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Critical literacy as an approach to literary study in the multicultural, high-school classroom

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ABSTRACT: As an approach to literary study, critical literacy is not a widespread practice in New Zealand secondary schools. This article draws on a major project on teaching literature in the multicultural classroom that take place over two years in 2008-2009. In it we report on a case study where a Year 13 English teacher designed and tested a novel English programme with a reputedly less able and culturally diverse group of final-year students entitled "13 English – Popular Culture". In it, she guided her students through a range of reading tasks aimed at developing in her students an awareness of ways in which texts position readers to take up certain meanings and not others through the language used. Over the course of the programme, students moved from compliant readers to readers who were sensitized to the manipulative power of texts. They enjoyed being exposed to a variety of theme-related texts, especially when these empowered them by enabling them to deploy their own cultural resources in responding to and challenging the texts they encountered. Students needed careful scaffolding in respect of metalinguistic understanding in order to be able to discuss the specific ways in which language constructs meaning. Indeed, these students struggled with this aspect of a critical literacy approach. However, despite the fact that these students were engaged in high-stakes assessment at a higher level than in the previous year, all gained more NCEA credits than they had in Year 12.

KEYWORDS: Critical literacy, representation, student empowerment, popular culture, resistant reading.

Introduction

This article has its origins in a two-year New Zealand project on teaching literature in the multicultural classroom that took place in 2007 and 2008. Seven teachers from seven schools with culturally diverse populations – four secondary, two intermediate and one primary in South and West Auckland – were involved in the project, which was coordinated by researchers (including the first writer) from the Arts and Language Education Department of the University of Waikato.[1]

[1] For a full report on the project, see Locke, T., Cawkwell, G., Sila'ila'i, E., Cleary, A., de Beer, W., Harris, S., Lumby, E., Riley, D., Sturgess, J., & Thumath, J. (2008). *Teaching literature in the multicultural classroom* (Final report). Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER/TLRI. Retrieved March 5, 2010 from http://www.tlri.org.nz/assets/A_Project-PDFs/9248-FinalReport.pdf.

In one sense, the project can be thought of as a series of interlinked case studies under a broad action research umbrella (see below). Working collaboratively with university-based colleagues and with other teacher-researchers, individual teachers (including the second author) reflected on baseline data about their students, formulated specific literature-related learning objectives, designed programmes of learning, and collected and analysed data pertinent to the success or otherwise of their "interventions" (Locke, 2010a). In this article, we draw on the work of the second author who included a focus on critical literacy as pedagogy and ideology in the planning of her interventions – the units or sequence of learning she trialled with her students and evaluated.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research was theoretically oriented in a number of ways, methodologically and conceptually. In adopting an emancipatory action research framework and adopting a collaborative model (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), the project put the critically self-reflexive teacher practitioner at its heart. This framework is characterised by:

- A praxial focus, where practice is examined ethically in terms of its effects or ends, and where there is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice (practice underpinned by and generative of theory);
- A recursive process of action, reflection and analysis, planning, further action (intervention) reflection and analysis;
- Non-hierarchical collaboration and partnership;
- Critical self-reflexivity, where researchers are "aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform their research as well as their own subjective, intersubjective, and normative reference claims" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 140; see also, Locke, 2004, pp. 34-37);
- Dissemination: Engagement and networking with others in the field viewed as a crucial aspect of action.

Drawing on Foucault, Fairclough (1992) has defined a discourse as "a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (p. 64). In specific terms, all participants in this project were seen as *subscribing* to various stories or discourses, which in their own way, for example, constituted what it means to study literature or what it means to be a culturally responsive teacher. For these teacher-researchers, self-reflexivity became the deliberate and systematic act of identifying and interrogating these stories.

There are a number of discourses related to multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2003). While teachers involved in this project were in part selected because they taught in schools with multilingual and multicultural classrooms, they were not conscripted to a particular discourse of multicultural education. Indeed, baseline data collection for the project sought to elicit from participating teachers their views on culture (as a concept), multiculturalism and what it meant to be a culturally responsive teacher. Drawing on

Sleeter and Grant's five categories, teachers in this project rejected *assimilationist* and *integrationist* models of multicultural education, and favoured discourses of *multicultural* education or *multicultural and social reconstructionist* education. The latter is generally aligned with a discourse of critical multiculturalism, viewed by May (2003) as having four characteristics:

- acknowledging the importance of ethnicity and culture in the identity formation of certain individuals and groups *without* essentialising them;
- recognising unequal power relations as a part of life for most people and that "individual and collective choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at any given time and place" (p. 209);
- recognising the ways in which certain cultural knowledges can become marginalized and misrepresented by more privileged discourses;
- recognising "'that all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, *without being contained by that position*'" (Hall, 1992, cited by May, 2003, p. 211 [May's emphasis]).

