

Critical literacy's ongoing importance for education

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Introduction

Apartheid ended when the African National Congress, led by Nelson Mandela came to power in South Africa after the first democratic elections in 1994. Without the language, texts, discourses and practices of apartheid to deconstruct did we still need critical literacy? Seventeen years ago I wrote an article entitled *1996: Why we still need Critical Language Awarenessⁱ in South Africa* (Janks, 1996). What I was able to show in that paper was the ways in which apartheid discourses continued to speak through us, to instantiate themselves in texts and to construct us as racialised human beings despite the political transition (Janks, 1996, 1997). There was still work to be done. In addition, I began to explore ways of conceptualizing critical literacy as a project of reconstruction and redesign not just deconstruction in this historical moment of hope and change (Janks, 2001).

Since then I have come to understand that the scope of my 1996 argument was too small, limited as it was to a particular country at a particular moment in history.

Different times and different places have their own inequities and iniquities that merit critical interrogation and intervention. So now I need to make the case for why critical literacy should not be seen as transient, like fads and fashions that come and go, but as essential to the ongoing project of education across the curriculum.

In *Literacy and Power* (Janks, 2010), I argued that in a perfect world in which social differences did not determine who gets access to resources and opportunity, we would still need critical literacy to help us read the texts that construct the politics of everyday life (p. 203). In the actual world – where a 17 year old boy sells one of his kidneys for an iPad; where adult men rape babies; where rebel fighters video themselves mutilating and cannibalizing the body of an enemy soldier to post on YouTube; where imprisonment without trial and torture are condoned; where children are molested by people they trust; where millions of people do not have access to drinking water or sanitation – the list is endless – it is even more important that education enables young people to read the both the word and the world critically (Freire, 1972a; 1972b).

A critical orientation to education

Social orders that create disparities based on arbitrary social categories, such as amongst others gender, race, class, ethnicity and religion, privilege some at the expense of Others. Such social orders do not just happen; they are not predetermined. We produce them collectively and individually by both our actions and our failures to act. A *critical* approach to education can help us to name and interrogate our practices in order to change them. Critical *literacy* education focuses specifically on the role of language as a social practice and examines the role played by text and discourse in maintaining or transforming these orders. The understanding and awareness that this enables opens up possibilities, however small, for social action (Vasquez, 2004; Comber, Thomson and Wells, 2001; Morrell, 2008). Elsewhere (Janks, 2005), I have used the ‘butterfly effect’ (Lorenz, 1972) as a metaphor for the way in which in an interconnected world small actions in one place can have an impact elsewhere. How

each of us contributes to saving energy so as to reduce our individual carbon footprints is a case in point.

My own approach to critical literacy integrates competing approaches to working with the relationship between language and power and maintains that any one without the other creates a problematic imbalance (Janks, 2000; 2010). I organized the theory and practice that contributed to my own understanding of critical literacy work into a framework with four interdependent nodes. The first focuses on language and power, the second on language identity and difference, the third on access to socially valued goods, and the fourth on representation or design across a range of semiotic modes in relation to options for redesign or transformation. The framework enables me to bring work in education from a range of perspectivesⁱⁱ to bear on the critical literacy endeavour. The kinds of texts and activities that the framework envisages for classroom practice is further developed in Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville and Newfield (2013).

Critical literacy in practice

Here I want to show what this looks like in classroom practice. In particular, I want to show the link between what I have called small-*p* politics and big-*P* Politics (Janks, 2010, p. 186). This is important because our students need to understand the connections between the local and the global, between now and the future and between ‘us’ and our constructed Others. It is not enough to for them to learn how to interrogate the world; they need to develop a social conscience served by a critical imagination for redesign. As teachers this is our job – it is why, in an age of instant access to unrestricted information, students still need us.

