

Critical Literacies in Australia

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Ch 2.2. Critical Literacy in Australia

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Brief Overview Of Australia In Its Socio-political Context

Australia is an island continent in the Asia Pacific region, with just over 25 million people. Australia's First Nations Peoples – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - are recognised as the oldest surviving culture in the world and have been living in Australia for more than 65 000 years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are diverse in languages and cultures. As a nation, Australia has continued to fail in recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples adequately, stemming back to the time of invasion in 1788, when British migrants claimed Australia as a colony via Terra Nullius. The *Mabo Case* in 1992 established Australian lands were not Terra Nullius prior to 1788 and this led to the passing of a Native Title Act providing opportunities for claims to land rights and compensation. However, Australia's colonial history of racist policies continues to impact the cultural and socio-political contexts and discourses present in Australia today.

Successive policies have foregrounded representations of Australia as a society of Caucasian English speakers. However, Australia has a diverse population where trends in cultural background, language, and religion continue to shift. Between three and four percent of Australians are now Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and of the non-Indigenous population, approximately one in four were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017). Migration has always featured in Australia's population growth.

After World War Two, the ‘populate or perish’ immigration scheme welcomed more than two million migrants from Europe and Britain. In the late 1970s, refugees from Asia, mainly East Timor and Vietnam arrived, and since 1990 increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle East and the Horn of Africa have made Australia home (Australian Government, 2020a). More recently, mandatory detention of arrivals by sea and lengthy off shore processing have led to temporary visas being allocated to those seeking asylum. Whilst varied cultures and races are reflected in the present-day cultural practices (including literacies) in Australia, migration and diversity continue to be polarising public debates.

As a Federation, the country is now delineated into six states and two territories. It was not until 1948 that those born in Australia were registered as Australian citizens and not British citizens. Voting is compulsory for Australian citizens. Women were given the vote for federal elections in Australia in 1902. There is a complicated history of voting rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at State and Commonwealth levels. However, the Commonwealth Electoral Act provided their right to vote in 1962 (Australian Electoral Commission, 2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not counted as citizens within the Australian Census until 1967, and the Aborigines Protection Act, which had enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be forcibly removed from their homes and Lands to live on missions and reserves, was not repealed until 1969. In recent times, the rise of political parties based in racist rhetoric and increased power of a conservative media has seen right wing politics take centre stage. This is somewhat of a shift from more centrist ideologies so successful to left leaning political parties through the nineteen eighties and nineties. Having said this, many Australians continue to engage with global social movements such as climate change strikes and equality debates including the legalisation of same sex marriage achieved in 2018.

Brief Overview of the Australian Educational System

The overall goals for Education in Australia are set out in ten-year intervals by Ministers of Education. The most recent, *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, 2019*, identifies two goals for Australia's education system. The first goal is focused on excellence and equity. The second focuses on encouraging confidence, creativity, lifelong learning, and opportunities to become active and informed citizens (Australian Government, 2020b). The Federal Government directly funds independent and faith-based schools. Public school education is funded and governed by State governments. As a result, curriculum and other policy decisions have historically been made by State governments, with varied levels of agreement across States and Territories at different times.

Successive Federal Governments have claimed increasing control over curriculum and assessment within schools by tying funding available to the States for public education to a number of national mandates¹. The staged implementation of a consistent Australian Curriculum from 2014 marks the first consistent national curriculum in Australia, although States still have control of implementation and delivery of the curriculum. After this introduction, related changes to the structure of schooling have occurred across States and territories – such as shifts in school starting age to bring systems into alignment and changes to the structure of year 12 assessment and calculation of tertiary entrance scores. School starting age for most children is between 4.5 and 5.5 years and continues for 13 years (foundation to year 6 as primary education and year 7 to year 12 as secondary education).

Survey of Critical Literacy Work in Australia

Australia is recognised as a space where critical literacy has strong foundations in theory, curricula and practice. Australian educators have continued to debate what critical

¹ For example, participation in the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which was brokered across all States through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in 2008.

literacy means and how to approach it within the mandated curriculum. Promoting both critique of textual worlds and enhanced access to them, critical literacy in Australia has drawn from a range of theoretical traditions including reader response, critical linguistics, post structural critiques of normative gender, race and class understandings, and cultural studies.