In part, the emergence of this discourse among participating teacher-researchers was consonant with the appeal of critical literacy as an approach to literary (and general textual) study. Teachers volunteered as participants because they saw culture as counting, even as they saw culture itself as a problematic concept. In the professional development phase of the project (concentrated in the first six months of the two-year timeframe), participating teachers were either re-acquainted with or introduced to critical literacy as a discourse of literacy/English teaching and learning. They quickly realized that critical literacy offered a particular rationale for why culture counted – in its view of the socially constructed nature of textual meaning.

Critical literacy as pedagogy has its origins in a socio-cultural view of language (see Gee, 1996), critical theory (poststructuralist and feminist criticism, for example) and has links with critical language awareness (see Gee, 1996; Morgan, 1997; Davies, 1997; Janks & Ivanic, 1992, Janks, 2010). As an approach, it has found a place in both mainstream English/literacy classrooms and increasingly in EAL/EFL settings (Wallace, 1995).

Critical literacy puts a value on encouraging language-users to see themselves as engaged in textual acts which are part of a wider set of discursive practices that actively produce and sustain patterns of dominance and subordination in the wider society and offer members of society prescribed ways of being particular sorts of people. In this model, a literary text can be thought of as a space within which a play of meaning might be enacted by the deconstructive, "writerly" reader. Meaning becomes a function of discourse and individual texts lose their discreteness and became meaningful only in an infinitely complex network of intertextual relationships among utterances. All texts, using a range of linguistic devices, seek to position readers to view the world in a particular way. No reader is innocent either. Each brings to the act of reading a set of discursive lens, each of which will interact with the discursive designs of a text in a particular way, ranging from submission to resistance.

A potentially powerful complement to deconstructive reading is deconstructive writing. Such a strategy involves the production of a text that *disrupts* (Yeoman, 1999) or *contaminates* (Chou, 2007) one or more discourses in the text to be resisted by producing versions framed by alternative, sometimes marginalised discourses (of race, gender and class, for example).

RESEARCH DESIGN

As mentioned previously, this paper draws on findings from a series of school-based case studies, conducted by teacher-researchers working collaboratively with university-based researchers based at the University of Waikato in a two-year project funded by the TLRI[2] on "Teaching literature in the multicultural classroom". The overall project set out to:

- review a range of approaches to the reading and composition of literary texts in primary and secondary classrooms;
- review a range of pedagogical (including questioning) strategies aimed at motivating students and enhancing the teaching and learning of literature in primary and secondary classrooms;
- develop, trial and evaluate a range of strategies/interventions for achieving cultural and linguistic inclusiveness in the teaching and learning of literature.

…and addressed such questions as:

1. What features characterise the successful classroom practices/processes of a sample of teachers engaging students in activities aimed at fostering their ability to engage in the reading and composition of literary texts?
2. What aspects of pedagogy have been successful in developing a culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom for the teaching and learning of literature?
3. In what ways can ICTs be integrated productively in a culturally and linguistically inclusive classroom for the teaching and learning of literature?

This was a multi-locale project, with seven case studies framed within an action research paradigm (discussed above) and drawing on other research traditions such as self-study, ethnographic research and critical discourse analysis. For each case study, teacher-researchers formulated sets of project-related objectives for classes chosen for the study. These objectives in turn generated a number of collaboratively planned, relevant task/activity sequences as interventions. Baseline and intervention-related data included reflective profiles, questionnaires, interviews, observations and teacher reflections, student work samples, pre-and post-test results and assessment task products. These data were analysed collaboratively by teacher-researchers and university-based researchers. In Yin's (1989) terms, these case studies were both *descriptive* and *explanatory.*

[2] Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, see http://www.tlri.org.nz/

In addition, a key facet of the project's research process was the self-reflexive examination of the discursive assumptions that shaped (supported and/or constrained) the research and pedagogical practices of all participants – a kind of self-study emphasis (Loughran, 1999) using critical discourse analytical strategies (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Locke, 2004). All participants developed a reflective profile of themselves as part of the project's baseline data.

CRITICAL LITERACY IN THE CULTURALLY DIVERSE CLASSROOM: VIGNETTES OF PRACTICE

The specific learning objectives articulated by the primary and secondary teachers in this project were found to fit into five (albeit overlapping) categories:

1. Responding to texts/attitudes to reading;
2. The form/content relationship;
3. Understanding text/context relationships;
4. The constructedness of text; and
5. Composing literary texts.

The third and fourth of these have a direct relationship with critical literacy as a discourse of English/literacy.

At the time of the project, the second author Alison was HOD English of a Decile 4, semi-rural school which was 63% Pākehā, 35% Māori and had a small number of Asian students. Her 2008 Year 13[3] English class was non-academic and started the year as a group made up of 8 Māori, 1 Argentinian, 1 Samoan/Māori and 4 NZ Pākehā, though the composition changed somewhat with arrivals and departures during the year. The class was affectionately known as the "United Nations" of the school! Most of the class had gained 11 or more credits in Level 2 English – gaining a mixture of both Unit and Achievement Standards.[4] Four had gained less than 10, but it was decided that they would be better off in this course than repeating Level 2. Four gained Literacy in Te Reo. Seven of the class came from an Alternative Level 2 programme.