Teachers need to develop ‘the dispositions, discursive resources and the repertoires of practice to do critical literacy work in classrooms’ (Comber, 2006). In essence they need to be able to

1. make connections between something that is going on in the world and their students’ lives, where the world can be as small as the classroom or as large as the international stage
2. consider what students will need to know and where they can find the information
3. explore how the problematic is instantiated in texts and practices by a careful examination of design choices and people’s behaviour
4. examine who benefits and who is disadvantaged by imagining the social effects of what is going on and its representation/s
5. imagine possibilities for making a positive difference.

These five moves will be illustrated with an example that focuses on an issue raised by a radio advertisement currently on air in South Africa. Vasquez (2004) provides other examples of how to build both a critical understanding and a critical imagination in relation to the issues raised by the children in her early years classroom as do Comber and Simpson in their edited collection of critical literacy work (2006).

1 Finding and naming the issue

The advertisement urges listeners to conserve water. It is disturbing because it reminds those of us who take water for granted of the many South Africans who do not have access to piped water. The advertisement tells us that while some families

use large volumes of water to fill their swimming pools, over 4 million poor South Africans lack clean water for their daily needsⁱⁱⁱ. Globally the figure is in the region of 780 million people.

Hearing the advertisement coincided with my reading *The Future*, Gore's (2013) analysis of the drivers of global change. Gore makes it clear that an ever-increasing world population and the rise of per capita consumption are set to deplete the natural resources that human survival depends on.

The declining availability and deteriorating quality of freshwater in numerous countries and regions stands alongside the loss of topsoil as one of the two most serious limitations constraining the expansion of food production.

Overconsumption and the profligate waste of freshwater ... are threatening to create food crises in multiple areas of the world (Gore, 2013, p. 164).

In addition 'Ground water aquifers are being depleted at unsustainable rates – especially in northern China, India and the Western United States. Water tables are falling in countries where 50% of the world's people live' (Gore, 2013, p. 145). Gore examines the research, which predicts an increasing number of 'climate refugees' (p. 180) particularly from 'Africa where approximately 800 lakes have dried up completely in the last decade' (p. 180).

One does not need much of a pedagogic imagination to see the potential of this issue for critical literacy work across the curriculum. The river literacies project in South Australia is one example of a project that focused on water as a resource. Teachers

and literacy researchers provided young people in the Murray-Darling basin with opportunities to develop knowledge about their local places and to become involved in communication about the care and the improvement of their environment (Reid, 2005; Comber, Nixon and Reid, 2007; Nixon, 2007). Another example is the BMW S.E.E.D project in South Africa, which helped poor township schools to grow food gardens while simultaneously teaching children about the importance of environmental sustainability. Children contributed to the garden by bringing litres of grey water and vegetable waste for compost from home as well paper and tins for recycling (Janks, 2003; see also Green, 2012). Both of these projects worked with literacy in combination with other learning areas. Water conservation connects with work in the natural and human sciences, social studies and what in South Africa is called Life Orientation.

2 Linking the issue to learners' lives

The radio advertisement that started me down this road attempts to draw listeners in by invoking swimming pools. The hook that I would use to engage students with these issues would be a different kind of water elitism: the marketing and consumption of bottled water. This topic lends itself to a critical literacy investigation for a number of reasons.

- Drinking bottled water is a practice that many young people either witness or engage in without much thought.
- Information and texts related to the issue are easy to find and to understand.
- The topic offers opportunities for work across the curriculum.
- Bottled water is sold and consumed in places where tap water is safe to drink even though it is 1 000 times more expensive.

- It is big business and brands compete for market share.
- It is a practice with harmful effects that can be measured.
- It is an elite practice: poor people without access to safe drinking water cannot afford to buy bottled water; it is bought by people who least need it.
- The consumption of bottled water is an issue that offers possibilities for student activism.

