

The Multiple Pleasures of Creativity and Critique: Why English teaching ought to be fun

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When I was first asked to do this address, I was going to work off a comment made at the AATE/ALEA conference in Sydney last year. I did a keynote on the final morning that was on the theme of “Real Pleasure”. In the final session in the afternoon, there were some respondents giving their summing-up reflections on the conference, and one of them, a visitor from England, made the throwaway comment that “not even Ray Misson could convince me that critical literacy can be fun”. This comment, which I decided not to be offended by but to take as a rather backhanded compliment, surprised me, because I have never thought of critical literacy as lacking in fun, at least in my own practice, but it did set me thinking about the general attitude towards it, and the resistance that is often there. So, I was going to talk about that, and perhaps relate it to a consideration of why “pleasure” has been a keyword in the titles of the last two national conferences, and why you might have gone for outright “fun” in yours.

However I want to cast the net a bit wider, because, a couple of weeks ago, as you will know, a major attack was mounted on Critical Literacy in the *Australian* newspaper. The battle raged for a couple of weeks, with some State ministers saying they were going to review their state curriculum and root out any of this terrible corruption that they might find, and with Brendan Nelson, not surprisingly, weighing in to deplore the critical literacy tendency. I don’t buy the *Australian* - in fact, I don’t think I know anyone who does, except on Saturday sometimes – and it has probably all blown over by now, but it is interesting to consider the charges made against critical literacy.

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There is also a slightly guilty personal element here in that I have just written a book with Wendy Morgan in which we consider the relationship of critical literacy to aesthetic texts, and suggest that critical literacy is a limited practice and needs to be reconfigured and expanded (Misson & Morgan, Forthcoming). Some of the things being said in an anti-critical literacy context were in fact quite similar to the things we had been writing in a context that was still supportive of critical literacy, but arguing for change in its practice. I wasn't sure whether I was sorry our book hadn't yet come out (because the controversy might have been fantastic for sales) or glad, because it could conceivably have been appropriated and used for ammunition by Luke Slattery and his friends, and we would have been in the uncomfortable position of trying to explain ourselves, and that we were being quoted out of context, and we were really nice people really, etc

So what I want to do is not mount a defence of critical literacy, but take quite seriously some of the things that were said against it in the debate and use them as a way into thinking about its strengths and limitations, and in that way work towards the issues about creativity, critique and fun that my title promises.

There was a rather scatter-gun approach to the case being mounted against critical literacy in *The Australian*, and it wasn't necessarily consistent or coherent, but there were a number of strands. The first was that it was part of a larger attack on Postmodernism and theory that Luke Slattery has been waging intermittently over the years. There were basically three charges against postmodern theory: that it was misguided, that it was out of fashion, and that it was just too hard.

In some ways the last one was the most pernicious, because it transmuted into a snide slight on teachers' intellectual capabilities. We read things such as

Postmodern theory is a tool that should ideally be handled by the subtle and well-read; by those already steeped in the intellectual tradition... In the hands of second-rate intellects, postmodern theory has become stultifyingly doctrinaire;

there is a risk of students being exposed to this at school. (Slattery, 2005a, p. 10)

And Luke Slattery had even managed to find an academic to agree: Catherine Runcie an “honorary associate” from the University of Sydney (who I remember as a very refined, rather bloodless lady thirty years ago when I was teaching in the English Dept at Sydney, so I was surprised she hadn’t frozen into immobility by this) who said that postmodern theory was “a great pretentious movement of teachers pretending to be intellectuals” (p. 11).

Why I bother to give these quotes is to make a historical comparison. Back in 1877, a witness at a Royal Commission in England into English education thought that English literature (as opposed to the classics) might be considered a suitable subject for “women... and the second- and third-rate men who... become schoolmasters” (quoted in Eagleton, 1983, p.27) Things don’t change very much! There is still a very elitist tendency amongst some people when they get to talk about education. Schooling is about giving students the intellectually inferior, because, in the view of some, teachers aren’t up to anything else.