Critical literacy is not an established discourse in New Zealand secondary English classrooms. While "Critical Thinking" was made a strand in the 1994 English curriculum, it was not related couched in critical literacy terms in the curriculum documentation (Locke, 2000). When Alison designed her project-related intervention, a course entitled *13 English – Popular Culture*, it was non-conventional in a number of ways. Firstly, she made critical literacy a pedagogical focus. Secondly, she made critical thinking central to her enterprise. In New Zealand, the fate of "less able" students is often to be placed in

[3] Year 13 is the last year of secondary school in New Zealand.

[4] The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is the senior secondary school qualification in New Zealand. It is a separate standards model of assessment, where programmes are made up or packaged by combining various assessable components, either "unit standards" or "achievement standards".

"learning" situations where the preferred teaching style involves low-level thinking and a large emphasis on drilling.

The course was designed for students who were not going on to tertiary study in English, but who wished to continue some form of English study. She had planned for discussion to be a key focus of the year, and from this foundation intended to build written work. As a participant in the *Te Kotahitanga* project[5], Alison had been focusing on cooperative learning activities and working from students' prior knowledge – both cultural and social. Her plan was to emphasise this prior knowledge when looking at cultural perspectives in relation to a major theme in the course – intervening in human life.

Among the objectives articulated by Alison for her course, the following had a critical literacy orientation:

- Students understand that social (cultural) and historical (time periods) contexts impact on texts;
- Students can identify the ways in which texts construct (represent) different viewpoints on topics such as discrimination;
- Students are aware that language is not a neutral medium and that the way language is used affects the way in which something is seen, for example, scientific or technological intervention into human life and discrimination;
- Students can identify value judgements and bias and can reflect on their own value judgements and bias.

The course was designed to be "high interest". The texts were largely visual, but written texts such as poetry, song lyrics, extended magazine articles also figured. The course was organized thematically – with a critical literacy approach being introduced when the theme was *Technology – playing God or just playing?* in relation to the topic of medical intervention to create or prolong human life. Texts included: Mary Shelley's (1963) *Frankenstein* (film and novel extracts), the film *The Island* (Bay, 2005), a short story, "*Te Manawa*" (Grace-Smith, 2006), scientific journal and magazine articles on xenotransplantation and the novel *Pig Heart Boy* (Blackman, 1997).

Reality as constructed

As mentioned previously, Alison wanted her students to identify the ways in which texts construct (represent) different viewpoints on topics, to be aware that language is not a neutral medium and that the way language is used affects the way in which something is seen. In keeping with critical literacy theory, she wanted to alert her students to ways in which texts *position* readers to take up a particular version of reality or to accept as "truth" a particular representation of some object or other.

Accordingly, in Term 1, she introduced her class to ways different versions of reality (or

[5] An ongoing research and teacher development programme in New Zealand, aimed at addressing the needs of Mäori students in mainstream classrooms (as opposed to Mäori students in kura or Mäori-medium schools). See http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/departments/index.php?dept_id=20&page_id=2639.

the truth) are presented via popular media. She emphasised that texts based in "popular culture" cannot be relied upon to be telling the "same truths". Her vehicle for this was the story of Rubin Carter, the African American, world heavyweight contender of the 1960's. Rubin's story was immortalized by the Bob Dylan song "The hurricane" and more recently by the popularity of a film version carrying the same name. Both of these texts, as well as Rubin Carter's "assisted" autobiography, use powerful language to persuade the viewer/listener/reader that Rubin was an innocent victim of a racist justice system. Here was a man, a successful "black man", wronged by the system. This view is clearly articulated in the words of Dylan's song:

> *The judge made Rubin's witnesses drunkards from the slums*
> *To the white folks who watched he was a revolutionary bum*
> *And to the black folks he was just a crazy nigger.*
> *No one doubted that he pulled the trigger.*
> *And though they could not produce the gun,*
> *The D.A. said he was the one who did the deed*
> *And the all-white jury agreed.*

and

> *And the newspapers, they all went along for the ride.*
> *How can the life of such a man*
> *Be in the palm of some fool's hand?*
> *To see him obviously framed*
> *Couldn't help but make me feel ashamed to live in a land*
> *Where justice is a game.*

The class was strongly swayed by the writer's use of the words – *fool* and *framed* – to describe the justice system. They clearly identified the phrases *crazy nigger, revolutionary bum* and *allwhite jury* as powerfully loaded words. At this stage in their journey, they surrendered willingly to the reading position the text was offering them and were unanimous in their belief that Rubin had been framed and that the system was wrong.

Building on her 2007 experimentation with social networking Web 2.0 applications for the English classroom, Alison was keen to use a new application *Pageflakes* with this group. *Pageflakes* is an application where the author can "build" a page that "aggregates" or collects "feeds" that reflects his/her interests or the purpose that he/she is building the page for. The page that she built for her Year 13 class (Figure 1)[6] included feeds that reflected the theme of popular culture: film and cartoons; interesting aspects of language (including fun links to online language games); daily quotations and links to the literature that we would be studying. For Alison, *Pageflakes* as a Web 2.0 tool reflected both the nature of the course – popular culture – and her interest in the use of Web 2.0 applications as classroom tools.