3 Accessing relevant information

A great deal of information on water as a scarce resource, together with ideas of how to conserve it is readily available on the internet. Much of the scientific information is written in accessible language and is easy to read. There is a vast amount of evidence to weigh and a large variety of texts – images, statistics, opinions, reports and so forth – to peruse. ‘Water as a sustainable resource’ produces over 34 million hits on google. The information on bottled water is also abundant, producing even more hits. It is easy for students to conduct their own research and for teachers to find material to stimulate interest and controversy. The fact sheet and statistics (Figures 1 and 2) illustrate this.

Figure 1: Fact sheet

- The US consumes 1 500 plastic water bottles every second.
- Out of the 50 billion bottles of water being bought each year, 80% end up in a landfill, even though recycling programs exist.
- 17 million barrels of oil are used in producing bottled water each year.
- Bottled water costs 1,000 times more than tap water.
- Drinking 2 litres of tap water a day only costs 50 cents per year.
- Plastic leaches toxins into the water, which have been linked to health problems such as reproductive issues and cancer.
- New York City tap water surpasses all federal and state health standards.
- 17 million barrels of oil are used in the production of bottled water each year
- Even in its smallest form, plastic will never biodegrade.

<http://www.treehugger.com/clean-water/the-us-consumes-1500-plastic-water-bottles-every-second-a-fact-by-watershed.html> Downloaded 15 June 2013.

Figure 2: Bottled water statistics

Bottled Water Statistics	
Total Average plastic bottles per person annually	167
Total Annual money spent annually on bottled water	\$15 billion
Total amount of all bottled water sold by Aquafina (Pepsi) and Dasani (Coke) annually	24%
Total percent of U.S. Water Bottle Market owned by Coke and Pepsi	50%
Total amount of bottled water Coke and Pepsi each sell annually	3.36 billion
Total Profit made by Coke and Pepsi each year individually	\$336 million
Total amount U.S. spends on bottled water annually	\$15 billion
Total amount of cases of water sold in the U.S. annually	2.6 billion
Total Global Water Bottle sales annually	\$50 billion
<i>San Francisco's tap water comes from Yosemite National Park and is so pure the EPA does not require it to be filtered.</i>	
Total average cost of a bottle of Evan Water	\$1.35
Total years it would take to have a Evan bottle refilled with San Francisco tap water before it cost \$1.35	10 years
Total cost of monthly water bills if tap water cost the same as the cheapest water bottle	\$9,000
Distribution of Water Bottle Money	
<i>It is estimated that at a cost of \$1.29 a water bottle</i>	
Where the money goes	Amount
Retailer	.63c
Transportation	.43c
Water Bottle Production	.12c
Profit	

<http://www.statisticbrain.com/bottled-water-statistics/> Downloaded 15 June 2013

3 Textual design

An indication of ideas suitable for critical literacy work is the availability of what Comber and Simpson (1995) and O'Brien (2001) refer to as 'everyday' texts. The labels on bottled water lend themselves to critique and to redesign. Figure 3 shows labels on water for sale in South Africa. Students can add labels of bottled water sold in their neighbourhoods to this selection. In interrogating the labels they can analyse their names, their visual designs and the accompanying text (See Figure 4). They can consider what they have in common and how they are different? (Why, for instance are all the labels shades of blue? Why are French words used?) They should look at how the verbal and visual designs position the texts differently and how they work to position consumers?

Figure 3: Labels on bottled water



Because it is impossible to read the written text in Figure 3, I have written it out in Figure 4. I am particularly intrigued by JUSTwater, which admits to being bottled tap water but uses the visual semiotics of spring water.

Figure 4 Fine print on bottled water labels

Valprè

Valprè spring water still. Plant bottle. Up to 30 % of this bottle is made from plants and is 100% recyclable. Plant bottle has a lighter footprint on the planet and its scarce resources. Valprè begins its journey as rain falling over South Africa's valleys and naturally filters through the earth for 15 years, to bring you world class spring water with balanced mineral salts. aQuellé

Cool Blue

Love Life avoid HIV/AIDS Penda a Maisha Jiepushe na UKIMWI* Cool Blue Pure Drinking Water Cares for you. Cool Blue water is under conditions conforming to export international standards, it can be consumed when one is uncertain to purity of any water; Cool Blue also meets your body/water requirements. Every drop of Cool Blue is thrice purified by

