

## **‘May you live in interesting times’: critical literacy in South Africa**

Hilary Janks

University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Robert F. Kennedy in his Day of Affirmation address in Cape Town, June 1966.) said that ‘May you live in interesting times’ was an ancient Chinese curse. He was wrong about it

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A807374> being Chinese, and I leave it to you to decide, once I have told my story, whether living in interesting times is a blessing or a curse.

The Nationalist government came to power in South Africa in 1948 and it was only after the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989 that the demise of apartheid seemed possible. I was born after 1948 and for the first forty years of my life lived with, and benefited from, a system based on discourses of white supremacy that infantilised or dehumanized people of colour. I was at University in the 60s at a time when many young South Africans at the liberal English speaking universities was committed to the liberation struggle. These were interesting times. Dangerous times. People we knew were placed under house-arrest, or in 90 day detention without trial; lecturers’ offices were fire-bombed; police invaded our campuses and broke up protests with tear gas, rubber bullets and sjamboks (whips). Members of the National Union of South African Students, were recruited as police spies. Others such as Steve Biko, were arrested and died in detention from torture. The apartheid museum has a chilling display of nooses to commemorate the many prisoners who died in custody ostensibly from hanging themselves. The absurdity of the police reports on death in detention is captured in the following poem by Chris van Wyk.

### **In detention**

He fell from the ninth floor  
He hanged himself  
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He hanged himself  
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing  
He fell from the ninth floor

He hanged himself while washing  
He slipped from the ninth floor  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing  
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping  
He hung from the ninth floor  
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping  
He hung from a piece of soap while washing.

(<http://poefrika.blogspot.com/2008/12/chris-van-wyks-in-detention.html> downloaded 1 May 2011)

I began teaching in the 1970s and was teaching at the time of the 1976 Soweto uprising. Protest poetry was used as a way of bringing social issues into our classrooms.

At that time the language in education policy for Bantu education was hotly contested. English and Afrikaans were the only two official languages of the country (despite the fact that the majority of the population spoke nine different African languages). Where the mission schools had enabled African families to elect either mother-tongue medium of instruction or English medium for their children's education, the apartheid State imposed mother-tongue instruction until Grade 7. Pennycook (1994, p. 73 - 79) argues that both indigenous language and colonial language policies served the interests of colonial power – the one Orientalism, excludes Africans from the language of power; the other Anglicism provides access to only a few enabling them to serve as Native Administrators who could broker relations between the colonial power and the subjugated indigenous population.

The language policy for high schools was different. From Grades 8 to 12 students had to learn half their subjects through the medium of English and the other half through the medium of Afrikaans. This became known as the 50/50 rule. Systematically disadvantaged by language in education policy, relatively few African students completed school. What sparked the Soweto uprising in June 1976 was a protest march by students to oppose the Nationalist government's decision to introduce the 50/50 rule into the last years of primary school. When police opened fire on students who were protesting peacefully, the spotlight was placed on both language and education. These were interesting times whose repercussions continue to shape language

attitudes and the take up of post apartheid language rights. South Africa now has eleven official languages, yet most parents choose English as the medium of instruction. In a country in which urban Africans speak many languages, fluency in English has more symbolic power, and therefore more status, than multilingual competence. In South Africa language education has always been political.

Bantu education was designed to domesticate the indigenous population:

“There is no place for [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. It is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim, absorption in the European community” (Verwoerd, speech to Parliament, 1954, cited in Rose and Tunmer, 1975).

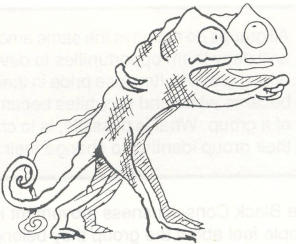
During the Soweto uprising, slogans such as ‘Liberation before Education’, ‘Say no to Gutter Education’, ‘Pass One Pass All’ mobilized students to boycott classes, to destroy school buildings, to threaten teachers. These were interesting times produced what has come to be known as the ‘lost generation’.

The focus on curriculum change as an alternative to school boycotts spearheaded the People’s Education Movement, which focused on rewriting the Curriculum in the key areas of History, English and Mathematics. The *Critical Language Awareness Series* of workbooks (Janks, 1993a), were designed to teach students about the relationship between language and power, about the ways in which ‘meaning is mobilized in defence of domination’ (Thompson, 1985, p. 35). Specifically conceived of as resources for People’s English, they were published one year before the first democratic elections. These were interesting times.

