

Tribute to Hilary Janks 19-11-2014

By Denise Newfield

Everyone here is familiar with the slogan 'Wits gives you the edge' but in my view, Hilary already had the edge before she arrived on campus as an undergraduate student and definitely by the time she was appointed as a lecturer. It is aspects of her extraordinary creativity and her vision that I wish to salute today.

I first met Hilary in 1985 when we were fellow students in an Applied Linguistics Honours programme offered by the Department of Linguistics at Wits which at that time was housed below ground in what is now the Umthombo Building. I mention this location because it has some significance for subsequent events.

I was particularly impressed by two things about Hilary.

The first was that almost immediately she had a **research trajectory** planned around her interest in the then very new areas of critical language awareness and critical literacy so that while continuing to teach in the Wits English Department and to commit time to her family, she developed the small scale research project undertaken for the Honours degree into a more substantial MA research project and in no time at all, or so it seemed to me, she had begun her PhD at Lancaster, doing research that was practice-based but richly informed by theory and which resulted not only in her doctorate but also in the publication of the Critical Language Awareness series of workbooks which have been used by teachers in South Africa and in other countries for almost 20 years. **Hilary believes in Doing Critical Literacy** – the title of the book published last year with contributions from four Wits colleagues (Denise Newfield, Kerry Dixon, Ana Ferreira and Stella Granville).

The second thing that particularly impressed me about Hilary was her **commitment to social justice**, to a better deal for all South Africans in all spheres of life but in particular, to better education for all, not only in terms of access but also in terms of quality. She believed passionately then, and still does passionately today, that teachers should have as strong a grounding in language studies as in literature and so she worked tirelessly for the

establishment of a Department of Applied English Language Studies at Wits. This became a reality in 1992 with AELS housed on the top floor of Umthombo: language studies had moved up in the world, even if one of our teaching rooms had formerly been used for behavioural experiments with animals!

Together with colleagues recruited to AELS from other departments at Wits and those recruited internationally, Hilary designed courses for an undergraduate major and also credit-bearing Foundation courses with a focus on academic literacy that were taken for over ten years by several thousand students across the Faculty of Arts / Humanities and in other faculties such as Law.

With the undergraduate programme in place, the AELS staff took over and extended the courses offered by Linguistics in the Applied Linguistics Honours programme, developed an MA programme in English Language Education and began recruiting PhD students. In all of this work Hilary played a key role – perhaps most of all in the design and teaching of courses that supported students to become a community of critical researchers and to be equipped for careers in the academy, if this was their goal. By 2011 not only had the AELS staff completed doctorates while teaching, but 34 AELS graduates were working at other SA universities and a further nine at universities elsewhere in Africa.

In 2005, when AELS moved from the School of Literature and Language Studies on the east campus to the School of Education, Hilary's creative talents (and those of our beloved colleague the late Pippa Stein) had a new outlet: the design and furnishing of a postgraduate teaching and research space which became known as the AELS Research Incubator. Since then this space has been used not only for postgraduate teaching but for numerous research seminars and workshops and for outreach events for teachers. This year, under Hilary's direction, it's had a facelift and is now bolder and brighter than ever (both literally and figuratively).

When AELS joined the WSoE departments of African languages, Afrikaans and English to form the division of Languages, Literacies and Literatures Hilary agreed to be its first head and in this role guided colleagues in new collaborative endeavours at both undergraduate and post graduate levels

while at the same time continuing extensive research and publication programmes. Apart from numerous journal articles, the results of these included *Literacy and Power* in 2010 and *Doing Critical Literacy* in 2013.

Thus far I've been speaking quite seriously about Hilary but as you all know she is a great believer in fun and laughter. For example, while she was head of AEELS, at one of the then fashionable bosberaad planning events, she arranged a tequila breakfast. We were creative until the headaches kicked in! Also while she was head of AEELS she introduced the fowl awards. At our end of year lunches, miniature birds bought a craft markets were bestowed on each of us accompanied by a citation which focused on what was outrageously untrue of each of us (in my case, think of a fashionista award) and which thus occasioned much protest and much hilarity.

I thought of trying to write one of these citations for Hilary today but I have neither her creativity nor her wit so I'm playing it safe and ending with a paraphrase of words written by one of Hilary's many friends in the international academic world, Alan Luke. In his review of *Literacy and Power* he praised Hilary for being 'a scholar, teacher, political activist and woman warrior of the greatest strength and wisdom' and in endorsing Alan's words of praise I add to them my thanks also for your creativity, your principled vision and your generosity to colleagues, students and teachers in South Africa and throughout the world.