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Janks, Hilary

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Critical Literacy's Ongoing Importance for Education

Hilary Janks

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 Awareness[1] in South Africa." What I was able to show in that article was the ways in which apartheid discourses continued to speak through us, to instantiate themselves in texts, and to construct us as racialized 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 initial argument was too limited, with its focus on 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. 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 adults they trust; where millions of people lack access to drinking water or sanitation; the list is endless—it is even more important that education enables young people to read both the word and the world critically (Freire, 1972a; 1972b).



Hilary Janks is a professor at Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa; e-mail hilary.janks@wits.ac.za.

A Critical Orientation to Education

Social orders that create disparities based on arbitrary social categories, such as 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 both by our actions and by 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 practices can be transformed opens up possibilities, however small, for social action (Comber, Thomson, & Wells, 2001; Morrell, 2008; Vasquez, 2004). Elsewhere (Janks, 2005), I

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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 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 perspectives[2] to bear on the critical literacy endeavor. The kinds of texts and activities that the framework envisages for classroom practice is further developed in Janks, Dixon, Ferreira, Granville, and Newfield (2014).

Critical Literacy in Practice

Here I want to show what critical literacy 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). This step 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 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, that 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, p. 51). In essence, they need to be able to do the following:

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 behavior.
4. Examine who benefits and who is disadvantaged by imagining the social effects of what is going on and of 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 airing 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 (2001).

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 people who do not have access to piped water. The ad tells us that although some families use large volumes of water to fill their swimming pools, over 4 million poor South Africans lack clean water for their daily needs.[3] 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.
>
> Over-consumption 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," 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 (Comber, Nixon, & Reid, 2007; Reid, 2007). Another example is the BMW S.E.E.D project in South Africa, which helped poor township schools to grow food gardens while teaching children about the importance of environmental sustainability. Children contributed to the garden by bringing in liters of gray water and vegetable waste for compost, as well as 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 the subject that 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 in listeners 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 several reasons.

- Drinking bottled water is a practice that many young people 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 need it least.
- The consumption of bottled water is an issue that offers possibilities for student activism.

3. Accessing Relevant Information

Information on water as a scarce resource, as well as ideas for 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. The search phrase "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 in Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this point.

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 redesign. Figure 3 shows labels on water for sale in South Africa. Students can add labels of bottled water sold in their neighborhoods to this selection. In interrogating the labels, they can analyze the names, visual designs, and accompanying text (see Figure 4). They can consider what the brands 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?

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

Lastly, it is interesting to compare the contents of these different waters (see Figure 5). If the mineral content claims to be "typical," does that mean it is the actual content of the bottles? If they are "typical," why

FIGURE 1 Fact Sheet

- The US consumes 1500 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.
- Even in its smallest form, plastic will never biodegrade.

Retrieved June 15, 2013, from www.treehugger.com/clean-water/the-us-consumes-1500-plastic-water-bottles-every-second-a-fact-by-watershed.html

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
San Francisco's tap water comes from Yosemite National Park and is so pure the EPA does not require it to be filtered.	
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	
It is estimated that at a cost of $1.29 a water bottle	
Where the money goes	**Amount**
Retailer	.63c
Transportation	.43c
Water Bottle Production	.12c
Profit	.10c

Retrieved June 15, 2013, from www.statisticbrain.com/bottled-water-statistics

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, and most people do not read it. Nowhere do any of the bottles explain the effects of the 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 a science teacher would enable

FIGURE 3 Examples of Water Branding



FIGURE 4 Transcripts of 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.

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.

* Swahili for "Cool Blue Pure Drinking Water Cares for you".

students to understand what is being obfuscated and allow them to make informed decisions about the quality of the different waters.

4. The Social Effects of Drinking Bottled Water

By now, the students have enough information to consider the impact that drinking bottled water has

FIGURE 5 Mineral Content Listed on the Different Bottles of Water

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

on the environment. They have a good idea of how many bottles of water are consumed in the United States and could do research in relation to other contexts. Why people drink bottled water when there are safe, cheaper alternatives is a question the class could be encouraged to research by surveying people in their school, their families, and their neighborhoods. They could compare their findings according to neighborhoods. They could consider the question of who really needs bottled water but lacks 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 step is a really important part of critical literacy. It 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 cyberactivism. Learning to weigh the alternatives for action is part of the educative process.

FIGURE 6 JoburgTap, Sold as an Empty Glass Bottle



Two examples that make use of redesign are offered because both are 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.

A second example can be viewed on the Internet. MSLK, a graphic design firm in New York, "regularly use art to raise awareness on the consumption of plastics" (www.treehugger.com). The firm constructed an installation using 1,500 plastic water bottles to draw attention to the number of bottles consumed every second in the United States. Figure 7 shows images of this installation, called "Watershed." Such work suggests links to art in the curriculum.

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, too, is available for

FIGURE 7 Views of "Watershed"





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

deconstruction and redesign. (Challenges to this installation can be found at mslk.com/reactions/watershed-a-new-mslk-eco-installation.)

Conclusion

This commentary was designed to explore an approach to literacy education that is willing to examine relations of power, particularly insofar as they determine who gets access to valued resources and who is denied access. One way of understanding power 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 or piecemeal, to the process 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.

Notes

[1] 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 general term that includes a wider range of semiotic and social analysis.

[2] These include 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; and critical geography.

[3] 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. That report stated that 89.5% of South African households had access to piped water. Breaking down that number, 43.3% had piped water in their homes, 28.6% had access to water in their yards, 2.7% had the use of a neighbor's tap, and 14.9% had to make use of communal taps. Retrieved from www.africacheck.org/reports/claim-that-94-of-south-aclaim-that-94-in-sa-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-doesnt-hold-water/#sthash.cCdw6UPv.dpuf.

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