resonate/conflict with their new roles and responsibilities as teachers.

A wide range of resources are available for thinking about and doing critical literacy in the classroom, from primary years to secondary and even in initial teacher education:

Comber, B. (2001). Classroom explorations in critical literacy. *Critical literacy: A collection of articles from the Australian Literacy Educators' Association*, 16(1), 90-102.

Comber, B., & Simpson, A. (eds.). (2001). *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. Routledge.

Govender, N. N. (2018). Deconstructing heteronormativity and hegemonic gender orders through critical literacy and materials design: A case in a South African school of education. In *Teacher Education for Diversity* (pp. 36-52). Routledge.

Janks, H. (2014). Critical Literacy's Ongoing Importance for Education. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57(5), 349-356.

Janks, H., Dixon, K., Ferreira, A., Granville, S., & Newfield, D. (2013). *Doing critical literacy: Texts and activities for students and teachers*. Routledge.

Luke, A. (2000). Critical literacy in Australia. *Journal of adolescent and adult literacy*, 43(5), 448-461.

Vasquez, V. M. (2014). *Negotiating critical literacies with young children*. Routledge: London & New York.

Navan Govender on behalf of UKLA

See also

UKLA bookshop www.ukla.org/shop

English Language and Literacy 3-19: Media
by Andrew Burn

Evaluating Online Information and Sources
by Andrew K. Shenton and Alison J. Pickard

Reading Magazines with a Critical Eye in the Primary School
by Carolyn Swain

UKLA website www.ukla.org/resources

Critical Reading of Magazines: resources for members by Egmont

There is also a UKLA Special Interest Group: *Critical Literacy*
<https://ukla.org/cpd>