Critical literacy in South Africa began as an overtly political and moral project and the materials that were produced were specifically designed to counter the prevailing apartheid discourses in South Africa, that were used to legitimate inequality. The following activity taken from one of the workbooks is designed to undercut theories of race as biological rather than social. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Chameleon Dance. (Janks, 1993b, p. 9)

Read the passage first, then answer the questions.



1. During the apartheid era, how did the state decide who belonged to what group?

2. Try to find out how the government decided who could be reclassified, that is changed from one group to another.

## 1985 had at least 1 000 'chameleons'

Political Staff

PARLIAMENT — More than 1 000 people officially changed colour last year. They were reclassified from one race group to another by the stroke of a Government pen.

Details of what is dubbed "the chameleon dance" were given in reply to Opposition questions in Parliament. The Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Stoffel Botha, disclosed that during 1985:

- 702 coloured people turned white.
- 19 whites became coloured.
- One Indian became white.
- Three Chinese became white.
- 50 Indians became coloured.
- 43 coloureds became Indians.
- 21 Indians became Malay.
- 30 Malays went Indian.
- 249 blacks became coloured.
- 20 coloureds became black.
- Two blacks became "other Asians".
- One black was classified Griqua.
- 11 coloureds became Chinese.
- Three coloureds went Malay.
- One Chinese became coloured.
- Eight Malays became coloured.
- Three blacks were classed as Malay.
- No blacks became white and no whites became black.

3. What is a chameleon? Why has the reporter used inverted commas?

4. Why did the changes need to be official?

5. What effects do these words have on readers?

6. What do the words chameleon dance suggest about people changing colour?

7. How are these verbs used? Why are these verbs used?

8. Explain the use of small and capital letters. Do you agree with it?

9. Explain the significance of the last two lines.

10. Show how the words of the reporter make us laugh at the words of the minister. Use your answers to questions 3-6 to help you.

11. Why do you think these people wanted to change from one group to another?

The Star reporter's words

The words of the Minister of Home Affairs: Stoffel Botha.

In relation to the South African context at the time, Marxist and neo-marxist theories of power which viewed power as oppressive, had explanatory power. Students were invited to consider the relations of domination and subordination in their own lives. This is captured in the classroom activity in Figure 2.

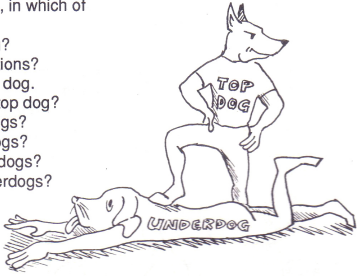
Figure 2: Topdogs and underdogs (Janks, 1993b, p.12)

**In pairs think about your own lives:**

1. Given that we all have many different identities, in which of your identities do you feel like a top dog?
2. In which identities do you feel like an underdog?
3. Who is the top dog in your family in most situations?
4. Name a situation in which someone else is top dog.
5. Among your friends is there competition to be top dog?
6. In your school how do students become top dogs?
7. In your school how do teachers become top dogs?
8. How do the top dogs you know treat the underdogs?
9. How do the top dogs you know talk to the underdogs?

Read the poem by Michael Rosen.

**CHIVVY**  
 Grown-ups say things like:  
 Speak up.  
 Don't talk with your mouth full  
 Don't stare  
 Don't point  
 Don't pick your nose  
 Sit up  
 Say please  
 Less noise  
 Shut the door behind you  
 Don't drag your feet  
 Haven't you got a hankie?  
 Take your hands out of your pockets  
 Pull up your socks  
 Stand up straight  
 Say thank you  
 Don't interrupt  
 No one thinks you're funny  
 Take your elbows off the table  
 Can't you make up your own  
 mind about anything?



How does the language used by the grown-ups in this poem show that they are the top dogs here?

How are your identities formed by the way adults use language when they speak to you? How are your identities formed by the way you use language when you speak to adults?

Now write your own poem and begin with the following first line: Students say things like... If you prefer you can write your own poem about grown-ups. Begin with Parents say things like... or Teachers or Politicians...

This activity on top dogs and underdogs was designed to show children that individuals are differently empowered in their different identities, Nevertheless it reproduced a binary logic based on dominant and dominated social positions. This was pointed out by primary school students in a new arrivals class in Australia. They argued convincingly that it was also possible to be a middle dog (Grant, 1999).