The claim that tertiary study has moved on is undoubtedly true, but it’s not true that it has moved back. In fact, Luke Slattery at one point invokes Terry Eagleton’s book *After Theory* and suggests that Eagleton has come to see the light and gone back on his earlier commitments. In fact, on the very first page of *After Theory*, Eagleton writes,

Those to whom the title of this book suggests that ‘theory’ is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment. There can be no going back... (Eagleton, 2003, p. 1)

Luke Slattery presumably didn’t get past the title. There can be no going back on theory, and there can be no going back on critical literacy. We now know too much, and we can’t unknow it. By the same token, however, there is no standing still and we have to move on, so I don’t want to do a defence of critical literacy but rather take

some of the criticisms of critical literacy and use them as leverage points for developing a new vision of what it (or its successor) might become.

The three basic charges against critical literacy, apart from its dependence on disliked postmodern theory, were summed up nicely in a single paragraph:

However, the growing band of critics of critical literacy say the approach deprives students of the joy of reading for pleasure, excludes classical texts and ignores basic literacy skills. (Slattery, 2005b, p. 1)

One can only see the basic literacy skills argument as a red herring, because there is nothing in critical literacy that would encourage ignoring basic skills. If you look at the Luke/Freebody four resources/four roles model that underpins so much critical literacy curriculum, you see that the basic decoding skills are still considered important. More interesting though was the strand to the argument that somehow you shouldn't mess up the students' minds with this complicated stuff before they have complete control of the decoding skills, as if thinking critically and understanding the ways in which texts are working somehow gets in the way of learning spelling or learning how to make sense of the words on the page. This is, of course, ridiculous, as anyone who had done any work on cognition would know. The two things call on quite different sorts of intellectual skills. As has been shown by many teachers, quite young students can work critically with texts – media texts, for example - while their command of the mechanics of reading are still quite limited.

The other two charges are more interesting, and this is where I start to get uncomfortable. In the book Wendy and I have written, we have, in perhaps rather different terms, made something like these same charges against critical literacy. It's not so much that it excludes classical texts, but rather that it seems to be uncomfortable with aesthetic, imaginative texts, and does not work with them very well, and it's not that it deprives students of the joy of reading for pleasure, but that it cannot help but be suspicious of pleasure, because the pleasure may in fact be the sweetener that draws us into ideological subjection. There is something of a belief

that it's best not to get carried away by a text: ideological purity only comes through eternal vigilance.

Over the last few years, I have been trying to open up critical literacy in two different ways, using two different kinds of leverage. In the one strand, that has issued in the book, I've done it by bringing critical literacy up against the notion of the aesthetic, which it finds uncomfortable for all sorts of reasons, most particularly because of the stress in aesthetic texts on the individual and the experiential and because of the particular kind of engagement that the aesthetic requires. In the other strand, I have been interested in bringing it up against and complementing it with the idea of the creative, and I want to do some of both here.

I'll start off with some of the work on the aesthetic, since that is more immediately related to the *Australian* attack. What seems to be involved actually is a basic misunderstanding of the complexity of reading, and what it is we do when we are engaging with texts. The *Australian* writers seem to want us just to "take pleasure" in reading, which, (when it doesn't mean just Mem Fox) seems to be about not being analytical, but rather "just reading", whatever that might be. On the other hand, in one version of critical literacy, there is a notion of reading as dangerously deceptive in ideological terms and needing to be controlled. This is the version that is mostly pilloried through examples from *From Picture Book to Literary Theory* (Stephens, Watson, Parker) in the *Australian* article. There is another version of reading though that comes through in the articles that is almost the opposite, and this is the one that is implied in the decrying of postmodern theory, reading as very open with no sense of texts having absolute meaning, truth or value. Now, it seems to me that none of these versions of reading is adequate, and certainly none of them provides very much for pleasure or fun in the English classroom.