[6] http://www.pageflakes.com/MrsC/20686168

Figure 1: Year 13 Popular Culture Pageflake

Despite problems with computer access and the unsuitability of two of the school's computer labs, Alison persevered with this activity throughout the first term. However, the class's online comments regarding "Hurricane" Carter and his innocence (or guilt) were unambiguous, with such Pageflake comments as "the hurricanes the man!!!!!" and "I liked the film The Hurricane it was an interesting movie and the story line was awesome". The web-based space became an affordance for these student readers to share with one another the reading position they had taken up.

Alison then introduced her students two websites that showed a very different version of "reality". The first was entitled "The top ten myths about Rubin Carter".[7] The second allowed viewers to ride along the route that Rubin and his friends supposedly took on the fatal night.[8] The class discussed these sites and the information found on them as they worked through an activity where they were to identify ten "facts" that were *not* presented in the movie or were different to what they had been presented in the movie. By involving the students in this activity, Alison was alerting them to gaps, silences or elisions in the initial text they encountered. In doing so, she was having them experience first hand the *partiality* of texts.

The final task is posted below (Figure 2). In subsequent Pageflake postings, students were clearly influenced by these new "versions" of events: "He's guiltyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy"; "I think he's guilty … his past and the way he lived (which we were not told about in the film) was of a wild nature, and that, one of a killer." Somewhat disillusioned, one student remarked: .... *Bob Dylan, he's a…like… a legend, like. I always wondered what that song was about… if he said he didn't do it. I'd believe him.* The above comment was made in discussion after the class had looked at sites that contested the version of the story in Dylan's lyrics. Such comments reflect the somewhat painful journey these students were

[7] http://members.shaw.ca/cartermyths/

[8] http://graphicwitness.com/carter/

taking from a kind of textual innocence to experience. As Alison was to reflect, it was a journey they had never undertaken before.

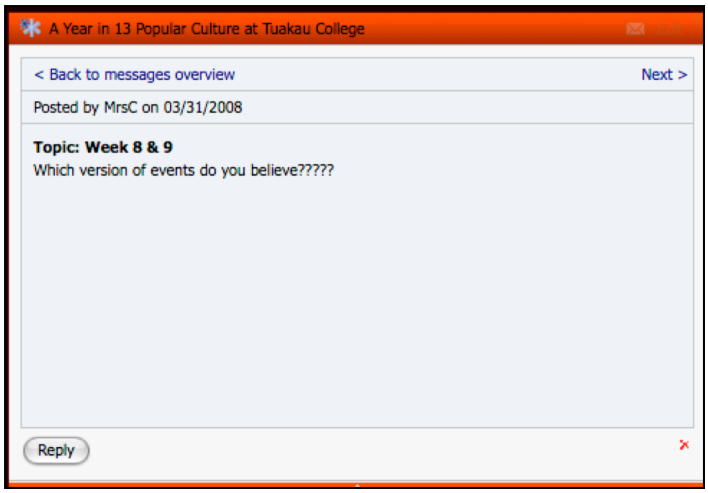

Figure 2: Which version of events?

Resisting the lure of textual positioning

The Term 1 focus on the constructedness of meaning provided a springboard for Term 2's theme of the impact of technology in people's lives, in particular the growing impact of technology in the prolonging of life or in transforming life in some way. The topic was launched with a pre-study, self-assessment questionnaire to ascertain the class' views on organ donation and cross-species genetic modification. In doing this, Alison was encouraging students to identify their *own* positions in relation to a topic. This meant that students had a ground for enacting a "resistant" reading of any text they were subsequently exposed to.

Eleven students completed the survey, 4 Pākehā, 1 Argentinian and 6 Māori. Many of the students wanted more information in the questions regarding donating organs and using body parts to save a family member. Statements such as "it would depend on which body part" and "which brother" and "it would depend on how old they were" were included a number of the responses. Two of the non-Māori students were vociferous in their support of donating organs to family members: *"... it's your family man!"* (Student E) and *"I reckon they'd do it for me"* (Student F).

The questions regarding receiving a body part from an animal and cloning displayed the greatest divergence in responses between the Māori and non-Māori students. Five of the six Māori students clearly stated that they would not accept a body part from an animal stating:

> *That's just wrong, Miss.* (Student D)
> *... some things are just not normal.* (Student G)

> *We have no idea what we'd be doing ... we could be stuffing things up for the future ... things don't always go according to plan (like Frankenstein) – not everyone wants to be Wolverine.* (Student H)

Many of the students, regardless of race, felt that engaging in scientific experimentation to extend life was simply wrong:

> *... when you're time is up, it's up ... make way for those being born before we run out of space.* (Student F)
> *... we could do more harm than good.* (Student C)

A number of critical literacy theorists problematise the concept of "voice" as implicated in a implausibly unitary view of the "self" (for example, Misson, 1998). However, what we are seeing here are students who are frequently marginalized or disempowered in mainstream classrooms, enjoying the experience of *voicing* their emergent positions on a topic that was clearly meaningful to them. They were experiencing agency.

