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# planting seeds with critical literacy

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## Abstract

Critical literacy encourages readers to question the construction and effects of texts. Using critical literacy, or critical text analysis, readers consider inclusion, exclusion and representation in texts, and relate texts to their own lives. Ultimately, critical literacy supports readers to consider how texts influence their thoughts and actions. The term text can refer to written, visual, digital, or audio texts; any vehicle we use to communicate to one another. There is a wide body of literature and research internationally into critical literacy, but there has been little to guide New Zealand teachers. This article, based on a recent NZATE workshop presentation, will encourage you to engage with the theory and practice of critical literacy in the Aotearoa New Zealand context and reflect on your current literacy programme as you consider ways to integrate critical text analysis across the curriculum.

## Planting seeds with critical literacy

### Introduction: Quick tour through the literacy landscape

Before you continue reading it is important that you take a moment to reflect. Jot down your thinking in the box below.

### Reflective interlude

What is your current understanding of critical literacy?

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand we find ourselves caught in the borderlands between the prevalent, traditional forms of literacy instruction and the 'new times' in which cultural, economic, social and technological change create a demand for people who are multiliterate (Luke & Elkins, 1998). Teachers and researchers have been struggling with how to best address these changes since the mid-1990s. In 1996 a group of leading literacy researchers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia called the New London Group after their meeting place, published an article calling for "a much broader view of literacy" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 60). Researchers working in this area have proposed we shift our thinking around how literacy is gained from a global mental process that is acquired according to a developmental, hierarchical timeline to "a repertoire of changing practices for communicating purposefully in multiple social and cultural contexts. Knowledge and literacy practices are primarily seen as constructions of particular social groups, rather than attributed to individual cognition alone" (Mills, 2010, p. 247). These new conceptualisations of literacy have implications for our literacy programmes.

In my work with preservice and inservice teachers I argue that the Four Resources Model (Luke & Freebody, 1999) provides a framework for developing a balanced literacy programme that will allow students to interact with the diversity of texts that they currently encounter, as well as 'future-proof' them to be able to engage with texts they have not yet met. This model suggests that students need to be able to develop the practices of code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1999). Code breaker refers to the practices readers use to break the codes and systems of texts. Meaning maker relates to the ability of readers to make meaning from texts, what we refer to as reading comprehension. Text user represents the practices of using and constructing texts effectively in a wide variety of contexts. And, lastly, text analyst emphasises that texts are not neutral and signifies the practice of analysing texts.

This article focuses on supporting students to develop the practices of a text analyst.

In the multiliteracies landscape the term *text* is used quite broadly. A text is any medium for communication. The term text comes from the Latin words textus meaning tissue, and texere meaning to weave (Bull & Anstey, 2010). This provides us with a useful metaphor for the term text as it describes the "weaving together [of] a combination of signs and symbols in a design that conveys meaning" (Bull & Anstey, 2010, p. 8). In the classroom we can use traditional texts that are live, such as a play, or paper, like a book. We can also use the new texts that are delivered through digital or electronic means, such as a wiki. A text is any "vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another using the codes and conventions of society" (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 3). This conceptualisation of text encourages us to extend our literacy programme across the curriculum.

Most texts are multimodal (Serafini, 2012). This means that the text draws upon more than one mode, or system of signs and symbols, to convey meaning. The five semiotic systems are the systems that we use in varying combinations to construct texts. These semiotic systems are:

- Linguistic (oral written language)
- Visual (still & moving images)
- Gestural (facial expressions & body language)
- Audio (music, silence, sound effects)
- Spatial (layout & organisation of objects spatially) (Bull & Anstey, 2010, p. 10)

When you support students to develop the resource of *code breaker* you are supporting them to break these codes. Typically in literacy instruction we have placed emphasis on supporting students to decode the linguistic semiotic system in traditional texts delivered on paper.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand the fourth resource, *text analyst,* has been conflated with critical thinking (Ministry of Education, 2003, 2006, 2007). However, these are not synonyms for one another. As discussed in *Planting seeds* (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011), you cannot do critical literacy without doing critical thinking, but you can do critical thinking without doing critical literacy. Briefly, critical thinking as described in most educational policy documents can trace its heritage back to the work of Benjamin Bloom, where the term critical has been used to refer to the so-called higher levels of thinking termed analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bailin, Case, Coombs, & Daniels, 1999; Paul, 1985). We need to be cautious, however, that we do not lose the power of text analysis work by merely asking students to think critically about texts. As you will see next, these are not the same.

