Filling the critical literacy vessel: constructions of critical literacy in Australia

Amanda Gutierrez

Introduction

The term critical literacy has come to be regarded in many quarters as an integral component of the Australian secondary English curriculum and has been that way for over a decade. The major drive to this approach came in Australia in the early 1990’s at a time of increasing awareness of unequal outcomes, disadvantage and exclusion, and a questioning of the role curriculum might play in this. In English, educational theorists were beginning to ask questions about texts and reading experiences that challenged English teaching practices, questions such as those Morgan asked in 1997, “…who constructs the texts, whose representations are dominant in a particular culture at a particular time; how [do] readers come to be complicit with the persuasive ideologies of texts; whose interests are served by such representations and such readings; and when such texts and readings are inequitable in their effects, how these could be constructed otherwise.” (p 2). While there was much interest in the use of what was coined ‘critical literacy’, it was (and still is) highly contested in educational circles and the public arena, and exists in many differing forms.

The project reported on in this paper is examining the protean constructions of the critical literacy entity in academic theory, curriculum policy documents and classroom practice, with the major research question being: ‘How has critical literacy been constructed in theory, Australian Curriculum and Australian secondary English classrooms and what is the relationship between the constructions of critical literacy in these fields?’. Luke and Freebody argued in 1997, “The term critical literacy has come to refer to such a wide range of educational philosophies and curriculum interventions that their family resemblances and shared characteristics would be hard to pick.” (p1). More recently Misson and Morgan have argued that constructions of critical literacy can often have a limiting effect on the treatment of aesthetic texts in the classroom and their deliberations over this may have “…produced something that is no longer recognisable as critical literacy.” (p 226). While educational theorists have identified the multiplicity of this entity and may be beginning to discuss what classrooms could look like ‘post’ critical literacy, this does not necessarily reflect the state of critical literacy in curriculum in Australia today, or the way teachers are constructing ‘critical literacy’ and using it in their classrooms. Curriculum developers and classroom practitioners continue to work from their own understanding of what critical literacy is and create further new meanings for this entity in today’s secondary English classrooms. These differing understandings of critical literacy raise questions such as what is the state of critical literacy today? What does it mean to people in academia, curriculum and the classroom and what is the relationship between these constructions? Is the term worth holding onto, or is it time to move on? An examination of the constructions in educational theory, curriculum and practice, and the complex relationship between these fields, will allow a greater sense of the state of critical literacy today.

This paper will focus on two of the fields under investigation, educational theory and curriculum. It will briefly map theoretical perspectives on critical literacy as they have impacted on English education in
Australia, and analyse the constructions of critical literacy in one of the Victorian and one of the Queensland secondary curriculum policy documents. The theoretical mapping will inform the discussion on curriculum constructions of critical literacy in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards or VELS curriculum document from Victoria and the English Senior Syllabus curriculum document from Queensland. As the larger study looks at both middle and senior curriculum I wanted to give a sample of both in this paper. By doing this the relationship between theoretical perspectives and their translation into curriculum can be identified, particularly in relation to the way major educational theoretical movements can be transformed differently as they are developed in different states. As state curriculum documents can have differing constructions of critical literacy, the question may be posed, how are these documents impacting on teacher’s constructions of critical literacy, and what is the relationship (if any) to academic theoretical discourse? The final section of the paper will very briefly identify some of the constructions of critical literacy in textbooks that can be found in many Victorian and Queensland English departments designed to aid in the development of ‘critical literacy skills’.

Theoretical perspectives on critical literacy

Due to the time constraints of this presentation, and the fact that I am discussing Australian constructions of critical literacy, I will focus mainly on constructions of critical literacy in light of Australian educational theorists from the 1990s to the present day. As may be expected, there is not one agreed construction of critical literacy. As Lankshear argues, “A good place to start is by accepting that ‘critical literacy’ is not a name for some finite established entity.” (1997, p 42). There are, however, similarities and variants that can be seen.

