

**Literacy and Power** Hilary Janks (2010) London: Routledge  
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This book has integrity – in more than one meaning of the word. Hilary Janks sets out to describe and exemplify an integrated model of critical literacy which includes both cognitive skills and social practices but she is herself a writer of proven professional integrity. One of the attractive features of this book – and there are many – is that the author includes the important historical dimension as she outlines the development of critical literacy theory and practice. The Synthesis Model of Critical Literacy on which the book rests is the product of some years not only of reflection on major theorists such as Bourdieu, Freire, Foucault, Marx and many others but of a lifetime pedagogy which has put critical literacy at its heart. The scope of the work is wide, and Janks acknowledges the different strands of thinking and, importantly, the colleagues and students across the world who have contributed to the development of the integrated model offered here.

Many years ago Raymond Williams argued that theory which informs social change should be ‘analytically constructive as well as constructively analytic’ (Williams, 1981, p. 233). Critical thinking has to be matched by critical practice. Throughout *Literacy and Power* there are practical examples and suggested activities which ground Janks’ nuanced thinking firmly in a reflective pedagogy which goes beyond critical deconstruction to argue the essential importance of critical reconstruction and transformation. In addition, the Tables offer tools for thinking about pedagogy, the curriculum and literacy policy. Different interrelationships between the elements of the Synthesis Model of Critical Literacy are shown in tabular form, helping to highlight commonalities and contrasts and there are other useful tables displaying for example, modes of ideology and key linguistic features for the analysis of texts. Throughout the book, such features help to maintain a sense of the possibility of transformative action through robust constructive analysis.

The opening chapters give a thoughtful and comprehensive backdrop to the model which informs the book as a whole. Leading the reader through the history of literacy, Janks begins by showing that the word itself simply doesn’t exist in many nations, raising the question ‘what is the usefulness of the word *literacy*?’ and, in association, what is the usefulness of a discourse which depends on an opposition between ‘literacy’ and ‘illiteracy’. One hallmark of the book is a refutation of the validity of binary oppositions in favour of more complex interrelated ways of thinking. Janks draws out the many facets of recent definitions of literacy, including visual and technological additions, describing her own development as a critical literacy teacher. After tracing different orientations to critical literacy, Janks describes her Synthesis Model of Critical Literacy whose main elements are: Dominance, Access, Diversity and Design. This is the central reference point of the book but, importantly, it is not a straightforward matter of identifying and discussing these elements in isolation. True to her enterprise of complexity and integrity, Janks challenges readers to consider their interdependence and the ‘problematic imbalance’ of any of these elements without the others.

From her South African perspective, Hilary Janks may be considered ideally positioned to speak authentically on the impact of discourses of ideology and power

on language, access, social rights and education, and the implications for identity. In the chapters 'Language and Power' and 'Reading Texts Critically' she certainly does this, but goes further, clearly showing readers from anywhere in the world just how harmful and dangerous language can be when harnessed to powerful ideology and how texts can position readers, requiring 'critical reading in combination with an ethic of social justice' (p. 98). In the UK these chapters have resonance not only in terms of the narrow, politically driven definitions of what counts as valid literacy which have permeated literacy and language teaching over recent years, but also in the constant media depictions of particular groups – 'youth', 'Muslims', 'immigrants' – as creating social friction. Janks' view of diversity as a productive resource for social and cultural transformation speaks to any of us, wherever we live and work.

The tough core of this book, the chapters on 'Diversity, Difference and Disparity' and 'Access, Gate-Keeping and Desire' acknowledges the edginess of constructing cultural identities and identifying rights and responsibilities associated with diversity. These chapters remind readers that these can be uncomfortable spaces, even if offering the productive friction of unevenly balanced political identities (Bhabha, 1990). Janks' approach – the insistence on a reconstructive critical literacy combined with careful analysis and practical examples of ways in which issues can be raised with students – recognises the riskiness of the endeavour whilst offering ways forward. The chapters 'Critical Text Production: Writing and Design' and 'Redesign, Social Action and Possibilities for Transformation' offer rich examples of classroom projects which have given even very young learners agency over their own culturally informed text production. Despite the wealth of these projects, Janks recognises the constraints imposed by teachers' established pedagogies and their own 'literate habitus' (p. 200) as well as the effects of the educational politics of the contexts in which they work. In drawing the threads of the book together, she argues the importance of pleasure, playfulness and desire: the desire of a teacher to address the needs of her students; the desire to take a critical look at the curriculum; the desire to develop literacy policy as part of a programme of social justice.

In offering an integrated model for analysing and enacting critical literacy Hilary Janks offers ways of probing inequities associated with literacy policy, curriculum and pedagogy. What is more, in advocating pedagogic practices which recognise difference, she offers the possibility of reconstruction. The final sentences of the book deserve quotation:

Critical literacy work in classrooms can be simultaneously serious and playful. We should teach it with a subversive attitude, self-irony and a sense of humour. (p. 224)

Despite the critical importance of the book's subject matter, Hilary Janks' voice – subversive, self-ironic and humorous – permeates the text.

## References

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