The close textual study, commenced with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1963), deliberately chosen as a "historical text". Beforehand, Alison offered three, pre-reading discussion prompts:

1. Man should never play at being God.
2. Medical and scientific experimentation for ways of prolonging life are the only way to a better life for mankind.
3. Anything can be justified if it eventuates in prolonging human life.

The class responded using a collaborative bus stop activity, where each group discussed and commented on the statement and the final group summarised all the groups' responses.

Their summaries were:

1. We could do more harm than good – but people have the right to do whatever they want with their body after they die – mankind will never live up to the expectations of God.
2. We were all doing fine before all these experiments came along. What about those who have a religious belief opposing this?
3. No (unanimous) – what about the consequences?

Before engaging in a close viewing of the 1994 film version (Branagh & Coppola) of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* students received background information on the life of Mary Shelley, enabling them to see how an author's life might be reflected in his/her work. The key ideas of "man playing God" and "man's attempts to prolong and create life" were introduced. Extracts from Chapter 4 of Shelley's novel were analysed using a critical literacy approach to questioning (see below) with the following prompts:

1. Who is speaking? Who is he speaking to? What do you think is the speaker's purpose? What method of narration is being used? What narrative structure is being used?
2. What are the main ideas or themes explored by the writer in this passage? How might these ideas have been influenced by what we know about the actual life of Mary Shelley?
3. How does the speaker justify his ideas or point of view?
4. How do you think the audience (readers) in 1818 might have viewed this justification?

The students discussed these questions in pairs or threes and then completed their own written response to the questions. All students were able to identify that the text was written using the 1st person narrative using flashbacks. Victor's purpose in telling his version of the events was also identified. *He's telling **his** story.* (Student A). This was taken to mean *his* version of the story, as opposed to the creature's, or any of the other characters whose version of events and the purpose behind them would have been at variance with Victor's. This kind of activity was developing in students the concept of *partiality* – how in a piece of prose fiction, a range of voices are on display, each with its own partial take on events.

Students were clearly interested in biographical material related to Mary Shelley. Typical responses to Question 2 included:

- *The main ideas explored by the writer are death and creating life or defying death, these ideas may have been influenced by Mary Shelley's life because she went through so much tragedy as such a young age eg her children dying, her husband dying.* (Student B)
- *That Frankenstein created life from only the best body parts and it was a disaster. She had a dream about this in real life. Her family had died.* (Student C)
- *The main idea is about creating life. She had lost her kid and her husband. I guess she thought about it a lot*. (Student A)

The third question proved a little more difficult. Some students identified phrases such as the expansion of scientific knowledge as Victor's justification, i.e. *"the acquirement of knowledge"* (Student B). A number identified the metaphor of the journey that Victor was "traveling" that needed to reach a conclusion. However, the archaic language and complex sentence structure tended to be wrongly identified as an answer for this question: *"The text written in 1818 uses obsolete language 'nay' 'charnel houses' compared to the language of today which is like short-cuts.* (Student C)

Getting into the mind of a 19th century audience proved challenging. The class had had some discussion about what the religious beliefs of the time would have been. None of them, however, had read the novel before, though most of them had seen at least one version of the film. The majority of them had no idea that the novel was written so long ago and were surprised by this. A number of them commented on the grotesqueness of the story. *"That's just gross Miss ... how did she think of that ... she must've been a freak."*

(Student D) Student D felt that if he felt like that now, people back then must have felt the same. Highlighted here is the way in which the possession or not of various kinds of cultural capital contribute to the ability of students to contextualise their response to a text.

A succession of other texts followed *Frankenstein*, aimed at scaffolding students in a critical literacy approach to reading literary and non-literary texts, with similar sorts of prompts. For example, the film *The Island* introduced the class to the idea of cloning to order and the commercial possibilities and corruptions that could develop from such a practice.

The consequences of organ donation were then investigated using two short texts, "Te Manawa", a short story by Briar Grace-Smith (2006), and "Cellular memory", a scientific journal article by Lesley Takeuchi (2004). The following question prompts, designed by Alison, typify the approach taken with both texts to investigate the way in which language is used. For instance, she is alerting students to the ways in which authority in texts is something constructed, as an aspect of ways in which texts position readers to respond. She is also encouraging them to refuse the reading position on offer and to raise questions over the text's authoritativeness:

> **Leslie A. Takeuchi: Cellular memory in organ transplants**
>
> 1. In one sentence, write down the main idea that Takeuchi is introducing in this article.
> 2. In your view, what is the *main* way that Takeuchi goes about convincing you that her idea has merit.
> 3. Come up with your own meaning for the word "sensational" as used to describe a news report. Identify details in this article that you consider to be "sensational".
> 4. Because Takeuchi wants her readers to take her seriously, she has taken care to establish her *authority* as a writer. How has she done this?
> 5. Come up with some reasons why a reader might *distrust* this article.
> 6. Visit the website for the *Journal of Near-Death Studies* at: http://www.iands.org/pubs/jnds/. How do you feel about this article after visiting this website?