In *Planting seeds* I trace the theoretical heritage of differing descriptions of critical literacy used in the literature (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). The description of critical literacy used in *Planting seeds* is underpinned by critical and poststructural theories and was developed in collaboration with the teachers who participated in the research project:

> We use the term "critical literacy" to describe ways in which teachers and students can deconstruct traditionally taken-for-granted texts (Lankshear, 1994). We believe that critical literacy for classroom practice involves supporting students to become aware that:
>
> - Texts are social constructions;
> - Texts are not neutral;
> - Authors draw upon particular discourses [1] (often majority discourses) and assume that readers will be able to draw upon them as well;
> - Authors make certain conscious and unconscious choices when constructing texts;
> - All texts have gaps, or silences, and particular representations within them;
> - Texts have consequences for how we make sense of ourselves, others and the world.
>
> Another important aspect of critical literacy for us is supporting students in making connections between texts and their lived experiences. (Sandretto & Critical Literacy Research Team, 2006, pp. 23-24)

Here we can see the links between critical analysis, or critical thinking, and a focus on connections between language and power. An emphasis on issues of power and social critique forms the basis for most descriptions of critical literacy found in the literature (Knobel & Healy, 1998; Mulcahy, 2008).

To translate the above description of critical literacy into practice, the critical literacy poster (see Figure 1) was developed. The poster

> clearly presents an underlying assumption ('All texts are constructed by people'). This is followed by the roles of the author ('People make choices about who and/or what is included, so some things and/or people may be excluded, and choices are made about how things and/or people are represented'). Then the roles of readers are considered: 'All readers have different knowledge and experiences that they bring to texts, and readers will make sense of texts differently'. This second role of the reader is a way for teachers to encourage multiple readings of the text under consideration in any given lesson. The poster concludes with 'So what? We can develop an awareness of how texts influence our thoughts and actions'. (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, p. 36)

Now we take a look at how you might use this theory of critical literacy in your classroom programme.

The next section examines key strategies for implementing critical literacy: text selection, focussing the lesson, questioning, and direct instruction of meta-language.

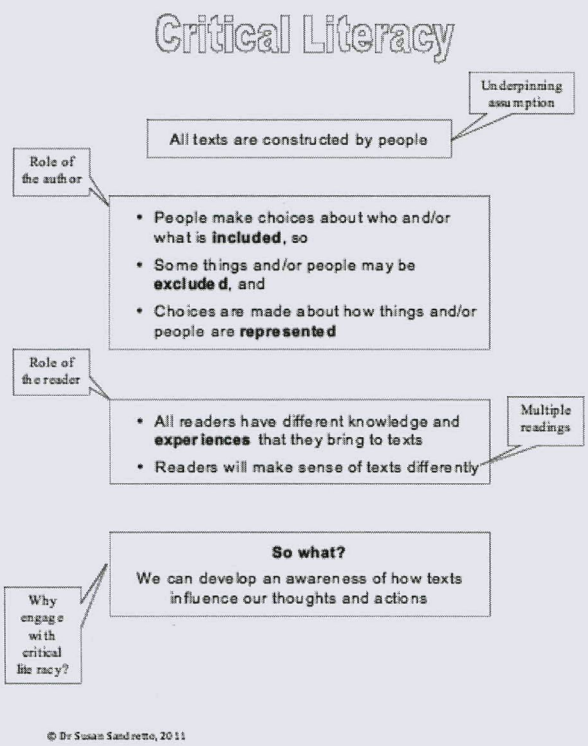


**Figure 1: Critical literacy poster** (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, p. 37)

## Key aspects of integrating critical literacy strategies[2]

### Text selection[3]

In planning a critical literacy lesson you will need to select the text you wish the students to analyse.

> Part of selecting the text is making explicit your *rationale for selecting that particular text.* Why did you choose that text over another? How does it link to your programme or unit of study? Maybe you wanted the students to analyse a visual text because you have already analysed a number of written texts. By making explicit your rationale you can chart the different texts and opportunities for analysis that you provide your students. An important part of critical literacy practice is acknowledging a broad range of texts from students' daily lives, so you may wish to include students in the text selection process for some lessons. (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, p. 71)

In selecting a text for analysis you may wish to consider the reading level, the topic, the curriculum area, the viewpoint the text provides, or the text type.

### Focussing the lesson

The next step after selecting a text for analysis is to decide where to focus the lesson. The poster will support you to select the focus:

> Does the text lend itself to consideration of the role of the author?
>
> - People make choices about who and/or what is included, so
> - Some things and/or people may be excluded, and
> - Choices are made about how things and/or people are represented.
>
> Or does the text lend itself to consideration of the role of the reader?
>
> - All readers have different knowledge and experiences that they bring to texts.
> - Readers will make sense of texts differently.

Every critical literacy lesson ought to conclude with a consideration of the "So what?":

- What does our analysis mean?
- What have we learned about this text?
- What have we learned about this author?
- What have we learned about how this text shapes our thinking and (potentially) our actions? (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, p. 72)

Once you have determined the focus of the lesson, you can select the questions you wish to use to promote critical analysis.