The question for work in critical literacy educators after 1994, under a Mandela government, was how to imagine it as a project for reconstruction, rather than deconstruction; how to imagine its contribution to establishing a new order. This question underpins the thinking that led to the construction of the interdependent model of critical literacy education that combines critique with work on identity, access and redesign (Janks, 2010).

Foucault's theory of productive power provided a way forward. He argues against overarching conceptions of domination, 'a binary structure with dominators on one side and dominated on

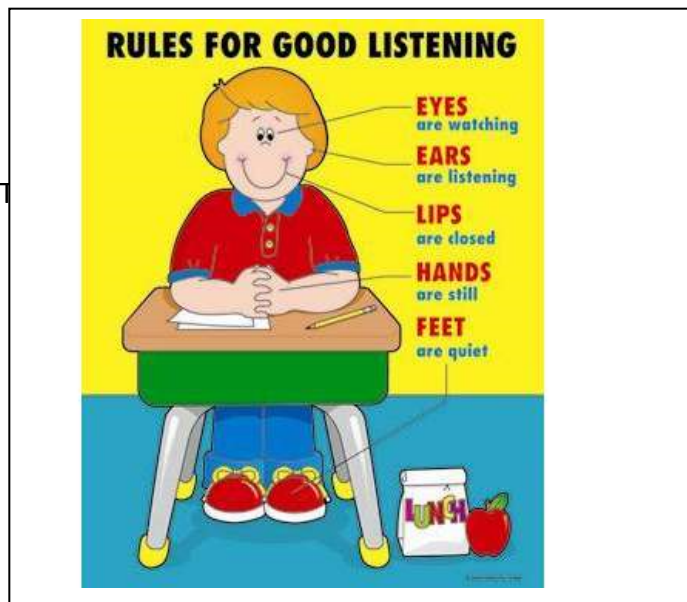
the other' (1980, p.142). Instead he is interested in the procedures which regulate discourses and the means by which power constitutes them as knowledge, that is, as truth. For Foucault

'Truth' is to be understood as system[s] of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. [It] is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth. (1980, p. 133).

This can be illustrated with an example from the U.S. Under the Bush administration, quantitative psychometric research on literacy was increasingly viewed as the only valid 'scientific' research - it was the research that received government funding and informed government policy. Constructed as the 'true' discourse about literacy, this effectively excluded qualitative research based on ethnographic research methods and a socio-cultural theory of literacy. Here power was used to sustain a particular discourse and to establish its hegemony. This discourse then has effects of power, setting norms for literacy which can be surveilled, examined, and used to legitimate the 'no child left behind' policy. It is worth noting, in passing, the way in which the naming of this policy also worked to legitimate it (who in their right mind would want a child to be left behind?), to silence opponents and to hide its practices (different and dumbed down programmes offered to at-risk children). While ostensible designed to create the equal education outcomes, this is a dividing practice that excludes.

No wonder Foucault thinks that 'discourse is the power which is to be seized' (1970, p. 110). Foucault moves away from seeing power as negative, working through the modes of 'censorship, exclusion, blockage, and repression' (1980, p. 59). Instead, he sees power as strong because it produces effects. In addition to producing effects 'at the level of desire - and also at the level of knowledge' (1980, p. 59), power infiltrates the minutiae of daily life, affecting the 'processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures and dictate our behaviours' (1980, p. 97). This is clearly illustrated in, the poster *Rules for Good Listening* (Figure 3) found on the wall of a Grade 1 primary school classroom in South Africa (Dixon, 2004).

Figure 3



We need to take seriously Foucault's view of power as having a 'capillary form of existence' that 'reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, 1980a, p. 39). Critical literacy has to take what I have called little *p* politics as seriously as it does big *P* Politics (Janks, 2010).

The difference can be illustrated by the emblematic story of a husband, who on the occasion of his golden wedding anniversary, shared the secret of his successful marriage. 'It's easy', he said, 'my wife makes all the small decisions and I make all the big decisions'. When asked to give examples, he went on to explain, 'My wife decides things like what we should eat, who our friends should be, where we should live, how many children we should have, where they should go to school'. And what, one might ask, are the big decisions? The man said that he decided the important things: 'Who should be President of the country, whether or not to go to war, what should be done about the economy ...