I don't believe there is any such thing as "just reading", and I certainly don't believe in setting up a pleasure/analysis opposition. In fact, I have always believed that the major point of analysis is to increase the pleasure. There seems to me to be not much point in working on a text, if it doesn't make the text more interesting. It might seem less good, and you might decide you don't like it as much, but it will be more

interesting in that you will know better what's happening in it and how it's working. This is why I'm so committed to the derided postmodern (poststructuralist) theory – it can powerfully tell you what is happening in texts.

Let's talk about how one particular part of the poststructuralist battery of concepts might in fact make your reading of a text more pleasurable. We'll take "discourse", the concept as developed by Foucault. As a very simple definition we might give "a commonly accepted way of speaking or writing about a particular area of experience". It can be defined by its subject matter (e.g. the discourse of education, the discourse of romantic love), or by the particular social community that uses it (the discourse of homeboys, the discourse of middle-class suburbia). Usually there are aspects of both content and community: a particular range of content interests talked about by people in a particular group, the group being defined by the shared interests.

Now, if we take a standard text (and you can't get much more standard than *To Kill a Mockingbird*), let's see how the notion of discourse might help us get deeper into the text.

The basic discourse (what Gee might call the "primary discourse") of the novel is set up by the narrative voice. Scout is immediately established as looking back at the events from an adult distance:

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right-angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. He couldn't have cared less, so long as he could pass and punt.

When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to this accident. (Lee, 1960, p.9)

During the novel, the events are often focalised through the consciousness of the young Scout, but we never lose the possibility and underpinning of this mature, sensible, generally good-humoured voice.

Now, every discourse implies beliefs and values, even though it might seem neutral, as Scout's here does. Without labouring the analysis too much, we can see that already a whole ideology is being built up, particularly around family and gender. The brother/sister relationship is obviously important, and enduring enough for them to get together in later life and look back on their childhood without any bitterness. Stronger in the passage, however, is the gender construction: the physically active boy who gets his arm broken and seems to care more about playing football than the pain. Certainly he cares more about football than his physical appearance. There is a warm, slightly ironic tone playing around: boys are like that! We know very clearly the kind of world we're in: a world of solid mainstream family values is being constructed discursively.

There are many other discourses in the novel, against which this is contrasted. We get, for example: the discourse of the young Jem, confirming his impetuous boyish energy -

“Scout, I'm tellin' you for the last time, shut your trap or go home – I declare to the lord you're gettin' more like a girl every day!” (1960, p.57)

- which seems to be largely indicated by a propensity to mild slang and “dropping the g” on present participles, and that confirms that boys are indeed “like that”, and, as such, much to be preferred to girls; the discourse of the trashy Ewells -

“Well, I was sayin' Mayella was screamin' fit to beat Jesus...Mayella was raisin' this holy racket so I dropped m'load and run as fast as I could but I run into th' fence, but when I got distangled I run up to th' window and I seen- ' Mr Ewell's face grew scarlet. He stood up and pointed his finger at Tom Robinson ' I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella” (1960, p.176)

- which is marked not only by non-standard English such as Jem could never dream of, but by slang based on blasphemy, and everything brought to physical animal terms (“ruttin”); then there is the discourse of the honourable black person -

“Mr Finch, I tried. I tried to ‘thout bein’ ugly to her. I didn’t wanta be ugly, I didn’t wanta push her or nothin’” (1960, p. 199)

- with an innate, but almost inarticulate sense of human dignity, gentleness and rightness (Scout comments, “It occurred to me that in their own way, Tom Robinson’s manners were as good as Atticus’s” (p. 199)); and Atticus, who never “drops g’s”, and whose discourse is marked by a calm, humane gravity, even in domestic conversation –

“You can’t do that, Scout,” Atticus said. “Sometimes it’s better to bend the law a little in special cases. In your case, the law remains rigid. So to school you must go” (1960, p 36)

- which has the authority of abstractions, judiciousness, inversions and perfect grammar. These are just a few of the many discourses interacting in the novel. It is important to insist that it is not just a matter of characters having individualising voices. Each of the characters comes with his/her own discourse, and these discourses import a range of different social values.

