

BOOK REVIEW

Literacy and power, by Hilary Janks, New York, Routledge, 2010, xxi + 245 pp., US\$140.00 (hardback), ISBN 987-0-8058-5577-7

Set against the backdrop of post-Apartheid South Africa, Hilary Janks illustrates in this timely book that school literacy is anything but “a neutral technology and a decontextualised set of skills” (p. 3) and clearly articulates why it is vital to find ways of teaching literacy that are inclusive of students’ diverse identity investments in contexts that are increasingly multicultural and multilingual. This volume, tying a selection of Janks’ previously published works together, provides an in-depth analysis of the different orientations to critical literacy and makes a compelling case for adopting her interdependent model for critical literacy. To do this, Janks outlines the theories (from Bourdieu, Foucault, Freire, Kress, Gee and Fairclough) that inform her model and draws on her research to provide concrete examples of what an integrated approach to critical literacy looks like in practice. Janks underscores the fact that the landscape of literacy education is shifting with the rapid development of new technologies: people are increasingly using multimodal means to communicate, and this development is changing ideas of what it means to be literate in the twenty-first century. However, one of the defining themes of Janks’ book is to demonstrate that not everyone has equal access to these “new literacies” because access to technology is intricately linked to questions of power.

As the title of the book suggests, Janks is interested in the ways literacy and power are connected. She therefore begins Chapter 1 by problematizing the concept of literacy and explaining the reasons she turned to critical literacy. Although commonly understood as the ability to read and write, Janks explains that “literacy” remains contested and is a concept that is not found in all languages. Nevertheless, a problematic binary exists between those deemed “literate” and “illiterate”. Those deemed literate usually belong to groups whose social practices are dominant and considered the social norm; moreover, their status as literate grants them access to further socio-economic resources that enable social advancement. Because the literacy practices of those deemed illiterate are devalued, their construction as illiterate allows less room for positive agency and social advancement. Janks also notes that different indicators of social privilege (language, race, class, gender, geography, etc.) work on individuals and influence their odds of becoming literate. She therefore concludes that it is impossible to separate questions of literacy from questions of social, economic and political power.

As an English teacher in South Africa in the 1970s, Janks turned to theories of Critical Language Awareness (CLA), and later critical literacy, to address these issues in her practice. For Janks, *critical* “is used to signal analysis that seeks to uncover the social interests at work, to ascertain what is at stake in textual and social practices. Who benefits? Who is disadvantaged?” (pp. 12–13). Critical therefore indicates a concern for revealing these relationships in order to work towards creating a more equitable society. Both CLA and critical literacy involve the deconstruction of texts and analyses of the ways individuals are constituted through discourse; however, Janks believes that critical literacy provides the ability to

work with literary and non-literary texts, in addition to multimodal texts produced through the use of digital technologies. She maintains that critical literacy allows for the inclusion of theories from a range of disciplines and that literacy learners can be viewed as creative and agentive subjects, capable of effecting social change. This is particularly important for Janks, who cites Freire and the New London Group's "multiliteracies" project among her influences.

In Chapter 2, Janks describes four different orientations to critical literacy: domination, access, diversity and design. Janks argues that each orientation has different pedagogical implications and presents her interdependent model for critical literacy, which considers each orientation fundamental to the teaching of critical literacy. Subsequent chapters are arranged in accordance with each orientation, a focus that has the effect of demonstrating why each one is integral to the proposed model.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on domination and power from the perspective that texts and discourse are constructed to either maintain or subvert dominant power structures. The ability to deconstruct texts is therefore invaluable. Janks has the ability to explain the theories she draws on in ways that makes them accessible to her reader; her discussion of two different understandings of power commonly found in critical theory is particularly useful. For Janks, neo-Marxist theories conceive power in a negative way. Here, power is oppressive and used by dominant groups to subordinate others. Neo-Marxist approaches are concerned with revealing and deconstructing the ideologies in texts, a process that is purported to be liberating for subordinate groups. Janks contrasts this with Foucault's understanding of power that lies in the ways discourses are produced, and how power works to constitute some discourses as knowledge. Power is capable of infiltrating every aspect of daily life through discourse. However, it is not merely negative, as force is required neither to uphold social norms nor to resist them. Explaining that her work had evolved in a way that made her seek conceptions of power that work in these dual ways, Janks concludes that both neo-Marxist and post-structural understandings of power are useful in critical literacy. Chapter 4 provides examples of the numerous ways multimodal texts can be deconstructed.