The Takeuchi article sparked lively discussion and in the post-class survey on texts studied, 9 of the 13 students identified this article as the most interesting text they had read in the unit. Reasons for this included:

> *It was interesting to read about other people's experiences and it made me think about whether to believe it or not.* (Student C)
> *It showed some kind of proof that cellular memory can happen through a heart transplant.* (Student A)
> *They were supposed to be real stories so that made me like them. (Student L)*

Despite the high level of engagement, however, none of the group attempted the final question, which had been set as an out-of-class task. Students clearly saw the writer's use of "evidence" and in particular "scientific evidence" as a strategy for enhancing

"believability". They also clearly identified what they thought was sensational in the article, citing "the amazing findings and evidence" and "the examples". However, one skeptic stated, *"it almost seems believable"*. The students admitted being swayed by the qualifications of the writer and the fact that there was *"1st person evidence",* and the fact that the writer provided examples of other articles that she had written. The discussion around Question 5 led to the following reasons why the article might not be trusted:

> *That the evidence was "small scale";*
> *That they could be purely coincidental;*
> *That they were too unbelievable to be true, in particular the chicken nugget anecdote.*

The recent New Zealand short story, *"Te Manawa",* by Briar Grace-Smith, also contained the idea of cellular memory. The main character, a Māori female, is a recipient of a heart transplant from Mele, a Samoan female donor, and takes on some of her qualities. Two close reading prompts had a particularly critical literacy emphasis:

- This story uses the technique of the roving third person narrator. That means that we are offered different perspectives on the action at different times from the points of view of different characters. On p. 22 we get Spencer's point of view of the surgeon who removes Mele's heart. Notice carefully the way Spencer describes the surgeon. How does the language Spencer uses tell us what his *attitude* to the surgeon is?
- On p. 24 we get a description of a scene where "the woman's" brother Tem offers a boar's heart to a doctor for possible use as an organ for transplant. Why does he do this? On the basis of careful reading, what can you deduce about: a. the doctor's attitude to Tem; b. the doctor's attitude to using a pig's heart in a human patient? What do you make of the doctor's statement: "I'm talking science here." In what way does this tell us something about how the author of the story is encouraging us to think about this sort of doctor?

The last part of the second prompt focuses on issues of representation – that through their use of language, writers position readers to view, for example, particular *types* of person in a particular way.

The students were able to infer that Spencer felt that the surgeon treated his dead wife's body insensitively:

> *He thinks the surgeon's ruff* [sic] *and doesn't care.* (Student A)
> *The surgeon pulled the heart out of her chest like he was pulling something out of a car ... sounds bad.* (Student L)
> *He (the surgeon) didn't even care that it's his wife.* (Student M)

Both Tem and his offer of the boar's heart were viewed as ridiculed by the doctor. This is clearly identified in the following responses:

> *The doctor thinks Tem is nuts and laughs at him. He's stuck up and thinks he's better than everyone else. He doesn't come across very well.* (Student C)
> *The doctor made it seem that Tem was dumb instead of being sympathetic to him for wanting to help his sister…he thought it was funny.* (Student A)
> *He (the doctor) is arrogant...he doesn't think about their feelings.* (Student H)

Though one student took a different meaning from the passage:

> *The doctor's statement is the right one I think as it reinforced the fact that science has to be proven before medical theories can be used on humans.* (Student M)[9]

This text was very popular, particularly with Māori students in the class. *"That's cool miss ... are there more like that ... you know with stories about our stuff in them."* (Student D) A positive aspect was that Student D took the short story collection to the Year 13 common room to read another story.

The final text studied was the novel *Pig-heart boy* by Malorie Blackman (1997), which deals with the issue of xenotransplantation (cross-species). For many in the class there was "no way" that they would ever get a body part from another creature. Questions similar to those used with the shorter texts were discussed in small groups, responses shared with the class, and a summary of discussion points made by each group collaboratively. These questions were handled the least well by the class, with some commenting negatively on the number of questions within questions, typified by the examples below:

- Is the question: "Don't you think you're behaving like Dr Frankenstein and creating monsters?" about ends or means? How do you think this questioner wants people to think of Dr Bryce? Do you think the question was justified? Do you think Malorie Blackman would view Dr Bryce as like Dr Frankenstein? Give reasons for your responses.
- In the course of this book, readers are introduced to the views and actions of people and groups who believe that Cameron's operation should *not* have happened and that Dr Bryce's work was unethical. Choose one group or person and study the way the author Malorie Blackman's represents them in the novel: How do these people act? What words do they say? Would you say that these people are presented sympathetically or unsympathetically? Overall, would you regard the way these people are represented as balanced or unbalanced?

In relation to these questions, all of the groups felt that the journalists' comparison of Dr Bryce to Frankenstein was unjustifiable and that the journalist was effectively "making Cameron [the recipient] seem like the monster":

> *The questioner wants people to think Dr Bryce is a mad doctor obsessed with*

[9] Interestingly, the student concerned lived with a serious medical condition and so had a totally different "take" on medical intervention.