Mikhail Bakhtin has written:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects... present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 114)

As Bakhtin suggests, it is the artistic organization of the array of discourses that is fundamental to any novel, and this is also, inevitably, ideological. It is aesthetic in that they are arranged in a way that engages the reader emotionally and intellectually in a particular reality that also focuses significant conceptual concerns. I won't go on and analyse here how the relative placing of the various discourses is done, but it's not a particularly complex thing to do.

It seems to me that a class comparing the different discourses in the novel and how they interplay with each other is useful both for coming to understand the novel better, coming to understand how language and discourse works to carry and shape attitudes, and because of the excitement of discovery and highlighting the clash of contrasts is likely to be fun.

In some ways the contrasting discourses in *To Kill a Mockingbird* make it easy to analyse the social and ideological implications of the text, because one can contrast the discourses with each other so readily, and besides, we're out of the particular social milieu and so the language is naturally distanced. It is harder when the discourse is much more homogenous and current. The characters in *Friends*, for example, all talk much the same language, and it is so much the language of a desired fantasy-land of inner-urban lifestyle, that it is hard to step back and see it as a particular discourse that is aesthetically deployed, and that brings with it very particular social values. Students find it particularly difficult to distance themselves sufficiently with works such as this, to see the sorts of values that the program is promoting. Not that one would want them to reject it – on the whole, it's benign enough – but the problem for teachers is that the show seems so straightforward and the surface so impenetrable that it is hard to work with it and develop analytical strategies.

If we take a characteristic, albeit famous episode, and look at it closely, we can soon see the way the discourse is working. The episode is “The One Where Everybody Finds Out” (Lembeck, 1999). What they find out about is that Monica and Chandler are “doing it.” The other strand in the program is that Ross wants the flat that the “ugly naked guy” across the street is vacating, and he goes to considerable lengths to procure it. If we want to analyse the discourse of the program, I think it's best to start

off with content and so the first question to ask is, rather primly, what are the areas of interest these people have? The (rather unprim) answer is, of course, sex, and the related areas of attractive (indeed seductive) appearance and (more distantly) material possession. The phrase “doing it” is repeated in the program as a kind of leitmotif, the centre of the discourse of sex. There is, however, a range of other phrases used: being “with a guy,” “hitting on me.” One of the best comic moments is actually when Phoebe, playing at being attracted to Chandler, says how she is looking forward to having “sexual intercourse” with him, and the sudden shifting of the discourse from the expected young singles range of euphemisms to the blunt professional/academic kind of naming, gets a huge shocked laugh on the audience laugh track. Personal attractiveness is a premium value in this world, but it is an attractiveness to do with sex. A lot of this is created through Chandler’s not being the sexy kind of attractive – “foxy” – but being “charming in a sexless kind of way.” When Monica acknowledges that Phoebe does seem to be coming on to him, she almost immediately realizes that Phoebe knows about their relationship and is trying to “freak (them) out.” Chandler is momentarily a little reluctant to give up the possibility that he is a sexy kind of attractive: “O.k. But what about, you know, my pinchable butt, and my bulging biceps... She knows!” (Self-delusion is so difficult sometimes!) The climax of the episode is signalled by a shift in the discourse. Phoebe and Chandler are reluctantly going through with their charade of wanting to have sex with each other. Chandler is increasingly uncomfortable in his dilemma that he does not want to be doing this, but he knows how competitive Monica is, and how she will not like it if he is the first to break. Finally it gets too much for him, and he cedes defeat, crying out that he can’t go on because he loves Monica. Monica rushes in, mutual protestations of love, embrace, the audience sighs, and Phoebe articulates the significance of the moment: “I thought you guys were doing it: I didn’t know you were in love.” So a discourse of sex (treated comically) gives way to a much more conventional (and much more valued) discourse of romantic love. Not that one would disapprove of this.

