

13 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A POEM: HOW DISCOURSES OF READING SHAPE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT *Different discourses of reading construct differing ways of reading texts. This article illustrates such differences by showing how three contrasting ways of interrogating a literary text arise from three contrasting discourses of reading. In doing so, it shows how "similar" constitutive elements in a view of reading are highlighted and constructed differently in these three interrogations. The implications of these differing constructions for classroom practice and the professional development agenda of English teachers are discussed.*

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between discourses of reading and pedagogical practice, particularly as the latter is enacted in secondary English classrooms. My starting point is the concept of "discourse" itself, usefully described by Fairclough (1992), drawing on the work of Foucault, as "a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (p. 64). In the first instance then, I am concerned to map the various ways in which the act of reading texts has been discursively constructed.

I then proceed to show how different "discourses of reading" construct differing ways of engaging with texts in the production of meaning. Specifically, I show with reference to a single literary text how differing ways of "constructing" reading generate or imply different ways of engaging with texts through "acts of questioning" and hence different types of meaning-making. I further suggest that these acts of questioning have the potential to underpin classroom practice and that a transformation of these acts of questioning is tantamount to a transformation in pedagogical practice. I conclude by discussing the potential implications which arise from the various forms these transformations might take and the importance of pedagogical "envisionment" as a key ingredient in critically reflective practice.

I would like to point out that this article is not centrally concerned with the relationship between discourses of reading and the intended curriculum. In New Zealand's case, the latter is represented by *English in the New Zealand curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1994). I and others have discussed elsewhere the discursive underpinnings of this document (Brown, 1998; Cawkwell, 2002; Locke, 2000, 2001). My assumption here is not that such documents don't have a powerful role in reinforcing or suppressing particular discursive constructions of reading, my concern is rather, to focus on constructions that are more widely disseminated – that are, in various strengths and dilutions, identifiable within the orders of

discourse that currently frame conversations about education, language, literacy and the arts.

CONSTRUCTING LITERACY; CONSTRUCTING READING

Common sense suggests that literacy is about learning to read and write. However, in recent decades this common-sense notion of literacy has been challenged by those who would view literacy as a social practice. In this view, what it means to be "literate" is socially constructed and different discourses generate different views of what it means to be literate. The social reality is, therefore, best thought of as characterised by multiple *literacies* (see, for example, Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996; Lemke, 1998; Roberts, 1997).

A number of broad social and intellectual developments in the last 20 years have affected the discursive terrain – the range of places whereby one might position oneself as part of an ongoing conversation on the nature of literacy. Sometimes, these developments can be summed up in a kind of ideological shorthand by referring to, say, romanticism, post-structuralism, modernism, postmodernism, neo-Darwinism or social constructionism, or to cognitive, social and functional approaches to literacy. The trouble with such shorthand is that the use of a term becomes a sign of one's subscription to one or other ideological camp. It can also trick one into thinking that terms such as "modernity" and "postmodernity" have somehow *fixed* cultural history in descriptions that begin to achieve absolute ontological status through the widespread nature of their usage.

Another way of approaching literacy as multiply constructed is to identify the elements that have a (potential) role to play in the construction itself. While recognising the non-exclusive nature of the following elements, I posit them as a list that can play a role in this approach: writer, reader, text, meaning-making mind, meaning, language (and other sign systems), technological mediation and social context. I suggest that *how* we view these elements and the relationships between them has a central role in the discursive construction of literacy, and therefore reading and, by further extension, literary reading (the textual focus of this article).

In the sub-sections that follow, I take three reading traditions – New Criticism, Reader Response and Post-Structuralism – and discuss the way in which they tend to frame the elements just listed. That is, I discuss the ways in which these elements are discursively framed, at least in terms of my reading of these traditions. I then use this discursive framing as a basis for generating a set of questions that each of these traditions might use in guiding students (or readers in general) in a reading of a particular text. The text I have chosen for this purposes is a poem by American poet, Emily Dickinson. The poem is a frequently anthologised piece, "I heard a fly buzz" (named for the first line of the poem, since Dickinson did not give her poems titles).