- Micro-Fine Filtering to remove impurities
- U.V. Light to kill bacteria
- Charged Oxygen (Ozone) for continuous protection

COOL BLUE Pure drinking water.

aQuellé

Enjoy the exceptional taste of our natural spring water, drawn from an underground spring. Undisturbed and unpolluted. **Pure taste. Pure enjoyment.** BOTTLED AT SOURCE EKHAMANZI SPRINGS. aQuellé pure enjoyment. STILL NATURAL SPRING WATER.

Still

Woolworths (logo). Still spring water.

Origin

Origin pure & simple still mineral water. The Origin Water Company. Pure and simple mineral water bottled in the misty Kwa-Zulu Natal Midlands.

JUSTwater

PREPARED WATER. REVERSE OSMOSIS AND OZONATION ARE USED AS A PURIFICATION PROCESS ON WATER OBTAINED FROM A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM.

* IsiZulu for Cool Blue Pure Drinking Water Cares for you.

Finally it is interesting to compare the contents of these different waters. (See Figure 5). If the mineral content claims to be ‘typical’, does this mean it is the actual content of the bottles? If they are ‘typical’ why are they different? JUSTwater also lists minerals despite making it clear that it is not spring water. I have deliberately used fine print; reading fine print requires effort; most people do not read the fine print. Nowhere do any of the bottles explain the effects of the different minerals on our bodies. Moreover, one of the bottles limits consumers’ understanding by using only the scientific abbreviations for the minerals, requiring them to take the water on trust. Across the curriculum work with the science teacher would enable students to understand what is being obfuscated and to make informed decisions about the quality of the different waters.

Figure 5 Product content information

Valprè	Cool Blue	aQuellé
Typical mineral composition in mg/l Calcium as Ca 10 Magnesium as Mg 10 Sodium as Na 3 Potassium as K 1 Chloride as Cl 2 Sulphate as SO ₄ 4 Alkalinity CaCO ₃ 65 Nitrate as N 1 Fluoride as F <0.1 TDS 83 pH 7.3	pH 7.3 Chloride 10.6 Calcium 4 4.0 Magnesium 6.4 Sulphate 5.2 Iron 0.02 Fluoride 0	Ca 2 mg/l Mg 1.6 mg/l Na 9.3 mg/l K 2.1 mg/l Cl 11 mg/l SO ₄ 3 mg/l CaCO ₃ <15 mg/l N 1.6 mg/l F <0.2 mg/l TDS 70 mg/l pH 6 uncarbonated
STILL	Origin	JUSTwater
Typical analysis of natural spring water Calcium 0.2 mg/L Magnesium 1.2 mg/L Sodium 10.6 mg/L Potassium <0.2 mg/L Chloride 18.5 mg/L Sulphate 1.0 mg/L Alkalinity 1.0 mg/L Nitrate 0.2 mg/L Fluoride <0.1 mg/L Total dissolved solids 58 mg/L pH 4.5 mg/L	Typical mineral composition in mg/l Calcium 21 Magnesium 13 Sodium 14 Potassium <1 Chloride <5 Sulphate <2 Nitrate <0.5 Fluoride <0.05 Alkalinity 112 pH 7.2 Iron 0.02 TDS 80	Typical mineral composition in mg/l Calcium <0.52 Magnesium <0.1 Sodium <2.87 Potassium <1.30 Chloride <8.81 Sulphate <0.89 Alkalinity <5.02 Nitrate <0.19 Fluoride <0 Iron <0 Aluminium <0 pH 6.5 - 8 TDS <20.00

4 The social effects of drinking bottled water

The students by now have enough information to consider the impact that drinking bottled water has on the environment. They have a good idea of how many bottles of water are consumed in the US and could do research in relation to other contexts.