> *doing something no-one else has done. That he really doesn't care about others ... he does care ... he's not like trying to cheat death like Frankenstein was, he's trying to extend a young boy's life ....* (Student A, Student G, Student H)

No group believed that the author saw Dr Bryce as a Frankenstein figure but did not provide any evidence for this. In response to the last question, two groups focused on how Cameron was presented to the reader. They saw him as disagreeing with everyone's view of Dr Bryce and with the view that "pig's hearts don't belong in humans", both quoting the phrase, "No, I wouldn't be here now". They also noted that Cameron is presented as sharp and quick and that, because he benefits the most from the operation, he has an unbalanced view.

Critical literacy theorists such as Wendy Morgan have long advocated the advantage of using thematically related texts, as she did with *The example of Ned Kelly* (1992). With Alison's students, we can see the increase intertextual reference occurring and a deepening understanding of the ways in which the partiality of textual representation is highlight when texts can be compared and contrasted.

Developing the art of interrogating texts

In Term 3, Alison decided to find out whether the students had a firm understanding of what was meant by a critical literacy approach to textual study. From a group of texts related to the theme of discrimination, she asked students in groups to choose one text and to write a series of questions, using the prompts used previously in class as a model. The questions were to focus on the way in which language was used in the texts to positions readers to take up certain kinds of meaning. The most popular texts chosen were "White comedy" by Benjamin Zephaniah (1996) and "Telephone conversation" by Wole Soyinka (2001).

The class did not find this task an easy one, despite having had models of questioning prompts. Their feedback responses on the task mainly focussed on the fact that the task was not integral to the assessment that they were working on and they saw it as an "extra" that was taking up time that they could have been spending on their theme study! Overall, students found "White comedy" an easier proposition. However, the following questions, drafted by the students themselves show the beginnings of an understanding of a critical literacy approach to a text.

- What do you think the poet is trying to make you think about by using "white"?
- How could Benjamin Zephaniah's life experiences have influenced the content of his poem?
- When you read the title what did you expect the poem to be about? Why did you think this?
- What image is Benjamin Zephaniah trying to get across by using words like "waz" and "wid" and "de"? Who would you expect to use these words?
- Why has the poet replaced the word black with white? What is the effect of this?
- Who might be offended by this poem and why?

Questions related to "Telephone conversation" were more general, though some did draw attention to relevant language usages:

- Whose point of view is this poem written from? What impression do we get of them?
- Why are only certain sentences in capitals? What effect does this create?
- What do you think about the comparison of skin colour or hair colour to chocolate?
- Why do you think that chocolate is used for the comparison?

We would see these sets of questions as indicating an emerging ability to interrogate texts from a critical literacy perspective. There is clearly an ability to identify salient language uses – strategies that are clearly designed to produce effects in a reader. What is not in focus – yet – is a developed grasp of the *way* in which language is constructing a preferred reading position.

REFLECTING ON THE INTERVENTION

Alison's major strategy in her innovative Year 13 course on *English – Popular Culture* was to carefully select a range of thematically linked tests including a classic text (Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*). Crucial in this strategy was a focus on cooperative learning activities (linked in Alison's mind with her involvement in the *Te Kotahitanga* Project), such as the bus stop activity used as a pre-reading task before engaging students with Mary Shelley's story. Alison's strategy with her modestly able Year 13 popular literature class was to use multiple texts on the subject of boxer Rubin Carter. These texts offered contrasting constructions of Carter's guilt/innocence, with student responses via *Pageflakes* indicating that they had successfully absorbed the lesson of textual constructedness. The same strategy of using multiple texts offering a range of "takes" on a similar theme was employed in the carefully modeled and scaffolded close reading work using teacher-designed prompts and then moving to having students design the prompts themselves.

For Alison, based on her observations, reflective journal, student feedback, work samples and assignment work, a range of findings emerged from this sequence of tasks. Firstly, the students were initially predisposed accept the version of reality offered to them in texts. Initially they were rather trusting, compliant readers. Being presented with an alternative reality and having their initial viewpoint challenged was challenging for them.

Students could identify the ways in which language is used to create different versions of reality **but** found it difficult to adjudicate between these different versions constructed by different texts. As indicated by the Pageflakes discussion, a number of the students either changed their view of Rubin Carter's innocence or could not decide which version of events to prefer. The identification of key words (such as emotive words and words with obvious negative connotations) through close reading and discussion of the texts enabled students to understand how these words impacted on the way that they read texts. This was particularly evident with the texts dealing with the story of Rubin Carter and the texts

that dealt with transferable cellular memory.

The student's own background (social and cultural) impacted on how they read texts. The texts that created the most interest, engagement and interest for Māori and Pasifika students in the class were the ones that they had a specific connection to. The post-study questionnaire identified "Te Manawa", "The Hurricane" and "Cellular memory" as the texts that these students enjoyed the most. Calling on prior knowledge and putting the students in a position of "power" – that is, the idea that students have important knowledge to share – proved to be a valuable teaching strategy. "Te Manawa", in particular, interested the class for this reason. The "true" story of The Hurricane was a popular text because it was perceived to be non-fiction. The link between "Te Manawa" and the article "Cellular Memory in Organ Transplants" and the "sensational" nature of the events recounted were given as reasons why the students enjoyed the latter text.