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King

Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable – and then it was
 There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
 Between the light – and me –
 And then the Windows failed – and then
 I could not see to see –

Emily Dickinson (c. 1862)

New Criticism

The term "New Criticism" comes from the title of a book by American writer and critic John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (1979). Drawing on the work of I.A. Richards in England and the critical essays of T.S. Eliot, it represented a reaction to and move away from an emphasis on author biography and literary history. Notable critics identified with this tradition were Allen Tate and R.P. Blackmur in the United States and the Englishman, F.R. Leavis. A landmark text in this tradition was *Understanding Poetry* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, first published in 1938. This book, which is still in print, was one of the instruments which made the New Criticism the critical orthodoxy in universities and schools in English-speaking parts of the world right up until the 1970s. According to M.H. Abrams (1981), the New Critics share the following viewpoints:

1. "A poem, it is held, should be treated as such – in Eliot's words, 'primarily as poetry and not another thing' – and should be regarded as an independent and self-sufficient object" (p. 117). The literary work, then, is seen as self-sufficient. For this reason, New Critics de-emphasised authorial biography and intentionality and tended to ignore ways in which texts might impact on individual readers.
2. The meaning of a text is a complex matter to be revealed by a process of close reading or textual explication.
3. "Literature is conceived to be a special kind of language whose attributes are defined by systematic opposition to the language of science and of logical discourse; the key concepts of this criticism deal with the meanings and interactions of words, figures of speech, and symbols" (p. 118).
4. "The distinction between literary genres, although casually recognised, is not essential in the new criticism. The basic components of any work of literature, whether lyric, narrative, or dramatic, are conceived to be words, images and symbols rather than character, thought, and plot. These linguistic elements are often said to be organised around a central theme, and to manifest 'tension,' 'irony' and

'paradox' within a structure which is a 'reconciliation of diverse impulses' or an 'equilibrium of opposed forces'" (p. 118).

The following quotation from *Understanding Poetry* is a typical embodiment of New Critical tone:

Poetry enables us to know what it "feels like" to be alive in the world. What does it "feel like," for instance, to be in love, to hate somebody, to be conscience-stricken, to watch a sunset or stand by a death-bed, to be willing to die for a cause or live in a passionate devotion to some chosen ideal? Only poetry – in the broadest sense of the word – can help us to answer such questions, and help us, thus, to an understanding of ourselves and of our own values. We may say, in fact, that literature is the most sophisticated example of the process by which we come to grasp our own environment, especially our human environment, with its complex and ambiguous values; you become aware through imaginative enactment and an imaginative logic that all the possibilities of fate are your own, for better or worse. Literature is the most complicated language that man has invented for talking not only to others but to himself; or rather, it is the language he has invented so that he may be *himself*. (Brooks & Warren, 1976, p. 9)

Through statements such as this and others, we can see how New Criticism discursively constructs the various elements listed above. There is an enormous focus on the writer or author, who is heroised as a kind of Everyman meaning-maker. There is a humanistic emphasis on the cultural heritage of literature, because therein lies the record of our best minds "grasping" our environment on our behalf. Readers, linked to writers through their common humanity, are called upon to participate in an act of imaginative identification with the drama of meaning-making that the text enacts.

If we find the poem coherent – that is, dramatically significant – we tend to take the leap of sympathetic imagination. We can appreciate it for the sense of the conquest over disorder and meaninglessness that it gives us. Perhaps this sense may be the very basis of the exhilaration we find in poetry – just as it may be the basis for the pleasure we take in watching the clean drive of an expert golfer or the swoop of a hawk, as contrasted with the accidental tumbling of a stone downhill. The sense of order and control in the vital act – that is what, in a successful poem, confirms us in the faith that experience itself may be made meaningful. "*A poem is, in this sense, an image of our life process – and in being that, an enlightening image of ourselves*" (Brooks & Warren, 1976, p. 270).

The text is everything, in that it is the embodiment of individual meaning-making for the writer and the object of close attention on the part of the reader. In respect of meaning, "*The meaning is the special import of the dramatisation of a situation*. In sum, a poem, being a kind of drama that embodies a human situation, implies an attitude toward that situation....In short, poems do not so much 'state' themes as 'test' ideas and attitudes by putting those ideas and attitudes into dramatic situations, by dramatising human concerns and interests" (Brooks & Warren, 1976, p. 267).

Literature, as Abrams suggests above, uses language in a special way and thereby produces a special kind of knowledge. But it is still being used as a meaning-making resource, and it is given that – adequately used – it is a powerful

means of embodying both the dramatisation of a creative mind responding to a situation (hence the centrality of attitude or tone) and that situation itself. The capacity of language to reference reality is not questioned. Indeed, the resources of literary language (rhythm, imagery and so on) are seen as designed to embody tone. As Brooks and Warren (1976) argue, "Language did not develop in a mechanically 'pure' form without the contamination of emotion, but in a form that embodied and expressed the density of experience – the interpenetration of stimulus and response, of object and perception, of idea and emotion" (p. 4).