The story is funny because of the way in which the husband appears naively to cede power to his wife on matters that directly affect the quality of his daily life, reserving for himself matters on which he can have an opinion, but over which he can have little direct influence or control. Moreover, the story pokes fun at the gendered binary which sees the domestic domain as the disempowered domain of women, leaving worldliness to men.

Politics with a capital *P* is the big stuff, the worldly concerns of the husband. It is about government and world trade agreements and the United Nations, it is about ethnic or religious cleansing 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, and how we construct them and they construct us. It is about the politics of identity and place; it is about daily triumphs and defeat; 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 garbage. Little *p*, politics is about taking seriously the feminist perspective that the personal *is* the political. This is not to suggest that *politics* has nothing to do with *Politics*. 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.

Gee (1990, p.142) defines big D discourses as 'speaking/writing-doing-being-believing-valuing combinations'. The hyphens are really important because they make the point that speaking and writing are fundamentally bound up with who we are and where we come from. We are



produced by the ways with words of our communities and as Heath (1983) demonstrated a long time ago, different ways with words are not equally valued. In 1972, Labov published 'The logic of non-standard English', which showed with concrete examples that African-American English was as capable of producing logical and rational argument as standard English. Yet when the Oaklands School Board recognized this variety of English in 1996 in order to take it into account in teaching Standard English, there was such an outcry that the Linguistics Society of America had to pass a resolution in 1997, in support of the Board, declaring that

The variety known as "Ebonics," "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE), and "Vernacular Black English" and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. In fact, all human linguistic systems -- spoken, signed, and written -- are fundamentally regular. The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past thirty years. Characterizations of Ebonics as "slang," "mutant," "lazy," "defective," "ungrammatical," or "broken English" are incorrect and demeaning.

(<http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/LSAResolution.html> downloaded 1 May 2011)

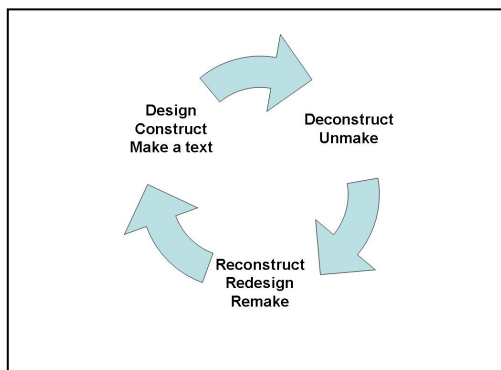
Even where scientists argue the case for linguistic equality, social valuations produce inequality. Difference is organized in terms of power thereby producing hierarchies. The Oaklands School Board's attempt to re-design the curriculum to provide students with access to the language of power by valuing their language and identity backfired. Access was seen as a form of Orientalism. Similarly, in South Africa parents see the use of their own languages in school as a form of ghettoisation. Parents recognize that elite languages, varieties, discourses provide greater access and they devalue their own linguistic and cultural resources as a means to this end. This produces what I, after Lodge (1997), have called the access paradox:

If you provide more people with access to the dominant variety of the dominant language, you perpetuate its powerful status. If, on the other hand, you deny students access, you perpetuate their marginalisation in a society that continues to recognise this language as a mark of distinction. You also deny them access to the extensive resources available in that language; resources which have developed as a consequence of the language's dominance (Janks, 2010, p. 139-140).

In the discussion so far three of the key terms that I have argued are crucial in conceptualizing critical literacy education: power, diversity and access have been considered. What makes literacy education critical is the recognition that language and literacy are shot through by relations of power. I have tried to show that sometimes this power is a form of domination and at others it is more pervasive, structured as it is by the discourses we inhabit: our naturalized ways of speaking and writing and our taken-for-granted systems of thought. This is further complicated by the fact that discourses, languages and literacies do not just sit side by side quietly appreciating and learning from one another. Instead they compete for recognition and control of social institutions. Instead of diversity being seen as a productive resource, as the motor engine for new ideas and change, difference produces competition and conflict. Difference then translates into differential forms of access. One only has to look at the institution of schooling to see whose ways with words, whose cultural capital, whose interaction styles, whose literacies control the curriculum, making it easier for those who have access to the discourses of schooling to succeed while simultaneously working to exclude those who are Othered by these choices. To these three, I have added a fourth term – design.