One of the major proponents of critical literacy in Australia is Allan Luke. In the early 90s he saw the aim of the critical literacy teacher as being “…to get students to construct and to challenge texts, to see how texts provide selective versions of the world.” (Luke, 1991, p 519). This view of text ties in with what many other Australian educational theorists were arguing in the late 1990s. For example Comber and Kamler, in 1997, argued “…the meanings constructed in text are ideological and involved in producing, reproducing and maintaining arrangements of power which are unequal.” (1997, p 30). Most Australian educational theorists around this time viewed critical literacy in this way, arguing that one of its major imperatives should be to challenge and disrupt ideological representations in texts and the power positions that may be normalised. These approaches align with what Lankshear (1997) described as critical social literacy variants.

There were, however, critical literacy educational theorists around this time who were inverting the critical gaze by calling for a more cautionary approach to some of the heralded possibilities being identified. In particular, Misson (1997) cautioned against the ways resistance was represented and was concerned about the treatment of the affective.

Over the next few years, critical literacy theorists began to emphasise the multiplicity of critical literacy. For example, Comber and Simpson in 2001 argued, “…there is no one generic critical literacy, in theory or in practice. Rather there is a range of theories that are productive starting points for educators working on social justice agendas through the literacy curriculum.” (p x). In the Australian context there still seems to be a focus on critical literacies for social justice purposes, but in a more sophisticated and deliberated way. The theoretical constructions of critical literacy seem to have evolved to have more focus on the ‘literacy’ element (as is demonstrated by the popularity of Freebody & Luke’s four
resources model and Green’s 3 D model) as compared to the earlier focus being more on resistance and empowerment. Power still does feature heavily, but is used more in the context of improving literacy than the original Freirean intention, as a way to ‘empower’ the ‘oppressed’.

The discussion surrounding the affective value of texts in critical literacy has also evolved, and is now becoming a discussion about the place of the aesthetic. Misson argued in 2005 that there is still work to be done to bring critical literacy and the personal and aesthetic together in a way that does not simply reflect old personal growth methods, but is rather an evolutionary step forward from critical literacy. Considering Morgan and Misson have published a book wholly focused on the issue of the aesthetic in critical literacy in 2006 (titled Critical literacy and the aesthetic), it is clearly an area critical literacy educational theorists are interested in and is influencing current constructions of the entity.

Constructions of critical literacy in Victoria – VELS

The current curriculum set for years prep-10 in Victoria is an evolution from the first outcomes based curriculum, the Curriculum Standards Framework introduced in 1995 (Victorian Board of Studies), (with a modified version, the CSF II, published in 2000 (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority)). The Victorian government through the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) began drafting the VELS early in 2004 in response to the then Minister for Education Lynne Kosky’s request to introduce ‘essential learning’ frameworks (VCAA website, last updated Aug 2008). This request came about after the release of the document Blueprint for Government Schools: Future Directions in the Victorian Government School System in November 2003. This began a move away from categorizing learning into ‘outcomes’, and instead towards the concept of ‘Essential Learnings’.

The VELS (and Progression Point document for English) have six levels (and in the Progression Points a beyond Level 6 as a later addition). It is expected that an ‘average’ child will demonstrate Level 1 by the end of prep, Level 2 by the end of year 2, Level 3 by the end of year 4, Level 4 by the end of year 6, Level 5 by the end of year 8 and Level 6 by the end of year 10. While in the secondary English context (years 7/8 – 10) there will undoubtedly be students who are struggling to approach level 5 (and in many schools students who will still be working in and towards level 4 and perhaps even level 3), the project focuses on the later years, and hence this paper concentrates on Levels 5 and 6. The VELS is structured with the overarching subject areas being labelled ‘Domains’, in which there is a learning focus statement for each level, and within each level there are statements outlining the standards (which in the English Domain are ‘Reading’, ‘Writing’ and ‘Speaking and Listening’).