A number of things are missing from this account. There is no recognition afforded to technological mediation in the production of literary texts. And, as mentioned previously, the sense of literary texts, authors or readers as rooted in cultural contexts is marginalised. Indeed, cultural diversity is subsumed into an overarching concern with the human – with the universal condition of the species.

The following, then, is a list of questions that New Critical discourse might use to guide readers in a close reading of "I heard a fly buzz":

- What situation does this poem evoke?
- What role does the speaker in the poem have in this situation?
- What atmosphere is evoked through the use of imagery in stanza one?
- Who is the "King" referred to in line 7? What is the impact of the use of the word "witnessed"?
- Explain the first three lines of stanza 3.
- In what way does the interposition of the fly mark a turning point in the poem?
- What is the significance of the "Windows" metaphor in the last stanza?
- Discuss some of the contrasts that are used to structure this poem.
- Discuss the speaker's attitude to death as revealed in this poem.

This kind of interrogation is characterised by: a focus on the poem itself; a sense that there is a dramatic situation that can be accessed through close reading; an emphasis on tone as reflecting an attitude to that situation; a concern with such features as imagery, structure and word choice; the sense of a speaker; a confidence that the poem's meaning will be revealed in a process of explication; and a lack of references to personal response, cultural contexts or cultural meanings.

Reader Response Criticism

In the reader response tradition of criticism, the focus moves from the author and text as object to the reader and the reading process. Its key theorists include Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser (Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978). In this tradition, reading can be thought of as a performative act which brings a literary work (indeed, any work) into existence through a transaction between reader and text.

Here is Iser's description of the reading process:

A reality [the text] that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of a text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader's consciousness. The actual content of these mental images will be coloured by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts

as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed. (Iser, 1978, p. 38)

Iser's work draws attention to the ways in which readers go through various stages in their responses to a text from initial bewilderment, to layers of interpretation, to considerations of the work as generating an aesthetic experience (Andrews, 2001).

Both Iser and Rosenblatt view the text as exercising a control over the production of meaningfulness. For Rosenblatt (1978), the text is both "stimulus" and "blueprint":

First, the text is a stimulus activating elements of the reader's past experience – his experience both with literature and with life. Second, the text serves as blueprint, a guide for the selecting, rejecting, and ordering of what has been called forth; the text regulates what shall be held in the forefront of the reader's attention...The finding of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it. (p. 11)

For Iser, the text, through a range of stylistic features, serves to constrain and produce what he calls the "implied reader" but also contains gaps which are filled creatively by the reader.

Compared with the New Criticism, a shift can be seen in the way the various elements mentioned above are constructed in the reader-response tradition. The writer is still important and actual. One can still talk about high quality literature, for example, but the stage is now very much being shared by the reader. While the writer structures constraints into a text, the text does not become a literary work until it is read.

While the writer may well be a meaning-maker (as a reader of his or her own text), meaning is very much viewed as transactional or dialogic – the dialectical product of a reader/text interaction. There is not the same tendency to think of meanings as inhering *in* texts as one finds among the New Critics. Having said that, there is also a reluctance in reader-response approaches to allow an unlicensed approach to meaning. In varying ways, the text is seen as productively shaping a reader's response. It may, for example, contain images and symbols which connect with elements in a reader's unconscious or non-verbal reservoir of images and symbols. Or it may be seen as reflecting assumptions about the world which stand in contradistinction to a reader's own stance and thereby produce a critical reading. Whatever, the text is viewed as a stable object, however variable the readings it can engender, while the reader tends to be an individual, unitary, sense-making self.

Some versions of reader-response criticism may place an emphasis on the cultural predispositions of a reader. Others may comment on technological mediation as a factor affecting response. But these are not large emphases. Language, in terms of this tradition, is still seen in terms of what Green (1997) calls a *correspondence* and *transparency* theory. "Language in this view is essentially a transparent, self-effacing medium, a means of more or less neutral exchange between the individual psyche and the world as a natural referent, in a one-to-one correspondence between the order of words and the order of things..." (Green, 1997, p. 15), despite a recognition that language can be imbued with ideological

assumptions. Such a view is shared with the New Critical tradition as reflected in such phrases as "interpenetration of stimulus and response" quoted above.

