

Language on the show circuit: A broadening appreciation of critical literacies

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Abstract

A significant result of a longitudinal study into the educational experiences of travelling Australian show children has been the broadening of critical literacies as a concept. Critical literacies imply the versatility of language, an attribute that is clearly demonstrated in the show people's maintenance of their distinctive cultural traditions.

This paper examines the language used by the members of the show circuit, highlighting the ways in which their language is modified to suit particular purposes. These purposes include communication within their exclusive circle and negotiation and lobbying with outside bodies to obtain certain privileges for their group. The three way

communication has created a partnership between the Showmen's Guild, the providers of distance education for children on the show circuit in Queensland and the team of researchers conducting this study. This partnership has resulted in a greater appreciation of the value and legitimacy of language used on the show circuit. It also has implications for the language employed in the writing of both distance education materials for the show children and reports about the research project.

The contexts of the discussion and focus of the research on which this paper is based are two show circuits in Australia. The theoretical origins for the discussion are several pertinent issues raised and discussed by Allan Luke, an Australian writer who has produced significant publications in the areas of literacy education and discourse analysis as well as the sociology of education. The analysis also draws on the theoretical positions of a number of other writers in the field.

The research began in 1992 and has continued ever since. It has been a collaborative project among a team of researchers from the Faculty of Education at Central Queensland University, Australia. The participants in the study have been parents, teachers, home tutors and children on two Central Queensland show circuits who were interviewed in towns where the 'showies' stayed for periods of up to a week. One hundred and ten semistructured interviews with 121 program participants were held from 1992 to 1996 on themes which included social networks, peer relations, work and play, curriculum and pedagogy, self-efficacy, participant roles and marginalised identities. Five articles, nine book chapters, a 13minute video tape, twenty-two conference papers and a booklength manuscript have been produced, this output representing the largest study into the life and education of an itinerant group in Australia to date.

The analysis of language on the show circuit presented here draws upon Luke's (1994) definitions of literacy and critical literacy. Throughout this paper, the context in which show children develop language, become literate and position their emerging perspectives will become apparent. Their world is interesting for many reasons, one being that they live, work, play and are educated in a transient and closeknit community or extended family. This community contains all those situations which Luke believes shape literacy; it is like a society in miniature. As Luke maintains, "...literacy is constructed by individuals and groups as part of everyday life. At the same time literacy also is constructive of everyday life". Literacy is "influenced by the institutions, ideologies and interests operant in these societies" (p. 2).

So much of what Luke has said about literacy and critical literacy and the development of such skills has relevance to an analysis of how show children can develop these skills and the use that can be made of them in understanding themselves better, for communicating with groups outside the show and for their future lives either within or outside

the circuit. For example,

Literacy...is a means for shaping how people conceive of themselves, their identities and their environments. A critical literacy entails...understandings of the ways in which literacy has shaped the organisations and values of social life, and of the ways in which the texts of everyday life influence one's own identity and authority. Literacy is therefore as much about ideologies, identities and values as it is about codes and skills (1994, p. 9).

The purpose of this paper is to initiate discussion about the show circuit on issues of critical literacies in relation to:

- the ways that language is modified to suit particular purposes;
- the value and legitimacy that can be attached to language usage; and
- implications for writing distance education materials and disseminating research results.

The ways that language is modified to suit particular purposes

One particular aspect of the lives of show children that is different from many other children is that they visit places, see events and live in ways that most children only ever read about or in some other ways experience vicariously. Show children live the 'inside story' of the travelling show person and they know all the intricacies that such a life entails. They are often surrounded by extended families of more than two generations as well as friends who are so close as to be

called cousins. A number of families have children who represent the sixth generation on an Australian show circuit.

Within this extended family and the way that these children live, the point that "school is not the biggest influence on [children's] lives nor on their learning" (1992, p. 1, Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training with reference to the Australian Language and Literacy Policy) could not be more true for the children of Australian show people. Children who travel with their families on the show circuit visit a number of towns and sites throughout the year and become very knowledgeable about those places. They recognise these places when they revisit them, they have memories that they associate with them, learning much at first hand as well as from the stories told to them by older family members as they travel.

The lives of the show people not only have the rhythm associated with the yearly cycle of visits to towns on their circuit, but a routine of packing and unpacking, which long ago became a fine art. The children know this rhythm and the work which gives it momentum and they can talk about it. They have parts to play and they know well the parts that others play. They have watched, they have helped and they have internalised this lifestyle. Conversations on the circuit assume an intimacy of such knowledge and aspects of their language have revolved around both the internal workings of the show and relationships with

people outside the circuit.

Roles that the parents of the children on the show circuit play include negotiating with officials in the towns where they visit for purposes such as determining sites for their caravans. Their parents have also negotiated with the Queensland Department of Education to improve their children's access to education. All these experiences from the beginnings of these children's lives form the backdrop upon which their language develops. The language on the circuit changes according to context and is used for diverse purposes. It serves the two functions which Cullinan (1993) has identified; it is used for communication and to talk about their world.