Investigating how language works and understanding how language choices affect meaning was a challenging task for these students and needed careful scaffolding. Close reading of texts using a critical literacy approach was an effective teaching intervention. The students' responses to the individual and group activities on *Frankenstein*, "Te Manawa", "Cellular Memory in Organ Transplants" and *Pig Heart Boy* showed a clear understanding of the way the authors used language to create effects. The intervention was successful because the questions that were used for both discussion and written response were carefully structured and explained. However, too many questions with multiple parts on *Pig Heart Boy* appeared to have impacted negatively on this discussion, even though the different parts were aimed to operate as a scaffold for critical thinking.

Not all students clearly or fully understood what was meant by the "crit lit" approach to texts. The questions that the students devised for "Telephone Conversation" were not as critically searching or reflective of a critical literacy approach as the questions devised for "White comedy". The post-study questionnaire clearly identified that some of the students did not have a clear understanding of what was meant by the "crit lit" approach to texts, though they were getting there: *"it means to analise [sic] the texts and trying to figure out what the text is trying to say from that point of view"* (Student L); *"that not everything is as it seems and to look at more than one point of view"* Student J).

Despite their partial understanding, students enjoyed the thematically based "crit lit" approach to texts – including the variety of texts used. The post-study questionnaire, the level of work completion and the student assessment data suggested that the course had been successful. Of the initial 13 students that began the year, 10 remained at the end and 2 more had joined during the year. The students in the course gained between 10 and 21 Level 3 credits. The most successful standards were Level 3 Theme Study (US8834: Investigate a theme across a range of selected texts and evaluate the outcomes of the investigation), Level 3 Close Reading Poetic Texts (US12427: Read closely and evaluate the effectiveness of poetic written texts**)** and Level 3 Report Writing (US3491: Write a report). The Theme Study and Close Reading in particular were directly linked to the texts studied during the year. All of the students who remained at school for the entire year, gained more credits than they had gained in Level 2.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a close-up of the critical literacy work done by one New Zealand, high-school English teacher with Year 13 students whose prior academic record constructed them as "non-achievers". A number of themes emerge when her findings are compared with those of other high-school teachers in the project (Locke et al., 2008; Locke with Riley, 2009; Sturgess & Locke, 2009), all of whom, as has been mentioned, saw themselves as adopting a critical literacy approach as part of the repertoire of classroom practices and saw it as particularly suited to their multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

For all teachers in this project, close reading was a multidimensional concept. Teachers drew on a range of discourses in designing discussion prompts. The design of these prompts was influenced by the nature of the learning objectives formulated, with different objectives coming into play for different lessons or parts of an overall unit of work. This article has focused on learning objectives pertinent to a critical literacy approach. All teachers, however, were keen to motivate students to read and engage with texts, and tended to use reading objectives related to a progressive or personal growth discourse of English to achieve this aim (Locke, 2003; Locke, Harris & Riley, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, a common finding among secondary teachers was that the cultural background of student influenced the way they read texts closely. Both "reader response" and critical literacy approaches, in different ways, open up an avenue to the cultural orientation of the reader as a determinant of meaning. This clearly worked to engage students and was likely to have been a factor in the enjoyment of critical literacy approaches to literary (and textual) study, which was an overall finding of this project.

Another overall finding was that a number of critical literacy concepts are best taught in a situation where students are exposed to a range of texts dealing with a similar subject or topic, as has been illustrated by the work Alison did with her students. As a discourse of English/literacy instruction, critical literacy comes with its own metalanguage. Concepts such as *portray, representation, construction* and *version* make more sense to students in intertextual contexts, where they can see particular versions of something or someone (e.g. Rubin Carter) operating across a range of texts. Nevertheless, Alison's students were not the only ones to struggle to think, talk and write about the way in which language is used to *position* readers to read the world in particular ways. Many of the students in this project struggled with the mainstream English curriculum and/or had English as an additional language. Our sense, however, is that critical literacy makes a number of metalinguistic demands on teachers and students and that questions around metalingistic knowledge remain unresolved for most New Zealand English/literacy teachers and that this lack of resolution is widespread, at least in the Anglophonic world (Locke, 2010b).

Finally, a common finding among high-school teachers was that, as they'd hoped, a critical literacy approach to reading invites and empowers students to view the positions offered by texts as both contestable and resistible. For some students, of course, the sense that they had the *authority* to resist did not come easily, especially if they had been

brought up in cultures which valued conformity or hallowed the written word (cf Wallace, 1995). However, for students across a range of classrooms, critical literacy, in a salutary way, destabilised the authority of texts and thereby their respective truth claims. In doing so, it created room for the emergence of voices, positions, angles on events that might overwise have been silenced. As inventors of these alternative voices and positions, these students were beginning to shift from their typical role of meaning-consumer to meaning-makers in their own right.

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