The following pre-reading activity might be used with students in a reader-response-based classroom preparing to study "I heard a fly buzz".

Have you ever witnessed a deathbed scene? Or read about one in a novel? Or seen one dramatised on film or television? Who do you picture as participants in such a scene? How do they relate to each other? What sorts of things might they say? What sort of feelings might be present? How would you describe the atmosphere of such a scene?

Guided discussion cues might include:

- On the basis of the poem's textual clues, write an account of the events this poem describes.
- What is your response to the sense that the speaker in this poem is the dying person and not one of the bereaved?
- Write down the associations "flies" have for you. Which of these associations do you consider to be relevant to a reading of this poem?
- Depending on the connotation of "fly" you consider most important, how does the interposition of the fly affect the atmosphere evoked in this poem?
- What does the word "King" suggest to you? Discuss the contrast set up between "King" and "fly".
- What does the word "Windows" suggest to you in the penultimate line? What do you think the failure is?
- How does a reading of this poem affect the way you think about death?

The hallmarks of this list include: a focus on the reader's response; an emphasis on connotations and associations; an interest in the impact of the reading on a reader's "world view"; and a sense that the meaning of the poem will differ from reader to reader.

Post-Structuralist Reading

According to Lye (1997)

Post-structuralism is not a school, but a group of approaches motivated by some common understandings, not all of which will necessarily be shared by every practitioner. Post-structuralism is not a theory but a set of theoretical positions, which have at their core a self-reflexive discourse which is aware of the tentativeness, the slipperiness, the ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings (opening paragraph, unpagged).

The generalisations are made with some caution, in the light of this sentiment. However, instability is certainly a frequently sounded note in post-structuralist approaches.

Pushed to a certain extreme, it is easy to see how reader-response criticism can edge the writer out of the picture, dispense with notions of intentionality, and make the reader centre-stage. Such a step was taken in Roland Barthes' (in)famous assertion that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the

Author" (1977, p. 148). Midwife to the murder, one might argue (grotesquely) was the concept of discourse. According to Ray Misson

The idea of "discourse" as developed by Michel Foucault is crucial here. A discourse in this tradition is a formation of textual practices activated in a particular social/personal arena which brings with it particular ways of being, ways of doing and ways of thinking. There is a discourse that we use with the family; there is a technical discourse we might use in our work; there are discourses of law, religion; and so on. The idea that we talk in different registers in different situations is an old one. However, rather than conceiving us as putting these different ways of talking on as a covering to a stable essential self, rather like putting on clothes to dress ourselves appropriately for particular situations, poststructuralism radically argues that there is no self apart from these ways of talking. The discourses we partake in are what constitute the self. Therefore the self is a social construct (the constructivist position), rather than being a given essence of a person (the essentialist belief). (1998, p. 148)

The concept of discourse replaces the unitary self with the notion of multiple-selves, each the product of discourse. Discourses are socially constructed ways of thinking about and being in the world reflected in language and other sign systems. The originary self as maker of meanings – the meaning-making mind – is replaced by human subjectivity/ies as produced by culture. We no longer tell stories; stories tell us.

It is easy to see, then, how the writer of genius has no place in such an arrangement. The reader is centre-stage, but it is a somewhat different sort of reader from the relatively stable self of reader-response criticism. The text is also destabilised. It is no longer a container of meaning (as per the New Criticism), nor a constrainer of meaning (as per reader response criticism) but rather a space within which a play of meaning might be enacted. Meaning is a function of discourse and individual texts lose their discreteness and become meaningful only in an infinitely complex network of intertextual relationships between utterances (Bakhtin, 1986). The cultural context has become pre-eminent. So, increasingly, has technological mediation. The notion that "literacy is a social practice" has become a slogan, perhaps an unthinking one. And with the increased presence of ICTs as mediating textual practices, is a growing emphasis on literacy, in all its forms, as technologised.

The following pre-reading activity might be used with students in a reader-response-based classroom preparing to study "I heard a fly buzz":

What is the range of cultural background represented in our classroom? How does each of these cultures represent the moment of death? What happens? What do these cultures say about a "soul" or an "afterlife"? Emily Dickinson grew up in a congregational community in the United States and wrote this poem in the early 1860's. How might this community view the moment of death? What was its view on the "soul" and the "afterlife"?