Or maybe one would. I’ve been doing what I consider to be “critical literacy” in looking at the discourses in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Friends*, but it’s perhaps not recognizable as the critical literacy that has been pilloried in the press, largely because I haven’t pushed through to a judgment, that Atticus’s language is actually that of the condescending master race sure of its own superiority, or that the discourse in *Friends*

shows the emptiness of modern sexual relations, or that the denouement shows the disappointing persistence of the master narrative of romantic love,

A large part of the criticism of critical literacy is that it is teaching a particular viewpoint, and getting students to see texts through a narrow, politically correct set of lenses. Thus, to take a much greater book than *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but more problematic in its depiction of black people, Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, I could imagine wanting to analyse the depiction of Jim as showing an inherently racist view of black people. Jim often seems like a stereotype: superstitious, child-like, dependent on Huck, not very bright. Even in some of the great set-pieces of the novel where Huck's feelings are educated by an awareness of Jim's humanity, Jim himself can seem rather limited. The "trash" speech when Huck has played the cruel joke on him after the night in the fog is undeniably powerful, but it depends on Jim's description of his mourning at the supposed loss of Huck, and so in the end depends on an overly sentimental image of the good and faithful black carer. The story of his deaf daughter is also very moving, but again the dominant mode is sentiment. Sentiment can carry a lot of force, but in the end it simplifies human emotion. Jim not only seems secondary to Huck, providing opportunities for Huck's development, but it could be argued that he seems to be simpler as a human being because he is black, and that is racist.

However, in a sense you haven't said a lot about the novel in identifying this element in the depiction of Jim, and it would be a very great pity if a student after that point were made felt able to write off the novel as racist and not worth the attention of an enlightened twenty-first century reader. There seems to be a very simplified view of reading behind much critical literacy practice. What's not taken into account in any serious way are a couple of very vital things.

- ? Personal imaginative recreation of the action
- ? Empathetic sense of the characters
- ? Emotional involvement
- ? Pleasure in engagement

It might acknowledge these things, but it doesn't see the message as fundamentally being carried by them, it doesn't see the experience of reading as significant in itself.

Our engagement with texts can be very complex, particularly imaginative texts, and it consists of both affective and intellectual elements. We do not simply take the message from the text intellectually, but the message becomes deeply implicated with our emotions, and in a very real sense we experience what it is like to see the world from this particular angle.

Critical literacy is a rationalist practice. The argument is that texts use various strategies to naturalise their ideology, and if we are not to become subject to the text, we must denaturalise it, show how it is in fact constructed. The force of reason, once we see the constructedness, will defuse the ideological power. Undoubtedly this can happen, and often does happen to some degree, but it by no means always happens, and particularly not with aesthetic texts. It is easy to see why. If ideology is not just carried by intellectual means, but by experiential ones, then a rational critique is likely to interfere with the intellectual channel, but it may well leave the experiential ones virtually unimpaired. The intellectual and the experiential can be radically dissociated. We might like to think that reason is the most powerful governing factor in human life, but history, literature and most personal experience would suggest that emotion can withstand rational onslaughts remarkably well under most conditions.

If you read *Huck Finn* and feel a strong emotional engagement with the text, then rationalist critique of it in terms of its racist depiction of Jim is not going to be very effective. Similarly, you can go to a romantic comedy at the movies, know that the ideology it presents is reprehensible on all your best feminist principles, but still be caught up in the tension of how these people are going to get together, and, if it has a sentimental streak, be quite capable of shedding a tear at appropriate points. One may rationally reject the ideology, but one emotionally lives it out being caught up in the narrative.