In Chapter 5, Janks examines diversity in a way that makes readers aware of the dangers of pedagogies that celebrate diversity without providing an analysis of power. Janks explains that when diversity exists without providing access to dominant discourses (what Gee calls secondary discourses), students from non-dominant backgrounds are marginalized. In Chapter 6, Janks tackles Lodge's "access paradox", that is, providing access to dominant discourses without an analysis of power, which serves to reify the dominant discourse. Although she writes that issues of literacy and power in multicultural and multilingual contexts are increasingly global issues, Janks draws on her own context: mainly South Africa and Australia, to illustrate her argument. She explains that in the new South Africa, the constitution recognizes 11 official languages and the right to instruction in African languages. Choices made regarding the language of instruction are closely tied to power, and Janks writes that many parents prefer to have their children taught in English as it is the dominant language and knowledge thereof is considered key for socio-economic advancement. Despite policies recognizing the importance of indigenous languages, Janks uses Bourdieu to highlight the fact that schools often perpetuate notions of a "legitimate" language, while simultaneously failing to provide access to that language for children from marginalized groups. The difficulty for teachers is finding ways to balance the need for access to dominant languages, while recognizing and supporting the use of diverse indigenous languages in contexts of unequal power relations.

Chapter 7 shifts the focus from text deconstruction to critical text production. Janks looks specifically at the different modalities people use to make meaning and encourages

teachers to draw on students' strengths by having them produce multimodal texts. Design is reconceived as "redesign" in Chapter 8. This is explained as the way people can use their different identity locations and multimodal literacies to create new texts out of old ones, in ways that challenge dominant discourses. This returns critical literacy to its Marxist and Freirean roots by engaging students, the "redesigners", in social action. Throughout the book, and particularly in these two chapters, Janks provides richly detailed examples of critical literacy projects in schools drawn from her research in South Africa and Australia. These examples provide a glimpse of the complexities of teaching critical literacy, while simultaneously showing that this work is possible when teachers and administrators are able to make concerted efforts to sustain it.

Janks writes that *Literacy and power* is intended for pre- or in-service teachers; however, some of the theoretical discussion in the book may not seem relevant to those unaccustomed to engaging with theory. For this reason, the text may be better suited to graduate students and researchers with an interest in critical literacy.

Literacy and power is most refreshing in that Janks critiques her projects and explains the limitations of and challenges for critical literacy in the concluding chapter of her book. This marks a departure from many writings about critical approaches to education, which often spend so much time advocating the necessity of teaching students to adopt a critical lens, that they fail to apply one to their own work. In this way, Janks stands apart from the pack.

It is somewhat ironic to write that Janks lures readers in with her disarming narrative, given the space she devotes to explaining that readers must find both points of estrangement and engagement in a text in order to critically deconstruct it. Nevertheless, the power of Janks' narrative, weaving personal anecdotes, concrete examples from her research and exercises for teachers together with rigorous theory is the defining strength of this book. The only slight disruption to the flow comes in Chapter 4, where an abundance of tables and diagrams somewhat overwhelm the text. However, this results from the vast amount of knowledge that Janks shares with her readers about the many ways multimodal texts can be deconstructed. In fact, she leads by examples and illustrates that academic texts need not be text based. *Literacy and power* is pertinent, well written and a book I am likely to refer to regularly in years to come.

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