Guided questions might include:

- The speaker in this poem appears to be commenting on her own death. What aspects of the occasion are commented on? What aspects of the occasion are not commented on?
- The first stanza uses storm imagery to position us to view the moment of death in particular way. Describe this. In what other ways might a moment of death be described?
- What qualities does this poem appear to expect you to associate with the word "King"? (e.g., sex? status? function?) What are other qualities readers might associate with this word?
- The first three lines of the third stanza appear to suggest that human beings have two parts: an assignable part and a non-assignable part. How would you describe these parts? Can you think of other ways of describing human beings (as "wholes" or as composed of different sorts of "parts")?
- The word "fly" has different associations for different groups. Even the *same* person can talk about flies in different ways. How does the choice of association for "fly" affect the sort of reading one might construct for this poem?
- Write a version of the poem commencing with the line: "I heard a Choir sing – when I died –" and substituting the word "Queen" for "King".

The hallmarks of this list include: a focus on the social constructedness of meaning; a sense of texts containing "gaps" in meaning; a sense of authors as cultural channels; the contestation of meaning; the sense of readers being "positioned" to take up certain versions or representations of "reality" over others; and the sense of other "constructions" of similar "realities" waiting in the wings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSROOM PRACTICE

In debates about English, various categories have been used to denote the "models" or "versions" of the subject that might be enacted in actual classrooms (e.g., Andrews, 1994; Ball, Kenny, & Gardiner, 1990; Green, 1997; Morgan, 1997). These versions might be distinguished according to varying emphases such as:

- *An emphasis on cultural heritage:* This puts a value on a traditional body of knowledge (including a canon of precious texts and grammatical knowledge) to be inculcated as a means of rounding out learners so that they become fully participating and appreciative members of a society or culture that is often defined at the expense of groups, communities or discourses that would threaten its homogeneity or sense of its own superiority.
- *An emphasis on personal growth:* Sometimes called the New English (Green, 1997) or "progressive" English (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993), this emphasis puts a value on the engagement in literary and language-centred enterprises as facilitating the personal, individual growth of learners, for whom the acquisition of certain linguistic competencies will play a central role in their ongoing capacity to make sense of their world.
- *An emphasis on textual and sub-textual skills:* At its worst, this puts a value on decontextualised knowledge about language and the acquisition of

grammatical skills based on narrow and formulaic definitions of correctness. Alternatively, it puts a value on the mastery of the forms and conventions of a range of genres deemed to be socially significant.

- *An emphasis on critical practice:* Often called critical literacy, this emphasis puts a value on training language-users to see themselves as engaged in textual practices 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 inscribe their own subject positions as members of that society (Locke, 2000).

There are clearly links between New Critical approaches to reading and a cultural heritage model; links between reader-response criticism and progressive English; and links between post-structuralism and critical literacy.

A point that needs to be made, however, is that while it is possible to envisage classrooms whose practices might reflect, in some "pure" way, one of these reading traditions and versions, the reality is generally far more complex. A range of factors contribute to the formation of an English teacher's professional knowledge and classroom practice. These include the critical orientation of their various degree courses, emphases in their initial teacher education, their history of professional development, the theoretical underpinnings of official curriculum and assessment documentation, the modelling of other teachers and the pedagogies embedded in text book and other resources and, last but not least, understandings related to the production, consumption and dissemination of texts developed in the wider social context.

If one focuses on the practitioner as distinct from the practice, it is interesting to note how the above versions of English correspond with four varieties of reflective practice as identified (in the USA) by Zeichner and Tabachnick (1991, cited in Smyth, 1992, p. 280-281).

1. An academic version that stresses reflection upon subject matter and the representation and translation of subject matter to promote student understanding (cf. cultural heritage);
2. A social efficiency version that emphasizes the thoughtful application of particular teaching strategies that have been suggested by research on teaching (cf. skills acquisition); and
3. A developmentalist version that prioritizes teaching that is sensitive to students' interests, thinking, and patterns of developmental growth; (cf. personal growth); and
4. A social reconstructionist version that stresses reflection about the social and political context of schooling and the assessment of classroom actions for their ability to contribute toward greater equity, social justice, and human conditions in schooling and society (cf. critical literacy).

In terms of the English teacher's professional content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), what I am arguing for here is a kind of informed and critical eclecticism. Such eclecticism would not privilege any of the versions of reflective practice identified by Zeichner and Tabachnick, but would be aware of the extent to which each is characterised by a particular ideological underpinning. Indeed, as Phelps (1997) suggests, "reflection" as a term is highly polysemous, that is, capable of being used in many different senses.