Why people drink bottled water when there are safe, cheaper alternatives is a question that the class could be encouraged to research by surveying people in their school, their families and their neighbourhoods. They could compare what they find in different neighbourhoods. They could consider the question of who really needs bottled water but has no access to it. What does bottled water say about people's identities? How is it marketed and why is it marketed in that way? Who profits from selling bottled water? Why are Coke and Pepsi in the business of selling bottled water? What is the history of bottled water; when and how did it become fashionable? What did people do before there was bottled water? What could they do now?

5 Imagining possibilities for making a positive difference

This is a really important part of critical literacy that takes us beyond deconstructing or problematizing the world by inviting students to intervene in ways that make a positive difference. Education has a responsibility to develop students' sense of agency. They may choose simply to stop buying bottled water themselves or to start an anti-bottled water campaign. They can create posters or use the internet or social media to engage in cyber activism. Learning to weigh the alternatives for action is part of the educative process.

Two examples that make use of redesign are offered because they are both imaginative and humorous. The first example relates to water in Johannesburg, South

Africa, where tap water is recognized for its high quality. Figure 6 is an image of an ironic glass bottle that pokes fun simultaneously at bottled water and at Johannesburg's status as the crime capital of South Africa.

Figure 6 JoburgTap, sold as an empty glass bottle



A second example can be viewed on the internet. MSLK, a graphic design firm in New York constructed an installation using 1500 plastic water bottles to draw attention to the number of bottles of water consumed every second in the US. They 'regularly use art to raise awareness on the consumption of plastics' (www.treehugger.com). Figures 7 and 8 are images of this installation called 'Watershed'. Such work suggests links to art in the curriculum.

Figure 7 Watershed installation



Figure 8 Watershed installation



<http://www.treehugger.com/clean-water/the-us-consumes-1500-plastic-water-bottles-every-second-a-fact-by-watershed.html>.

Redesign, committed to positive transformation, completes what I have called the redesign cycle – an iterative process in which a design is deconstructed and then reconstructed. Because every reconstruction is also a new design it is also available for deconstruction and redesign. (Challenges to this installation can be found at <http://mslk.com/reactions/watershed-a-new-mslk-eco-installation>).

Conclusion

This commentary has been designed to explore an approach to literacy education that is willing to examine relations of power, particularly in so far as they determine who gets access to valued resources and who is denied access. One way of doing this is to read texts critically to see how they have been constructed, whose interests are served and how they work to produce our identities. An understanding of how semiotic resources have been deployed in the act of textual representation together with an understanding of connections between representation and social practices paves the way for redesign. The act of redesigning enables ‘readers’ to resist textual positioning and to contribute in ways, however small, to the process, however piecemeal, of creating a world that is both just and sustainable. If the creation of such a world is the abiding purpose of education, then there will be an ongoing need for critical literacy.

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ⁱ Critical language awareness is a form of critical literacy in which linguistic and lexical analysis is used for deconstructing and redesigning texts. Critical literacy is a more term that includes a wider range of semiotic and social analysis.

ⁱⁱ These include amongst others feminism and gender studies; poststructuralist theories of identity; postcolonialism and critical race theory; multiculturalism and cultural studies; critical pedagogy; critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis and genre theory; multimodality, media studies and new technologies; critical geography.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to the 2011 National Census, 91.2% of households had access to piped water, either inside their own homes or yards or from communal taps, and 8.8% (or about 4.5-million people) had absolutely no access to piped water. More detailed figures are contained in a 2011 general household survey published by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), the government statistical service. And that report stated that 89.5% of South African households had access to piped water. Breaking that number down, 43.3% had piped water in their homes, 28.6% had access to water in their yards, 2.7% had the

use of a neighbour's tap and 14.9% had to make use of communal taps.
(<http://www.africacheck.org/reports/claim-that-94-of-south-africa-claim-that-94-in-sa-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-doesnt-hold-water/#sthash.cCdw6UPv.dpuf>) Downloaded 14 June 2013