There is an interesting parallel as well as comparison between Cullinan's analysis of research on classroom talk relating to the need for students to "talk in order to learn and to become competent language users" (p. 2) and show children's development and use of language for different purposes on the show circuit. The parallel refers to the notion of talk occurring in a learning environment which, for most children in Australia, is the formal classroom and for show children is the show circuit. The comparison is where the classroom studies undertaken by the show children may not have the same degree of formality as regular classrooms, where show children spend less time in formal instruction and where study fits in with life rather than life fitting in with study.

On the show circuit, there are diverse opportunities for children to develop their language skills and to adjust their language according to the situation. Such opportunities include serving customers, talking with older family members about historical landmarks which they see on their travels or talking about the people who attend the shows. Talk in these situations promotes learning, helps to clarify thoughts before writing, assists comprehension, develops in children the confidence to talk to people and is an indicator of the nature of children's thinking. As indicated in the research reviewed by Cullinan (1993, p.2), "Students need to talk before they write". This point is echoed in the work of Fitzgerald (1993) on language and literacy in classrooms and the connection between oracy and literacy. In the present context, the connection between these latter concepts signals the value and legitimacy of language used on the circuit and also supports the view that "being literate enables us to play productive roles in our own society (de Castell, Luke & Egan, 1986, p. vii).

The value and legitimacy that can be attached to language usage
The children on show circuits have extended opportunities to interact with other children as well as adults. Cullinan (1993) explains that adults "can facilitate children's language development by carrying on conversations with them and by giving them opportunities to express themselves" (p. 3). In addition, the opportunities that children have to interact with one another are important because children are more likely, in these situations, to explore ideas further than they would

if teachers were leading the discussion (Cullinan, 1993).

The different ways that language is used on the circuit is both central and essential to the ways that the children learn. What Derewianka (1990) says about language and learning in the classroom can just as easily be applied to language and learning on the show circuit. As Derewianka (1990, p.4) has said, "it is now widely recognised that we learn through language" (emphasis in original). "Our perception of the world is constructed through language, and it is through language that we are able to interact with others in our world". This notion pervades the total learning environment in which show children live out their lives.

The idea that the entire context of show children's lives provides opportunities to learn through experience and language can also be related to the notion proposed by Pigdon and Woolley (1994) that the use of quality resources in the classroom can lead to the development of critical literacies. If the show circuit is the learning environment of the children of show people, then their 'classroom' consists of a wide variety and large number of valuable resources. These resources, which are unique to this particular travelling lifestyle, include a richness of sights and sounds, activities and experiences as well as diverse opportunities to interact with a range of people.

The result of the interaction between such rich resources is what Pigdon and Woolley, in relation to classroom life, describe as the "crucial connection" (p. 1) between literacy learning and daily life experiences. For example, messages in texts which assume the normalcy of life in mainstream Australia and, by implication, devalue other lifestyles, would perhaps be easily recognised by children who travel the show circuits as contestable. Why would this not be the case when these children frequently read other 'texts' which perpetuate similar inconsistencies, such as when their parents lobby for a more relevant education for their children? When the lives of groups of people are not easily understood or even recognised as normal by the mainstream, then it can be expected that those in the mainstream may not conceive that their views are contestable. In this context, the analysis of life by those outside the mainstream is analogous to a critical analysis of literature in the classroom.

Apart from developing critical literacy skills which would enable show children to identify situations in which texts produced from within the 'mainstream' fail to appreciate other views of life, it is also important for show children to develop the capacity to consider what a life outside their enclosed circle could mean for them as adults. Interviews conducted with participants in this study over the years have considered the notion that show children may need or may want to leave the circuit at some stage. Interviewees, including a travelling teacher, have acknowledged that some children leave the circuit when they grow up, either permanently or temporarily, and that some may need to leave for economic reasons. It is not certain that there will always be a place for travelling shows or that it will always be economically viable. As one parent explained:

...I hope that I can provide my children with the facilities so they have the tools to venture into anything. Their world should not be limitless, and it shouldn't be just in this one little area...my

children should know that...with education and other experiences in their life, they'll have avenues that they can choose. They shouldn't just think that this is the one avenue for them.

In this situation, children will be best served by their developing critical literacies if those skills have equipped them to analyse texts from different perspectives, not just their own. For example, it is one thing to be able to identify omissions and inconsistencies in texts from one's own point of view when one is living in that situation. If the individual then joins the 'mainstream', he or she then has to survive in that system, and a broader appreciation of the use of critical literacies is likely to be needed. In other words, apart from the 'mainstream' needing to recognise the value and legitimacy of language used by those groups which hold a different perspective, it is also important for the latter groups to understand the value and legitimacy of language in the 'mainstream', of which some of its members may one day become a part. This is one of the reasons why the distance education teachers who come from the 'mainstream', but who have made an enormous effort to learn about the lives and views of the show people, are so crucial in bridging the two worlds and why they play such an important part in the developing critical literacy skills of the children whom they teach on the circuit. Equally important, therefore, are the implications that this has for those teachers who also write the distance education materials which are used not only by the show children, but by other groups of isolated or travelling children.