The VELS document includes not only core subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science, but also the interdisciplinary domains Communication, Design, Creativity and Technology, Information and Communications Technology and Thinking. These domains are included into curriculum design in different ways depending on each individual school. As they are assessed, some schools have assigned particular interdisciplinary domains to the domain they feel is best suited, while other schools have asked all teachers to include the interdisciplinary domains into their curriculum, which has created some conflict when teachers’ assessment of students is not consistent across disciplines. It is important to consider these interdisciplinary domains when looking at constructions of critical literacy as they are an integral component of classroom teaching and assessment. Out of these domains there are two that appear to have incorporated critical literacy approaches, and have strong ties with the skills emphasised in the English standards, being Communication and Thinking. For the purpose of this paper I will be
outlining links in the Communication domain only. These interdisciplinary domains do not include Progression Point documents, but do have overarching statements, level learning focus statements and statements for the standards.

The VELS and progression points for levels 5 and 6 have a number of links to critical literacy academic discourse. While the ties are often ambiguous, there are several sections of the document which can be analysed in terms of the language included and excluded. These inclusions and exclusions can be divided into the following in relation to constructing ‘critical literacy’:

A. The complete exclusion of the phrase ‘critical literacy’ (not just in levels 5 and 6, but across the whole of both documents).

B. The use of the word ‘critical’ in general ways that appears to draw on discourses from critical literacy, critical thinking and Leavisite literary criticism, which at times contradict the overall expectations of skills needed for completion of the level.

C. The inclusion of language characteristic of critical literacy academic discourse in the English domain, which is at times open to multiple interpretations.

D. The inclusion of language characteristic of critical literacy academic discourse in the interdisciplinary domain of Communication, which, at times, has stronger links to critical literacy academic discourse than the English domain.

Each of these language choices helps to construct and position critical literacy in particular ways. Following are some samples of analysis from the project looking at how these language constructions invite particular meanings and views of critical literacy.

A. Exclusion of the phrase ‘critical literacy’

This particular omission is important to note as often the exclusion of educational terms, which are used to name approaches to education in some curriculum documents, can point to underlying themes about those terms. This is particularly the case in the Victorian curriculum documents, as, while they do not name critical literacy, they do not completely exclude language that epitomises this approach (as analysed in point C). At the time of the VELS creation, there was much media backlash against critical literacy and its ‘proponents’ influencing subject English. English is the most closely observed subject in schooling, and is often under close media scrutiny. By excluding the term ‘critical literacy’, yet not excluding all of the concepts, they have managed to create a document that is less overt about its possible support of a teaching approach seen as contentious by pundits in the media, the public, and powerful political figures.

B – The use of the word ‘critical’

The word ‘critical’ appears to act as, what Laclau & Mouffe (1985) call, a floating signifier in this curriculum document in the sense that ‘critical’ exists across multiple discourses and is used in multiple ways. This can create ambiguity and struggles about its use when placed into the context of teachers operationalising the curriculum. The word appears 26 times in the overarching English domain.
statement, levels 5 and 6 of the English domain and ‘Progression Points’ statements. It appears 5 times in the introductory overarching statement for the English domain, 7 times in Level 5 and 14 times in Level 6 (including the Progression Points documents). After scanning the level 4 documents in the English domain it was discovered that the word ‘critical’ only appears twice, which would indicate that whatever the meaning teachers (and the creators of the documents) may construct from this term, curriculum writers saw the skills as being developmental, and valued in the later years of secondary schooling.