The point can perhaps best be made by looking at advertising for a moment. Take that classic kind of high-end-of-the-market advertising where you simply have a picture of an exceptionally good-looking, sexy, cool, hot, charismatic person, and the only

written text is the product name. The picture may well be black-and-white rather than coloured to add to the arty, aesthetic feeling. The exceptionally good-looking etc person may be wearing the product, but this is not essential (and obviously in perfume advertisements, for example, we cannot tell). A rational critique will look at the advertising strategy and scoff at the notion that the underwear or the perfume can make you look like that, and will perhaps fulminate about the objectification and exploitation of women (and increasingly men) in advertising, and stress the dangers of glorifying such exceptional body images. All this may be true, but in a sense it is beside the point. No-one really believes that a pair of Calvin Klein briefs or a spray of Chanel No 5 is going to transform them, and no-one really believes that the models are anything except exceptional physically. We wouldn't enjoy looking at them if they looked just like most of us. The image is not working rationally but aesthetically, drawing on our emotional engagement and desire for this particular fantasy ideal, and so the rational critique scarcely blocks our engagement with it at all.

There is another point worth making on advertisements that suggests the limitations of the view that showing the constructedness of a text somehow defuses its power. Anyone who has done serious critical work on advertisements or taught them in any but the most piously negative way will understand the fascination they exert. One is on the lookout for interesting and clever advertisements, and the analysis of their construction only makes them more interesting, because one is getting more involved with them through working on them. The scary thing is that you can be in the supermarket or department store and find yourself searching for the product, in spite of your full knowledge of the text's constructedness and how it was working to position you, because the awful fascination of the advertisement only becomes the stronger for the analysis. This happened with Barthes's groundbreaking work in *Mythologies*: Jonathan Culler notes the "awkward fact" that:

...the mythologist puts himself in complicity with what he attacks, as he articulates what goes without saying, spelling out mythical meaning...
demystification does not eliminate myth, but, paradoxically, gives it a greater freedom. (Culler, 1983, p. 39)

I suspect actually that something like that is happening with a lot of critical literacy work. As one text after another is shown to be racist or sexist or discriminatory, or exploitative, a kind of “so what?” reaction sets in. If all texts are ideological, then why get upset? Let’s enjoy them or not enjoy them, whatever.

A related problem is that the distinctiveness of the texts tends to get lost. Because they are being looked at for a particular purpose, and because a limited range of questions is being asked, a limited range of answers is found. The great variety of potential meanings that can make classroom discussion so rich is lost.

The judgment on the portrayal of Jim as racist would be roundly rejected by many (most) people, and that is very much the point. We cannot expect a single reading. Poststructuralism has made us dubious of any claims to a single, stable meaning in a text, let alone to claims of absolute truth.

Roland Barthes is a central figure in signalling this shift, or at least in popularising it, with his notion of the “death of the author”. He reminds us that “etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric” (Barthes, 1977, p. 159), and that

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced.... (1977, p. 147)

The threads come together in the reader’s mind, not the author’s: the reader’s patterning of them is what matters.

Thus, if we think about *Huckleberry Finn*, we can see that it is perfectly possible to highlight the thread of the representation of Jim as a black person, and find the book wanting, even racist. It is equally possible to pick on the thread (as most people do) of the developing relationship between Huck and Jim and see the book as a triumphant assertion of a common humanity beyond racism, a strong statement of an anti-racist position. Both views are perfectly defensible. One could equally read the book as a terrifyingly accurate critique of the violence and rapacity of American society, with

its exploitation of black people being only one aspect of its ultimate contempt for human decency and human life. Or one could read it as a book about the demands made by this society's way of doing masculinity, or as a book about the economic basis of class structure and class values. There are endless possibilities and their interplay is one of the great pleasures in English teaching.

Now, this idea that there is no single meaning in a work seems profoundly disturbing to people like Luke Slattery, who sees it as part of postmodern relativism. And indeed poststructuralism does argue that there are no single meanings (in complex works at least), and no absolute value and truth.