### *Questioning*

Questioning and dialogue form the key pedagogical strategies for any critical literacy lesson.[4] Once you have selected the focus for the lesson, you will select two or three questions to support students to explore that focus. There are a number of questions that can be adapted for any level and any text.[5]

It is important to remember that students typically have had few opportunities to engage with these sorts of questions, so be sure to allow sufficient wait time for the students. Research shows that we frequently give students less than one second to respond to a question! (Rowe, 1986). If the aim of questioning is rote learning or recall, a short wait time is acceptable (Tobin, 1987). If the aim of questioning is critical analysis, however, research advocates allowing students more time to think. After you have selected the questions you wish to use to initiate discussion, you will need to identify the metalanguage you will teach.

### *Direct instruction of meta-language*

The aspect of the poster you have selected to focus the critical literacy lesson on, and the questions you have selected to start the discussion will guide your choice of metalanguage to teach. Students typically need support to develop the metalanguage, or language about language, that they need to analyse and discuss texts (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). While the poster does not contain a great deal of metalanguage, we have found that teachers need to do some explicit teaching of terms such as *representation, bias, stereotype, viewpoint* and so on. Some teachers develop a word bank on the wall or in students' notebooks that students can refer to and build upon.

In the next section we consider an example of what this might look like in practice.

### An example

How might you direct student analysis of the following text? (See Figure 2). You start by selecting the aspect of the poster you wish to focus on. Let's say that you select "Choices are made about how things and/or people are represented". You might then select the following questions to prompt critical analysis and discussion:

- What do the images suggest?
- How are young adults (Romeo and Juliet) constructed in this text?
- What is missing in the text?

You might choose to teach the terms *representation, construction* and *stereotype.* You would then construct the lesson sequence, perhaps including a follow-up activity. After the lesson you would reflect on how it went.


**Figure 2: Romeo and Juliet movie poster (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 92)**

## Concluding thoughts

Before you continue reading, complete the following reflection.

### Reflective interlude

What is your understanding of critical literacy now?

Where will you integrate critical literacy?

Which texts will you use?

What questions remain about implementing critical literacy in your programme?

In this brief introduction to critical literacy we have quickly traversed the current literacy landscape, looked at a description of critical literacy from New Zealand research, considered some key aspects of teaching critical literacy, and examined one example of a text and the sorts of questions you might ask.

You may be asking yourself right now "So what?" Why should you support your students to develop the resources of a text analyst? According to Anstey and Bull (2006), "we must be aware that the texts we access or are exposed to have been consciously constructed to share particular information in particular ways, shaping our attitudes, values and behaviours" (p. 23). Students come into contact with a rapidly increasing number of texts on any given day. I believe that a balanced literacy programme supports students to develop the resources of a *code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst* with a wide variety of text types across curriculum areas. This does not mean we throw the baby out with the bathwater. In other words, if you add critical literacy to your programme, you are not removing the literacy and writing programmes that you are using now.

### Where do you go from here?

There is a great deal of research evidence to suggest that interaction with one-off conference workshops or brief articles is not sufficient to shift teacher practice (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). If you are interested in exploring critical literacy I suggest that you form a teacher professional learning group and interact with the readings and resources recommended here. Try out critical literacy lessons in your class and then return to your group for reflection and discussion. You can observe each other as well to prompt critical reflection and discussion. Finally, you may find the critical literacy audit tool useful to consider ways to integrate critical literacy across your programme (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

I look forward to hearing from you.[6]

## Suggested further reading


Anstey, M., & Bull, G. (2006). Teaching and learning multiliteracies: Changing times, changing literacies. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Bull, G., & Anstey, M. (2010). Evolving pedagogies: Reading and writing in a multimodal world. Carlton, Vic: Curriculum Press.

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

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Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development: Best evidence synthesis iteration [BES]*. Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

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## Notes

[1] "The term discourse emphasises the power of language and encourages us to focus on the ways in which language works in different contexts. For example, the discourse of phonics will shape teachers' literacy pedagogy differently from the discourse of whole language" (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, p. 238).

[2] For a more detailed discussion please see Chapter 4: Practical considerations: What could it look like? (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, pp. 69-110)

[3] Join the Planting seeds wiki to access a variety of resources to support your work including questions and a lesson plan template http://plantingseedswithcriticalliteracy.wikispaces.com/

[4] For a thorough discussion on the role of dialogue in critical literacy see Chapter 3: Dialogue: How do you do it? (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011, pp. 42-68).

[5] You can download a list of questions from the wiki- http://plantingseedswithcriticalliteracy.wikispaces.com/

[6] Like the Critical multiliteracies Facebook page to share resources and initiate discussions. https://www.facebook.com/CriticalMultiliteracies?ref=ts&fref=ts