There seems little doubt that political, policy, legal, moral and relational conventions are shifting in local and global spaces. It is not within the purview of this chapter to discuss the reasons for this unprecedented shift in boundaries and responsibilities. However, in terms of literacies, it is relevant to note that new capacities for text production and consumption, including new conventions and practices, emerge each moment. These transitions provide “the staging grounds for a volatile ideological, geopolitical and social order” (Luke, 2018, p. vii). So, readers and writers “use a variety of modes of inscription – print, oral, and multimedia – to understand, analyse, critique and transform their social, cultural and political worlds” (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 9), and yet Australian policy and literacy curriculum continue to offer simple answers for complex problems seen in the recurrent push to basic skills, especially phonics, as the one best way to teach literacy. These debates and their solutions seem to be on rewind, and the responses of successive governments, policy makers, the media and lobby groups are predictable. At a time when those pushing standardisation, highly defined curriculum to muzzle teacher professionalism, and the primacy of phonics seem to be winning the debates played out in the traditional and new media forms, a look back at the strong foundations of critical literacy in Australia is timely. To achieve this, we offer an almost chronological survey of critical literacy in Australia from the later parts of the 20th century and first two decades of the 21st. It is not exhaustive, but highlights key contributions to what critical literacy has come to be known in this country.

Amidst wide-spread political reform in the late 1970s in Australia, curriculum developers and educators were pushed to think deeply about how schools could provide greater equality of opportunity; less segregation in schools based on gender and class; and a more meaningful curriculum relevant to the lived experiences of students and their families. The document *Orientations to Curriculum and Transition: Towards the socially -critical school* (Kemmis, Cole, & Suggett, 1983) ushered in the beginnings of a socially-critical approach to literacy education in Australia. Kemmis et al. argued for the need to convert schools to “a socially critical orientation... involving the community, curriculum reflection and debate, in-service activities, school reviews, and monitoring progress” (p. 1). ‘Socially-critical’ literacy, as a concept, was later mentioned by Luke (1988) in connection with the ideological, cultural and political foundations of literacy that can be seen as reproduction of inequality. Luke and Walton (Luke & Walton, 1993) further distinguished critical social literacy from conventional literacy arguing that a critical social approach necessitated application of critique in the Freireian tradition and discourse analytic approaches.

Several key nodes of critical literacy work have been highly influential in developing critical literacy’s presence in Australia, and also in other international contexts where notable Australian critical literacy scholars networked and had influence. Critical literacy work developed in Queensland, Australia for example has been well networked into international contexts such as Ontario and South Africa, the US and UK. The most well-recognised of this work is by Peter Freebody and Allan Luke on the Four Resources Model of Reading (later literacy). Outlined in their initial contributions - Freebody & Luke, (1990); Freebody (1992), and in an edited volume led by Muspratt (Luke & Freebody, 1997) - the model argues for four necessary and simultaneously occurring “roles” for readers (later expanded from reading to literacy) in a postmodern, text-based culture:

- Code breaker (coding competence)

- Meaning maker (semantic competence)
- Text user (pragmatic competence)
- Text critic (critical competence)

In adaptations of this work by the original authors and others (e.g. Luke and Freebody, 1999), the framing of roles developed to a more complex theorisation of literate beings having a repertoire of practices to call upon as required. Widely used by teachers and curriculum makers in Australia and beyond, the model has featured in curriculum policy in several Australian states. Readers of this handbook would not be strangers to this approach. As one example, the model was officially adopted in Queensland policy in 2000 in the *Literate Futures* materials (Luke, Freebody, & Land, 2000), and accompanying teacher resources. The four resources model also featured in innumerable text books, online resources, commercial packs and reading resources from publishers and professional organisations.

Colin Lankshear's occasional paper *Critical Literacy* (1994) was instrumental in finessing Australian educator's understandings of critical literacy from a critical pedagogy perspective. It acknowledged that critical literacy was "a contested educational ideal" (p. 4), and addressed two important conceptual groundings at odds with each other: what does "critical" really mean? (or what characterises a "critical orientation"?), and secondly, how do we work with "critical" being a vague perennial ideal, constructed in different ways in different contexts? Grassroots work in this area was achieved by post structural feminist researchers and teachers (e.g., Davies, 1989; 2003; and Gilbert, 1989) encouraging teachers to consider the gendered assumptions of texts, schooling and systems. As has been the case in other contexts, Indigenous, critical race theorists have taken this work forward in Australia as well (see for example Nakata, 2000).