I chose the word *design* (first introduced to the field by Kress, 1995) as the term to stand for the ability to harness multi-modal resources (language, image, movement, gesture, music etc) for the production of meaning. This choice of this term privileges the production of meaning over reception because it is more agentive, but clearly it would be pointless designing texts if there was no one to read them – to believe them, to question them, to redesign them. Redesign is crucial as without it there would be no possibility of transformation and change.

### The redesign cycle



In my model of critical literacy education I have argued that these four orientations power, diversity, access and design/redesign need to pull against each other to keep the critical literacy tent taught. One without the other produces a problematic imbalance. Elsewhere I have considered each of the key terms and systematically unpacked the implications for literacy of any one orientation without the others (Janks, 2010). All I have time for here is a sliver of this argument. Tables 1 to 4 summarise the argument that follows. (In these tables, the orientations that are the focus of each approach have been shaded, while those that are omitted have been left unshaded.)

Different approaches to literacy education can be analysed using the interdependent model (Janks, 2010) to see which, if any, of the orientations argued for in Janks' model is privileged. If they are not interdependent, what are the effects? New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1994; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984, Barton et al, 2000) focuses on literacy variation across communities in which literacy is shaped by the specific social uses of literacy in different communities. The main argument is for the recognition and valuing of different literacies. Because diversity is at the centre here, not enough attention is given to providing students with access to the powerful forms of literacy that they nevertheless need to succeed in a knowledge economy. (See Table 1).

**Table 1: New Literacy Studies**

Power/domination	The fact that not all ways with words are equally resourced or valued is not taken seriously enough. (Linguistic variation)
Diversity/difference	Communities' different ways with words and with text are privileged. The approach is driven by respect for diversity.
Access	Not enough consideration of the social goods that different literacies provide access to.
Design/redesign	The redesign of literacy resources requires a redesign of what society values and the politics of opportunity and exclusion.
Desire	Equality in the valuation of difference.

Genre approaches (Martin, Christie and Rothery, 1987; Cope and Kalantzis, 1993) on the other hand reverse this privileging. In over-valuing access to dominant forms, the diverse languages and literacies that children have as resources are not harnessed, nor are forms of creativity that subvert existing genres. (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Genre theory**

Power/domination	Genre theory recognizes that some genres are more powerful than others.
Diversity/difference	It excludes non dominant forms – for example sounding or rap.
Access	This approach takes access to the dominant genres of schooling seriously .
Design/Redesign	It reifies existing genres and does not allow enough room for contestation and change.
Desire	Access to privileged forms.

*Multimodal design literacies* (Kress, 2010) focus on design and the play of semiotic resources largely for the stylization of self. Here the focus is the interest of the designer without attention to the ways in which these interests are shaped by power. Nor is sufficient attention paid to who gets access to the means of production. (See Table 3).

**Table 3: Multimodal design literacies**

Power/domination	The styling of self is somehow beyond critique.
Diversity/difference	Semeiosis is seen as contributing to the styling of self. Identity is at the heart of the project.
Access	Access appears to centre on access to consumption and image
Design/Redesign	The focus is on design and redesign: the infinite play of semiotic choices. What matters is the harnessing of semiotic resources for identity work.
Desire	The production of images of identity and identification

Finally, *Back to Basics* naturalizes what counts as the basics and who decides. It does little to address the problem that some children get stuck in the basics while others forge ahead or that

this correlates strongly with social stratification and class privilege. Focused on access to the basics it ignores questions of power, difference and re-design. (See Table 4). I

**Table 4: Back to basics**

Power/domination	The language and discourses of the elites determine what counts as the basics. Dominant languages, literacies, discourses prevail and exclude all others.
Diversity/difference	Excluded.
Access	Claimed, but in fact children <i>are</i> left behind, by dumbed-down curricula designed to drill the basics.
Design/Redesign	Redesign is conservative ( <i>back to</i> ), rather than transformative
Desire	A basic educational minimum for all.

The following sequence of critical literacy activities is offered in order to show how it is possible to engage with all four orientations.

- 1 Research project  
Research the ways in which people were treated as less than human in any of the following situations
  - The German concentration camps
  - The conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda
  - Apartheid rule in South Africa
  - 'Ethnic cleansing' in Serbo-Croatia.
- 2 Watch *District 9* and discuss what it teaches us about prejudice, humanity, heroism and the relationship between us and strange others.

