



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

April 25, 2011

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Follow Education Review on Facebook



Janks, Hilary. (2010) *Literacy and Power*. New York: Routledge.

Pp. 245 ISBN 978-0-415-99963-2

Reviewed by Geneviève Brisson
University of British Columbia

In *Literacy and Power*, Hilary Janks, professor in Applied English Language Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, develops and refines her model of critical literacy by drawing on her own journey toward becoming a critical literacy teacher and researcher, and on the work of a range of theorists well known in education (e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault, Gee, Kress, van Leeuwen, Marx). Janks' book sits at an intersection where theory meets practice, i.e. where critical literacy research meets critical literacy in the classroom. Her interdependent model of critical literacy goes further than critical reading: it involves critical writing or, to use her terminology, design/redesign. The word *critical* is a key word in her book and, from the very first pages of the book, Janks shows her colors by stating that, in her approach, critical signals a constant focus on power: she states that literacy cannot be divorced from issues of power.

Citation: Brisson, Geneviève. (2011 April 25) Review of *Literacy and Power* by Hilary Jank. *Education Review*, 14. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1074.pdf>

In chapter one Janks describes her own journey toward critical literacy. In chapter two, she introduces readers to diverse orientations to critical literacy education – domination, access, diversity or design – and how each approach operates with a different conceptualization of the relationship between language and power, usually foregrounding competing orientation to critical literacy education. In Janks’ model of critical literacy – the interdependent model – domination, access, diversity and design are “crucially interdependent” (p. 23). For critical literacy to achieve its goal, that is to uncover the social interests at work in textual and social practices, teachers and researchers need to weave the different elements together “in complex moves from deconstruction to reconstruction to deconstruction, from access to deconstruction to redesign, from diversity to deconstruction to new forms of access” (p. 27).

Chapters three to seven provide an in-depth exploration of the different elements of the interdependent model of critical literacy. The third and fourth chapters focus on domination, a word that Janks replaces “with the more inclusive word ‘power’” (p. 35). Chapter three looks at the relationship between language, power and identity, whereas chapter four explores how texts are both positioned and positioning. These two chapters, however, do not explore how power interfaces with diversity, access or design/redesign. Janks takes on that endeavour in the following chapters. Chapter five explores diversity’s place in her model by describing how it interfaces with power, access, and design. She suggests, for instance, that diversity without access to powerful forms of literacies and languages isolates students. Chapter six explains the access dimension of the model. For example, access without possibility for redesign leaves students with no option for transforming the language. Chapter seven focuses on critical text production, the design dimension of the model. Each chapter provides a comprehensive view of each element and how they interface with one another. Throughout her book Janks clearly states that teachers and researchers do not need to foreground all four elements of the model in every critical literacy activity or project: they can work only one orientation at a time with their students. Other activities should, however, provide a counterbalance by bringing the other orientations into play.

According to Janks, no design is ever neutral because every new design serves new interests. Janks explores this statement in depth in chapter eight. She explains that if a text may be constructed, it can also be deconstructed and reconstructed: critical literacy should therefore be seen as a cyclical process. In her last chapter, Janks reasserts the importance of critical literacy, but also acknowledges that her model has some limits. Researchers and teachers new to critical literacy will find *Literacy and Power* accessible and thought provoking, but those with a background in critical literacy will also find Janks' ideas stimulating.

As a novice to the field of critical literacy, I find Janks' work fascinating. Chapter four, *Reading Texts Critically*, was of particular interest to me. Janks explores the difficulties encountered by readers when trying to resist a text that speaks a discourse in which they are comfortable: the text simply appears natural to them. She refers to this as being the "ideal reader" (p. 97) of a text. Critical literacy, however, requires readers to not only engage with a text, but also to distance themselves from the same text: readers need to read *with* and *against* a text. In this chapter Janks offers helpful analytic tools to help readers who find themselves the ideal readers of that text deconstruct a text. She offers succinct yet well-developed tables presenting linguistics features, inspired by Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, (e.g. lexicalisation, metaphor, voice), and visual features, inspired by the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1990) (e.g. gaze, focus, camera angles), that would help readers to deconstruct a text. She deconstructs some texts herself, and offers readers a range of examples to experiment deconstruction with these tools: a newspaper article about sperm, an 1994-advertisement about a pension plan for domestic workers in South Africa, an AIDS awareness advertisement, and a series of (home-made) photographs.

Chapter four is a perfect example of one of the strengths of Janks' book: she manages to maintain a balance between theory and exercises/examples. She provides clear explanations of theories and concepts such as Neo-Marxist and Foucault's views of power, Bourdieu's concept of habitus, and Gee's definition of discourse, and how they have informed her journey and her model. She, however, interspaces theories with a range of concrete examples as

well as exercises, making her book an excellent one to gain some experience with critical literacy. The examples from her personal experience are fascinating and telling. In chapter six, for instance, Janks discusses how access to linguistic capital has to be balanced by according value to linguistic variations, i.e. to diversity. To illustrate she provides an example from her experience as an instructor where she had students listen to recordings of different people's speech in order to discuss social and linguistics prejudices. One recording was of a man speaking English with a strong South African accent influenced by Afrikaans. In addition to interpreting age and gender, students provided information about the man's ethnicity and home language, his intelligence and level of education, as well as his political affiliations. Some students prejudiced against Afrikaners suggested that the speaker probably had low intelligence, a lack of education, and was politically conservative. Janks then forced the students to confront their prejudices as she told them the man was a native speaker of English and an engineer. In fact, the recording was of Janks' father.

As I read *Literacy and Power* I was struck by how devoted one must be on a journey to critical literacy. Rewriting an advertisement or any other text does not mean one is critically redesigning it, and not all redesigns are transformative. Janks acknowledges the difficulty and limits of her model. For instance, she writes about many examples of great critical literacy projects she undertook at Phepo School, a primary school in a township outside of Pretoria, South Africa, with various teachers and other researchers. The teachers have repeatedly asked her and other researchers to come back to work with them but, on their own, they have not repeated any of the projects. Janks explains how she struggled to understand this and, if she does not provide a clear answer – because she does not have one – she does offer food for thought as she reflects on the concept of pedagogical habitus. She also explains that critical literacy is a rationalist activity, one that does not take into account “the territory beyond reason” (p. 212), the territory of desire, identification, pleasure and play.

In *Literacy and Power* Janks accomplishes what she intended: step by step, one chapter at a time, she refines her interdependent model of critical literacy and clearly

explains it to the readers. Her work is strongly grounded in theories and practice. All readers, from administrators to classroom teachers, from teacher educators to graduate students, will benefit from reading this book. It would also be a great addition to any course focusing on literacy or critical literacy.

About the Reviewer

Geneviève Brisson is a second-year doctoral student in Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada. Her research interests include multiple and new literacies; literacy practices of Francophones in minority settings; identity, discourse, and power; and children's and young adult literature.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