Critical literacy in Australia has also been influenced by a strong heritage in text analytic approaches founded in the linguistic theory of Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (e.g., Halliday & Hasan, 1985) and subsequent work by genre theorists Fran Christie and Jim Martin. These approaches have still attended to ideological functions of texts, but also provided resources to analyse texts (Luke & Woods, 2009). More recently, critical literacy foundations have been put forward in work related to bodies, time, place and the environment, and emotions such as that in work by Barbara Comber and colleagues (e.g., Comber, Nixon & Reid, 2007), building on earlier work in South Australia by these researchers connected to leading critical literacy thinkers in the US and South Africa such as Hilary Janks, and in key work building on the traditions of multiliteracies (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

A particular feature of the Australian critical literacy work is that alongside these theoretical developments, the critical literacy agenda has always had an eye on policy and practice, and this has resulted in important texts written to both document the work of teachers and inform teaching colleagues. Supported by the National Language and Literacy Institute of Australia, Andrew (Lohrey, 1998) prepared a foundational professional development package on critical literacy. The package did not engage with what Lohrey called “difficult matters” (p. 5), alluding to the problem of the contested ideal, and instead offered a hands-on resource for practical application.

Other textbooks and teacher professional development resources that emerged include Michelle Knobel and Annah Healy’s *Critical Literacies in the Primary Classroom* (1998), a publication of teachers’ classroom research which is still utilised in preservice and inservice teacher education, and Wendy Morgan’s *Critical Literacy in the classroom: The art of the possible* (1997). Work by Barbara Comber, Helen Nixon, and Alison Simpson and others in

South Australia highlighted the characteristic practitioner focus of much of this work in Australia with a basis in social justice, (e.g., Comber & Simpson 2001; Comber, 2014). Teachers have also had access to resources, building on linguistic and ideological ways of thinking about texts, that have encouraged the use of a range of everyday written and multimodal texts and classroom pedagogies (Exley & Kervin, 2013; Exley, Kervin, & Mantai, 2015) to encourage critical and analytic literacy practices in students from the early years of schooling (Exley, Woods, & Dooley, 2014; Ludwig, 2006; Woods, Comber, & Iyer, 2015) into secondary schooling (e.g., Alford, 2014; Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, critical literacy was gaining significant traction in secondary school English curriculum and in Queensland in primary curriculum as well, but not without resistance, mostly due to poor professional development of teachers. There was much debate, still lingering today, about how critical approaches would transform dearly-held notions about teaching, especially of canonical literature. Attempts to reconcile this perceived disjunct were offered by Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan (2006) who argued that taking pleasure in texts while also critiquing was possible. Critical media work also encouraged engagement and access to digital ways of working while foregrounding critical literacies.

Current research contributions are continuing to emerge which consider new challenges and diverse cohorts of learners. For example, critical literacy has challenged how systems might better work with ideas related to diverse genders and sexualities. A foundational article by Misson, *Dangerous Lessons: Sexuality Issues in the English Classroom* (1995) disrupted the heteronormative status quo of critical literacy, and these ideas were expanded in *English in Australia* in a special issue published in 2018 (McGraw, van Leent, & Doecke). Querying the state of critical literacy for English teachers in Australia, the publication focused on ‘love in English’ pushing further the boundaries of critical literacy. van Leent and Mills (2017) refined a set of pedagogical approaches to equip

teachers to critique heteronormative assumptions of texts in the context of adolescent multimodal and digital practices.

Another area emerging as a space for critical literacies to have influence challenges notions that English learners should be provided predominantly with functional access to literacy and language instruction. While providing functional approaches to language and literacy is crucial for English learners, especially those with interrupted schooling, some have argued that given the right professional learning and agentic conditions, teachers can provide English learners with access to critical literacies (Alford (2014); Alford & Jetnikoff (2106)), though this is not without its challenges (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999). Critical literacy theorists have also problematised the dominance of Standard Australian English over other migrant and Indigenous languages represented widely in schools (see for example Alford and Kettle, 2017).

Moving Into More *Transnational* And Other Critical Work From The Perspective Of Australia.

In Australia, as in many other contexts, literacy education is currently being narrowly construed in public debate, media and policy. An autonomous understanding of literacy as a set of defined skills or as set content, challenges the spaces available for educators to engage children and young people in learning literacy as a social and material practice.

Foregrounding the ideological base of all texts and teaching children ways to engage critically with texts is a difficult task in contexts where basics skills such as phonics are given priority. This is a recurring problem and literacy scholars have been drawn into these great debates before. However, as world politics has been moved to Twitter, as social media is increasingly considered a space for fact rather than opinion, and in a context where world economies continue to structure policy on the myth of trickle down economics, gaps between

knowers and the unknowing, rich and poor, left and right politics broaden, and expertise in procedural dimensions of literacy will increasingly fall short as a panacea for our youngest generations. As such, literacy researchers and educators must take a public and political stance on the place of critical literacies in education.