After categorising the 26 uses of the word ‘critical’, there were three major discourses that the uses could be linked to – critical thinking, critical literacy and Leavisite literary criticism. As the use of language consistent with critical literacy discourse is analysed in section C and D, I will focus on possible interpretations of ‘critical’ to mean critical thinking or Leavisite literary criticism in this section. While these two discourses are separate from critical literacy, the curriculum documents failure to establish the links between the use of this term and its origins can further influence teachers’ constructions of critical literacy, as they try to interpret which discourse to fit to each use of the term. Also critical thinking discourse has links to critical literacy discourse, and in educational circles there is much confusion about the distinction between the two. Hence when attempting to analyse constructions of critical literacy all influencing factors and possible confusions need to be considered.

Critical thinking discourse reflect meanings “…based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.” (Scriven & Paul, 2007, p 1). It carries a more ‘scientific’ tag, or connotations, which creates a sense of objectivity, rationality and evidence based teaching and learning. This kind of meaning can be seen in the statement “Students begin to respond in more detached and critical ways…” (Level 5, VCAA, 2005, p 41). By using the adjective ‘detached’ in association with the term ‘critical’ this statement suggests that a rational and objective response in subject English is required to make ‘critical’ judgements, which reflects its use in critical thinking discourse.

There are also uses of the term ‘critical’ that suggest a traditional Leavisite literary criticism meaning, “This work entailed explicating the literary text under consideration: interpreting it, explaining what it ‘really’ meant deep down …evaluating the worth of the text based on the way its literary features enhanced or made that meaning.” (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p 3). A statement such as “By understanding and working with texts, students acquire the knowledge, skills and personal qualities that enable them to read, view and listen critically…” (English domain introduction, p 38), could be interpreted to suggest there are innate ‘qualities’ that students needs to have to allow them to come to an understanding of how a text works, and once these ‘qualities’ are attained a student will be able to better understand the meaning of texts, hence epitomising the kind of student who could succeed at creating Leavisite literary criticism. Yet in saying this, for a statement such as this there could well be other interpretations, which is not uncommon as there are many other ambiguous uses of ‘critical’ throughout the document. Take for example the following statement;

…introduce critical approaches to the ideas and thinking contained in texts and support students in the development of critical understanding about the ways writers and speakers control language to influence their listeners, readers and viewers. (level 5, p 37)

The initial part of this statement suggests ideas and thinking is ‘contained’ in texts and that there are critical approaches available to extract these ideas and thinking. This kind of interpretation matches Leavisite literary criticism and could also tie to critical thinking discourse due to the use of the word
‘thinking’. Yet in the same sentence it is suggested students need to develop a critical understanding about the use of language to ‘influence’ audiences. This suggests an understanding of how language can be used in powerful ways, and in ways that can position (or ‘influence’ as they have used) audiences needs to be a part of the study, which ties in with academic critical literacy discourse. How teachers view statements such as these can not be ascertained without asking them directly, but it can be said that statements such as these do not assist teachers when they are grappling with the floating nature of the word ‘critical’.

C Inclusion of critical literacy concepts in the English domain

There are statements that use language that are regular inclusions in academic critical literacy discourse, and at times the use of the word ‘critical’ in combination with these phrases. The key language phrases concuring with critical literacy academic discourse, that were apparent in the earlier mapping discussion, that are present in the English domain, are ‘different perspectives’ in the sense of multiple interpretations, ‘sociocultural dimensions/factors’, ‘contextual factors’ and ‘social values or attitudes’ which recognise the ways these impact on students’ readings of texts, ‘power’, ‘influence’ and ‘position readers’ suggesting students need to understand the ways texts can promote particular ideologies in an attempt to persuade, influence or position readers into believing or accepting a particular viewpoint, and finally ‘construction’ and ‘shaping meaning’ in relation to students recognising the constructed nature of texts. All up across the English domain there are 48 cases of these phrases or their derivatives (eg constructing, construct) occurring. As with the use of the term ‘critical’ these occur more often in Level 6 (30 times) than Level 5 (14) with the remaining 4 times occurring in the introduction statement to the domain.