However, this is often misunderstood. It is sometimes claimed that it is saying that anything can mean anything, and that everything is of equal value. While there may have been the (rather) odd person here or there who has made such claims, this certainly is not the general view. To say that all language is unstable and indeterminate is not to say that it is an empty receptacle into which any meaning can be poured at the whim of the reader: a rose is still a rose and not a tub of Kentucky Fried Chicken. To say that there are no absolute truths is not to say that nothing is true, or that one thing cannot be truer than another, or rather, that the truth of some things matters more than the truth of others. The fact that the news will be on television tonight at 7.00 p.m. is undoubtedly true (if there isn't a sports telecast that's running over time): the fact that people, both military and civilian, are being killed in a war zone (as we may see on the news) is just as true, but matters rather more. To say that there is no absolute standard of value and all value is relative does not mean that we are unable to value things. We may enjoy reading both Jackie Collins and George Eliot, but in the end we who regularly read such a range of novels in the first part of the twenty-first century would probably say that *Middlemarch* is a greater book than *Hollywood Wives*.

It is profoundly human to evaluate things as less true or more true, as of lesser value or greater value, and we simply could not live without our standards of truth and value, as shifting and provisional as they might be. It is important however, that the limits of truth and value, the fact that they are constructed and partial, is recognised, even as their power is acknowledged and felt. To recognise a truth as partial is not to

reject it, but to acknowledge its limitations. The question, as I say, is how much it matters, and I would insist that is as much a decision calling on imagination and so our creativity as on rational deduction.

Which brings us to creativity.

I want to argue that any focus on critical literacy must be complemented by an equal focus on creativity. The functional element in English teaching is vital as I said before, but there is more to English than that, and English is important because it develops in students these two other capacities beyond the functional one, capacities without which the functional one is either useless or dangerous: a critical capacity and a creative one. The significance of English, beyond the important role of giving students control over basic literacy, seems to me to lie in critique and creativity. This is why, even though I would argue that critical literacy has some severe limitations and blindspots, I am nevertheless committed to the critical literacy venture and want to maintain what we have learnt through it, while expanding its domain, and even perhaps, in some ways moving beyond it.

What exactly do I mean by critique and creativity in the context of English?

Well, critique implies, of course, the critical literacy agenda. Students need to be able to understand what the social and ethical implications are of what the text is saying. To do this well, they need to know how the text is working in its context, both at the level of the immediate purpose for which it is constructed, and the implicit social understanding both in terms of the genre and of the social myths, narratives, - ideology – that informs the text. I am deliberately choosing my words here to cover both reading and writing, because it's very easy when you start thinking about critical literacy only to think about it in terms of reading, but a knowledge of these things – the linguistic/social materials out of which texts are made, the implications of putting them together in certain ways – is just as important in writing if we want to achieve our purposes, and we need to have a strong critical element in our writing practice.

But what about creativity? Presumably no-one would want to underplay its importance, but it is certainly less talked about in curriculum documents.

Probably most people when they think about creativity in relation to English teaching, think about creative writing (i.e. imaginative writing, fictional writing). I think this is a far too narrow notion of creativity. In fact, what I have argued is that most kinds of writing we do in English are, or ought to be seen as creative. However you define creativity, if you ask a student to write a letter to the Editor on whether or not Australia should pull its troops out of Iraq, you are asking them to be creative, to imagine themselves as the kind of person who writes such things in the real world.

And just as I argued that critique isn't only about reading, but is essential to writing, I would argue that creativity is fundamental to reading/viewing. Good reading is about making the text come alive to ourselves, and it draws deeply on our imaginative capacities. In a very real sense, as was argued in a lot of the theoretical work on literature in the eighties and early nineties, every reading creates a new text: it's an imaginative act.