Figure 4: The Poster for *District Nine* (Downloaded at [http://www.moviegoods.com/movie\\_poster/district\\_9\\_2009.htm](http://www.moviegoods.com/movie_poster/district_9_2009.htm) on 1 May 2011)



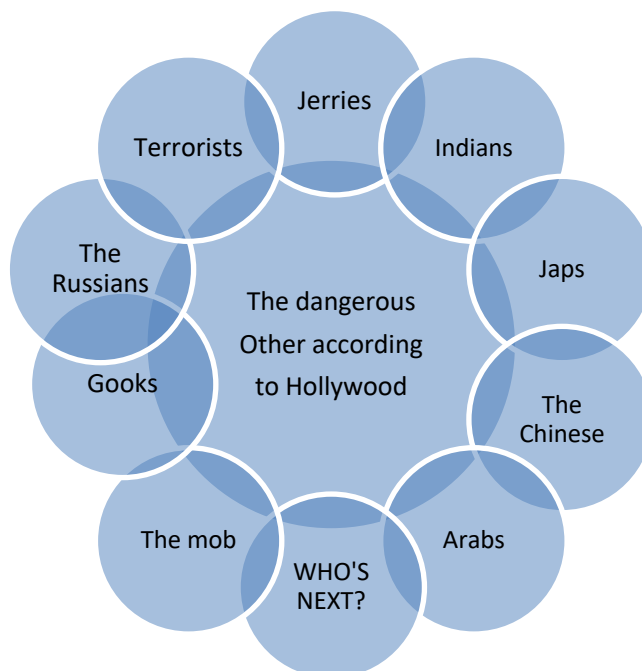
- 4 Consider research on the negative discourses about Africa. For example, Adegoke (1999) found that

- 60% of reporting was negative.
- civil unrest and riots, corruption and crime (37%).
- foreign aid, poverty and under-development, disaster and tragedy, and health and disease (21%).

Then read how this is satirized in *How to write about Africa*, by Binyavanga Wainainina (Kenya, 1992). (<http://textandcommunity.gmu.edu/2009/resources/how-write.pdf>).

5. Consider Figure 5 and answer the following questions.

- Who do these names refer to? Why do you think derogatory names are often used?
- What era is associated with each of these baddies?
- Describe the stereotype that goes with each of these baddies?
- What is a stereotype?
- Collect photographs, headlines, words, cartoons of the people or types of people currently constructed as the 'bad guys' in your own country or community. Redesign these stories. Begin with: How to write about ....



- 6 Read 'Body ritual of the Nacirema' (Horace Milner, 1949).  
<http://fasnafan.tripod.com/nacirema.pdf>

How these activities work with the different power, diversity, access and design/redesign in an integrated way is summarized in Table 5.

Curriculum activity	Social effects	Interdependent model
1 Lessons from history about othering.	Dehumanization and violence on a global scale.	Interface of diversity and power in order to redesign attitudes
2 District 9: Xenophobia –tied also to language as a marker of otherness  District 9 – allegory for apartheid. Apartheid signage	Language as a marker of identity. Fear of strangers. Locally  Who is <i>us</i> and who is <i>them</i> ? Redesign that produces a design of Nigerians that needs to be redesigned	Identity, diversity and power. Access to resources.  Multimodal redesign of apartheid 
3 Adegoke's research – concrete local	Patterned representations – discourse. Systems of meaning.	Critique of representations of foreign Africans.
4 Check own newspapers – concrete global.  Satire – writing back	Discourses circulate – power to produce subjects  Playing with the discourses – refusing the positioning	Power circulates – discourses affect African Americans Deconstruction; redesign
5 Othering in popular culture	Big P politics designs the bad guys	Diversity, power, design, redesign
6 Nacirema – emic and etic perspectives	Denaturalisation of Othering.	Diversity. Who has the power to name?

I have always worked at the interface of theory and practice and have tried to show that complex social theory can be turned into lively classroom practice, whether or not the powers that be sanction what we do. The trick is to make sure that in doing so, we enable our students to outdo their peers in the mind-numbing bench-marking tests. My analysis of the PIRLS results in South Africa, suggests that critical literacy could improve scores (Janks, 2011).

In conclusion: If we lived 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, I would

argue that 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 a multitude of social categorizations 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 little *p* politics of our daily lives. Some former critical literacy proponents, who have moved on, are now arguing that critical literacy has 'reached its sell-by date'. I want to know what perfect place they live in so that we can all go and live there too. Until then, we do what we can to create this better place in our own interesting times in our own countries, our own communities and our own classrooms.

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