Teachers so equipped would be aware of the way in which different reading traditions effectively construct different kinds of reading and, to some extent, different readers. It needs to be emphasised that such knowledge is not going to be developed in teachers' heads out of books. It will only be developed by teachers performing acts of interpretation as integral to their own reading practices. To the extent that these acts are cognitively based, teachers will benefit from metacognitive reflective tools. To the extent that these acts are social practices, teachers will benefit from a critical awareness of ways in which these are discursively constructed. As I see it, this is not an either/or situation.

Moving from the practitioner to the practice, Table 1 indicates ways in which different versions of English might lead to different reader orientations, that is, the goals and dispositions readers might be encouraged to bring to the act of textual engagement. Hopefully, critically reflective English teachers would see a place for each of these orientations at different times in their classroom programmes.

Table 1: Versions of English and Reader Orientation

Cultural heritage	Personal growth
Reader orientation: Appreciation Deference Acculturation	Reader orientation: Self-realisation Creative exploration Personal integration
Skills acquisition	Critical literacy
Reader orientation Formal mastery Pragmatic competence Social adeptness	Reader orientation Linguistic analysis Detachment Social transformation

In respect of a community of composition teachers she worked with, Phelps (1997) notes how reflection was "operationalised" in the classroom. "Anne and the others teach reflection as they apparently learned it: by demonstrating, pointing, giving multiple models, naming, illustrating, and otherwise scaffolding it" (p. 2). Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) have argued that structured reflection is the key to learning from experience. They suggest a three-stage model of experience-based learning – preparation, engagement and processing – with a reflective aspect accompanying each stage (p. 9). By way of example and in relation to Table 1, I favour "preparing to read" tasks that include involving students in a critical appreciation that there are different versions of reading practice with different sorts of outcomes. Indeed, I would envisage the kind of structured reflection occurring in the context of a richly engaging English lesson as no different in kind from the metacognitive and critical practices I have recommended for teachers a few paragraphs back.

The potential for the development of this eclecticism in terms of professional content knowledge and practice can be thwarted in a number of ways. It will be undermined should instrumentalist approaches to teacher education become widespread. Here, I am referring to simplistic, "how to" approaches to teacher training coupled, in classrooms, with curriculum and assessment regimes which train students to jump through hoops constructed via the mechanism of behavioural and predetermined learning outcomes. Such approaches are antithetical to theory and problematisation. I have argued elsewhere that the NCEA learning and assessment is a danger in this respect (Locke, 2001).

It can also be undermined in situations where one particular approach to reading or version of English becomes entrenched as an orthodoxy. For example, operating out of a discourse of critical theory, McIntyre disparagingly consigns two versions of English to the scrapheap of history. The following quotation, from McIntyre (2002), illustrates the point I am making:

Hence, while the heritage and personal growth models of English, underwritten as they are by liberal-humanist concepts of the individual, should never be dismissed as worthless – they have produced teaching that has often been life-changing for students – they prove theoretically defective and politically unpersuasive models for English teaching in schools and universities today (p. 37).

My own approach is closer to that advocated by Green who, in response to a perceived binary opposition between the New English and poststructuralism, argues for “a view of meaning in English teaching which brings together structure and agency, reconceptualized, as a new form of open-ended, dynamic unity” (1997, p. 25).

There are dangers when statements such as ‘Literacy is a social practice’ are transformed from insights into slogans and even mantras. When such a statement becomes read as asserting that ‘Literacy is *exclusively* a social practice’, then the ground has been established for marginalizing traditions which focus on the relationship between language/text and mind/cognition (Damasio, 2000; Gazzaniga, Ivry & Mangun, 2002; Pinker, 1995; Sadoski, 1998). Likewise, a privileging of critical theories of literature based in cultural studies, and views of the text as socially constructed, has the potential to marginalize, for example, views of the literary text as rooted in competing epistemologies and aesthetics – views such as those represented by evolutionary-based literary theories (Boyd, 2001; Carroll, 1995).

In conclusion, my argument here is for a kind of openness as opposed to closure – an appreciation of the fact that there is a potential richness in the range of reading approaches and versions of English available. Like critique, problematisation is not a bad thing. On the contrary, it can be seen as characterizing detachment, the opposite pole to engagement. Effective learning requires both: passionate (dare I say) engagement with a task (say, reading) or issue at hand, followed by detachment for reflection, questioning, and so on. And then a return to engagement. Without problematisation and critique, the range of possibilities for textual engagement are never canvassed. And classrooms can only be the worse for it.

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