Critique and creativity might be thought of as, in most ways, antithetical, calling on very different kinds of mental capacity, but I want to insist that they are complementary, and I would argue that, in fact, they are very intimately connected with each other, and in good textual practice are inseparable.

It's worthwhile, however, for a moment considering some of the ways in which critique and creativity do seem to be in opposition because it allows us to think about their features. If you do a quick brainstorm you'd probably come up with some oppositional pairs, such as

Intellectual	emotional
Impersonal	personal
Social	individual
Constricting	liberating
De(con)structive	productive
Judgmental	accepting
Negative	positive

I actually think that's interesting in terms of why critical literacy has, in many ways, failed to win the hearts and minds of lots of teachers, why it doesn't seem to be fun. The column on the left looks pretty boring. However, that's only so if you are seeing critical literacy as essentially in opposition to creativity rather than as complementary, if you refuse to allow the necessary creative elements in working with texts. English teaching ought to be fun because of the creative element in the critical, the critical element in the creative.

It is perhaps not worth going through each of these oppositions individually in detail to deconstruct them, but I would argue very strongly that a rich textual practice needs to draw on both. Critique is dead if it is a purely intellectual affair. It becomes pointless mind games. It needs to be energised by emotional commitment. This is why I am sometimes disturbed by what happens "Who is being excluded from this text?" etc. etc. They are worthwhile questions, but only if it can be made to matter to the students whose interests are being served, who is being excluded. Conversely, though, emotion without intellect is just as pointless. We all know the uncritical rant that sometimes passes as argument, the unconstrained emotional outpourings about a text that isn't engaging at all intellectually with what the text is on about. There is inevitably an intellectual element in all good literacy practices.

Those closing down/ opening up oppositions are interesting. It's one of the constant claims of critical literacy that texts are "partial". They only show us part of the world, and they promote their own interests. This is true, but their partiality is in fact what allows them to be creative. They frame the world for us, allow us to see the world in particular ways, and so allow us to make sense of the world. That's what is liberating about them.

And then there is the whole question of ethics. Critical literacy can seem to be very narrow, and overly politically correct, and it needs creativity to show it sometimes different ways of seeing things. But, whereas critique is inherently ethical, creativity in itself is not – creativity is about freedom from constraints, producing new ideas, new things – it's not concerned with ethics. Hijacking a plane and using it not for ransom but for destroying symbolically significant buildings was a highly creative piece of thinking, but scarcely moral (at least on my judgment): to be able to produce

a missile that you can fire from a thousand kilometres away and hit a particular house is the result of extraordinary technological creativity, but there are very pressing ethical questions about how you use the technology. Closer to the classroom, one can sometimes get highly creative and powerful pieces of writing that are expressing quite unacceptable attitudes – one needs to bring them into the light of critique. To be truly productive, English classrooms need to be both critical and creative places.

This is profoundly important, productive work. In English classes, we are continually asking students to rethink, reimagine the world in different ways through language. English is important because we can take on both the intellectual and the emotional, the social and the personal in our classes. We are about whole people. We are continually asking students to think and feel new things. More than that, we are asking them continually to imagine themselves into new reading positions, new writing positions, and so, if we take the poststructuralist view of how discourse produces our subjectivity, our identity, we are continually asking them to produce new subjectivities, new selves, which is a profoundly significant kind of productivity. That's why English teaching matters: at its best it allows students to see their diverse potential, and have the power to create new selves.

While this is very serious work, it should also be fun. It's fun because we are playing with texts, seeing how they're put together, seeing with them, seeing through them. It's fun because we are setting one view of a text up against another, and seeing the relativity of perception. It's fun because we are engaging in a full way, intellectually and emotionally with texts and expanding our understanding of the world, and our different ways of coming to understand the world. It's fun because of the sheer exhilaration of exercising critical and creative power in helping our students take control of the textual world.

The Luke Slatterys of this world not only have a misguided view of the value of critical literacy, they don't understand what it really is or was, and they certainly don't understand how it's changing and what it might become.

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