Engaging More Deeply With Indigenous Perspectives On Literacy And Language

Through reviewing the history of critical literacy in Australia it is notable that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and ways of being are largely missing. Sandra Phillips (2015) argues Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement with writing is an imperial project. Critically, she highlights the complexities of "being ourselves and writing ourselves" in the 21st century, providing insight into the dominant ideological positioning of literature, language and literacy as published material. Melitta Hogarth (2019) also highlights the power of critical literacy to probe the dominance of the Standard "Oostralin" English variety over local Indigenous languages. Exploring possibilities for engaging with Indigenous perspectives is an opportunity to reframe the critical locally, and transnationally as other nation's Indigenous perspectives are privileged.

Critical Literacy And Intercultural Understanding

There is growing interest in developing intercultural capacity among school-age learners within increasingly plurilingual and diverse communities such as Australia. Intercultural understanding involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect" (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA), 2020). Coupling critical literacy approaches with building intercultural understanding provides fertile ground for moving critical literacies forward transnationally. A guiding questions for this kind of future project is: How do we embrace and fashion criticality from

the point of view of diverse cultures, especially those of Indigenous peoples, as these cultures co-exist in complex ways and create shared history?

Critical Digital Literacy

As shown in Ch 3. 10 in this volume, there is growing global interest in critical digital literacy. Australian researchers such as Lucy Pangrazio, Tanya Notley and Michael Dezuanni (Notley & Dezuanni, 2019) call for the deliberate cultivation of a “critical digital disposition” (Pangrazio, 2019, p. 151) in all young people in Australia. From a transnational perspective, this sentiment is echoed by Juliet Hinrichsen and Antony Coombs (2013) in London, UK, who propose a model called “The five resources of critical digital literacy: A framework for curriculum integration”. Similarly, Donna Alvermann (2017), in the USA, posits that critical literacy inquiry into social media is imperative when, amidst society’s general tolerance of “fakeness”, social media texts obscure the very facts young people need to critically reflect on issues and matters relating to life decisions. There is much work to be done in this regard, especially in relation to interpreting meaning critically from moving images such as videos and film clips (not static images), the staple diet of young people today. Transnational research of this nature would be highly beneficial to the future of the critical literacy project as the nature of the moving image continues to transform, and so does its demands on readers/viewers.

Conclusions/Suggestions for Further Research and Practice

The focus of Australian researchers has been “to remake the teaching of critical literacy in ways that both critiqued and reconstructed worlds, institutions and communities- while engaging directly with the need for enhanced access to mainstream cultural capital requisite for economic and civic participation.” (Luke, 2018, p. 12). Further research and practice foci can build on this to ensure that perspectives from queer literacies, intercultural

uses of languages and literacies are present, and by embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing, within literacy practice and research.

Questions we take forward ourselves include:

- How might we question normative practices undertaken under the guise of critical literacy?
- How will we continue to engage with the critical literacies project globally while continuing to foreground the particular of the Australian critical literacy project?
- What will be the implications for critical literacy in Australia as researchers and educators answer the call for heightened environmental action?
- What will be the implications of super diversity in populations, language, religions, genders and cultures and how must critical literacy educators address these challenges?

Implications for Our Social Responsibility as Academics

With a long and rich history in critical literacy research and praxis, Australian academics are in a unique position to help shape new responses to oppressive discourses, institutions, and forces that are increasingly *transnational* in nature. One of our responsibilities is to continue to foster in pre-service teachers a critical stance towards global forces of standardisation and measurability in education that run counter to critical literacy's interest in championing diversity and social justice. This is challenging in a higher education environment reverting to approaches to teacher *training* as opposed to providing a critical education.

At the same time, we are still responsible for engaging deeply with the growing socioeconomic injustices and inequities in our own backyard, especially in relation to First

Nations peoples and other marginalised groups. For First Nations Australians, the criticality of literacy is underpinned by community responsibility, lifelong learning and connectedness (Grant, 2016). First Nations peoples' ways of knowing should be the bedrock of an education tradition that is learnt and understood by all. Academics and educators have a responsibility to engage with various ways of 'knowing' critical literacy. It is the social responsibility of those who are in positions of power to walk with others, invite their expertise, and share knowledge respectfully. An increasingly diverse Australia means that intersections of identity, ways of being, ways of knowing, are diverse and complex, providing a unique opportunity for critical literacies to flourish.

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