Implications for writing distance education materials and disseminating research results

In the writing of distance education materials, as with any writing, the interaction between the reader and the text needs to be considered. This interaction is related to the earlier discussion on the ways that readers from outside the 'mainstream' may contest views which have been presented as 'normal' or at least not problematic by the writer. Between any text and any reader there can be a mediator. In classrooms, this mediator is most often the teacher; for show children, the mediator is likely to be a home tutor and sometimes a teacher. The mediator's approach or perspective can be crucial in determining how the child reads the text or what he or she makes of it. An interesting parallel can also be drawn from the earlier discussion on children's talk and how this can be influenced by whether an adult is part of the conversation. Mey (1988) believed that this juxtapositioning of the reader, the teacher and the text needed to be considered in the light of the broader, societal structure in order for the process to be understood.

On that point, the teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education who meet and work with the show children when the shows stay for a week or more in one town have made an enormous effort over the years to discover and understand the context around which the lives of these children revolve. Perhaps these teachers have even come close to what Luke (1994, p.4) espouses, that "literacy requires social and cultural analysis of literacy in contemporary society and, crucially, of how it is part of the lived experience and futures of children and their communities". This must have implications for the ways that these teachers treat literacy in the classrooms of the show children.

In getting to know life on the circuit, these teachers from the Brisbane School of Distance Education have also perhaps demonstrated opposition to the view that education is the vendor of culture (Kaplan, 1990). Instead, this approach more closely fits the ideology, also expressed by Kaplan, that language is essential for the transmission of culture. By keeping alive throughout generations a number of traditions associated with travelling shows as well as recognised artefacts, the

show people have shown a remarkable capacity to use language to sustain their lifestyle and not be pushed further from the 'mainstream' than they want to go nor to be subsumed by it.

The people who tutor show children may either be parents of the children or people hired for that purpose. Home tutors are not usually qualified teachers although, as one such tutor noted during an interview, it makes an enormous difference as far as applying the Language curriculum that is provided by the Education Department if the tutor is a skilled classroom teacher. In either case, if the tutor has the ability to mediate between the materials and the children in such a way that the experiences of the show children are not devalued, then there is a chance that the children will learn critical literacy skills. They may then learn to be able to interact with the text themselves in a meaningful way rather than to be passive recipients of all kinds of texts from a variety of locations which promote a particular, favoured or even alienating view.

Promoting critical literacies through the use of distance education materials, however, is not limited to, nor is it as simple as, ensuring that children have the opportunity to draw on their own experiences. Schools, according to Pigdon and Woolley (1994), have a responsibility to extend children beyond their own experience. A consequence or extension of this responsibility may be a more balanced view but it needs to be done in such a way that it is likely to produce future generations of readers of a wide range of texts who can contest 'favoured' readings of such texts. This should be done not just from one's own preferred perspective either, but from an appreciation that there is likely to exist other readings which are just as legitimate as their own. As Pigdon and Woolley state, resources for learning can include people and places, but they must be used in such a way that they assist children to become more critical readers, and to "examine and resist ideologies, attitudes, values and stereotypes" (p. 6)

presented in a variety of media.

An understanding and appreciation of language usage and the development of language skills by children on the show circuit, including critical literacies, is a complex issue. Theoretically and in practice, this understanding could only hope to develop over an extended period in which the researchers enter the situation a number of times. A community such as the one of interest in this research has decades of tradition and culture, much of which is only visible to and fully appreciated by the people involved. There has always been a certain amount of mystery about how show people live and work. If, as Luke (1994, p. 2) maintains, "Literacy is a dynamic, evolving social and historical construction" and "not a fixed, static body of skills", then there is even more reason to believe that coming to an understanding of the issues involved by those from outside this group is even less likely to occur in the short term.

These points have implications for the dissemination of research findings because researchers need to ensure that they do not represent a simplistic or uncomplicated view of language on the show circuits. Further, they must be careful not to overestimate the efficacy of their methods or their methodologies in being able to come to in-depth understandings and to realise the limitations of their study. On the other hand, the issues involved in language development and use on the show circuit, together with a widening appreciation of critical literacies in such uncharted waters, is already beginning to develop and needs to be made known. The advantages are a better understanding of a group of people who previously seemed to hold mysteries which we had not even tried to unlock before this study began in 1992 and, hopefully, a contribution to theory in the area of language and literacy.

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