

## Book Reviews



Hilary Janks, 2009. *Literacy and Power*. Series: Language, Culture, and Teaching. London: Routledge, 250 pages.  
ISBN: 978-0-8058-5577-7 hardback.  
ISBN: 978-0-415-99963-2 paperback.

The title of Hilary Jank's book *Literacy and Power* is an intertextual nod to Norman Fairclough's groundbreaking *Language and Power*. It places literacy (and thus the classroom) rather than language at the centre, and goes to the heart of current debates about what is, and possibly always has been, a highly contested term. Janks says upfront that her book works against the dividing practices in the field, so this review will focus on how the book achieves this on several levels. As a critical linguist, words and naming are deeply important to her; the first sentence in the book makes the arresting observation:

Many languages do not have a word for *literacy*: Sotho doesn't - neither do Xhosa, French or German. Do we need it? But having found a word for itself in a dominant language like English in the mid 16<sup>th</sup> C, it is born into trouble because it was born into a binary, to give a positive meaning to its Other, 'illiteracy'. So the word literacy itself always works to divide, and to split; it always draws a line, because illiteracy lurks on the other side.

Janks points to how, from this founding binary in the English language, various different versions of literacy 'wars' emerge, that keep reinventing themselves in either-or debates about whether literacy is a cognitive skill or a social practice (she refuses this binary, and argues that it is *both* skill *and* social practice); whether we should teach bottom-up or top-down, genre or process, whole language or phonics, the literary canon or popular culture. Instead she advocates a four-part model that takes into account a range of different approaches and scholarly takes on the critical, which she argues are profoundly interdependent. They revolve around four elements: domination, diversity, access and design, each the focus of a separate chapter. I have read journal articles where Janks sets out this interdependence model, but to have the model unfold in the course of this book, with rich examples and full discussion of how this interdependence works, is complex, convincing and enabling. In an engaging final chapter she moves beyond the model, acknowledging how critical literacy rests on an essentially logocentric and rational view of language, and looks

tentatively at what critical literacy might look like beyond reason, in the realm of the unconscious, desire and play.

There are two other ways in which this book works against the dividing practices in the field. The first is its refusal to separate practice from theory. It is vividly illustrated with activities that eloquently embody theory. This is a particular gift of the author's. The illustrations criss-cross time and space, from London in the mid-1970s to Adelaide in Australia, to Atteridgeville, but the sense-making base is always South Africa, from the shored up certainties of the apartheid regime to the much more complex terrain in which we are currently, where the need for the critical is just as important. This book is rich in offerings for practice, from a series of provocative questions about something as mundane as a cellphone, to tables for the analysis of ideology in texts, stories and rich descriptions of practice.

The last refusal of the dividing practices, and perhaps the most significant, is the author's inclusion of the personal as a thread that runs through the book. One of the dividing practices of the academic field is its tendency to split the head off from the heart - and from the body too - and she refuses both. A particularly satisfying part of the book is towards the end where she reflects on how what she calls 're-design' work is far easier spoken about than achieved, and how some classroom innovations have not been sustained. In struggling for an answer, she recognizes how resistant our embodied ways of being are to change, and offers her experience of using the Alexander Technique as a therapy to unlearn her own embodied ways developed from long hours of critical literacy work on the computer.

The book offers a mapping of a sphere for action that is thoughtful, hopeful and profoundly practical.

LUCIA THESEN

*Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town*



## Hilary Janks

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**To:** Hilary Janks  
**Subject:** FW: Review of your book  
**Attachments:** Literacy and Power Janks EB.doc; Thesen review in ReadingWriting RASA.pdf

-----Original Message-----

From: Eve Bearne [<mailto:evebearne@btinternet.com>]

Sent: Mon 26/07/2010 17:57

To: Hilary Janks

Subject: Review of your book

Hello, Hilary

I trust you travelled home safely from Winchester. It was good to meet you and have a chat.

I've attached the review of your book which I wrote for Literacy. As soon as I know when it's going to be published I'll make sure you get a copy.

Very best wishes

Eve

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**Literacy and Power** Hilary Janks (2010) London: Routledge  
ISBN 978 0 415 99963 2 £27.99 pb 224 pp

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

BHABHA, H.K. (1990) The Third Space, in Rutherford, J. ed *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

WILLIAMS, R. (1981) *Culture*, Fontana; Glasgow

Eve Bearne



## Hilary Janks

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**From:** Hilary Janks [hilary.janks@gmail.com]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, July 28, 2010 10:32 PM  
**To:** hilary.janks@gmail.com  
**Subject:** Sales figures End July 2010

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**From:** Silverman, Naomi [mailto:Naomi.Silverman@taylorandfrancis.com]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, July 28, 2010 2:45 PM  
**To:** Hilary Janks; Hilary Janks  
**Subject:** FW: Review of your book

Hi Hil

The sales figures to date are as follows:

TOTALS: Hardback 75, Paperback 739, E-book 12

**BREAKDOWN:**

US  
HB: 51  
PB: 527  
EB: 4

UK  
HB: 24  
PB: 212  
EB: 8

This is excellent for not yet a year on the market.

Naomi