The need for students to be able to understand the possibility of multiple interpretations of texts due to varying factors, such as coming from ‘differing groups’ (see example below), is only apparent in level 6 of the English domain. While the possible reasons for these differing interpretations, that is context, values and attitudes, do appear in the introductory statement, level 5 and level 6, it appears to connection between these factors and multiple interpretations is only hinted at in level 6. Two instances of this are “…explore and interpret different perspectives on complex issues, analysing how different texts are likely to be interpreted by different groups.” (Learning Focus, level 6, p 42) and “discussion and comparisons of possible interpretations of texts supported by evidence from the texts.” (Progression point 6.75, p 18). This perhaps again links into what appears to be a developmental impression that students are not able to display these ‘critical’ skills of analysing differing interpretations on complex issues and analysing the possible reasons for this until the later years of adolescence.

Another indicator of a critically literate student is that they are also aware of the ways audiences can have power over texts and influence their production. This kind of thinking can be seen in the statement “…awareness of the influence of audience on the construction and presentation of spoken texts…” (Level 5, Speaking and Listening). This is particularly the case in texts that are attempting to persuade the readers to accept/agree with their position on particular issues, for example political propaganda. In critical literacy discourse it is important that students are aware of the constructed nature of these texts and that while these texts may be trying to promote a particular viewpoint, the ideologies of the audience will influence the ways texts are constructed.
This ties into the final link to critical literacy discourse, the need for students to understand that texts are deliberate constructions rather than simply being created for pleasure or to inform. The word ‘shaped’ and ‘construct’ and their derivatives appear the most out of all of the critical literacy language phrases/words. All up there is one use in the introductory statement, 3 uses in level 5 and 11 uses in level 6. While this is the case, there are only two examples (including the statement just discussed) that can be clearly linked to academic critical literacy discourse, the other being, “They develop a critical understanding of the contextual factors involved in the construction and interpretation of texts, including the role of audience in shaping meaning.” (Learning Focus, Level 6, p 42). This statement is a culmination of many key phrases and words from critical literacy discourse and comes immediately after a statement previously discussed focusing on ‘different perspectives’ and how texts can be ‘interpreted by different groups’. Here the use of critical appears to be linked to academic critical literacy discourse that argues for the consideration of contextual factors when looking at the ways texts are constructed and the readings produced.

To further highlight the ambiguity of the language in this document, there are instances that could appear to align with critical literacy ideas about texts, language and literacy, but again would be dependent on the teacher. For example the statement “understanding of how variations in language, form and context affect interpretations of texts.” (Reading 5.5, p 15) could be interpreted as requiring students to recognise the constructed nature of texts and their power to produce multiple views. Being able to understand how changes in language, form and context can impact on the readings an audience can produce from a text are common aims discussed in critical literacy discourse. A common activity in critical literacy textbooks, as will be identified later, is to investigate the impact of word substitution on readings of texts. This does not mean that a teacher would read this extract in this way, it is dependent on the multiplicity of factors that work together to create an individual moment of construction for each individual teacher. While this is purely supposition, it does demonstrate the multiplicity of meanings teachers could make of language moments such as these in the document.

D Critical Literacy concepts in the Communication domain

One would perhaps see Communication as having obvious connections to the English domain. There are clear links to critical literacy discourse in this domain and at times the links are more explicit than in the English domain. The kind of language that would be seen in critical literacy discourse used when categorising the language, and the examples I will cover in this presentation, are ‘discourse’, ‘construct’ and ‘deconstruct’ which are terms commonly used when discussing the need for students to be able to understand the ways texts are put together, and hence be able to take them apart (that is de-construct texts) and the ways language is used can vary depending on the discourse. Also the words ‘empower’, ‘power’, ‘ideology’, and ‘exclude’ appear, which tie into emancipatory strains of critical literacy where students are asked to look at the way power works in texts and language, how ideologies are reflected, and how some people can be excluded from texts due to dominant ideologies and discourse specific languages. The Communication domain overall has 14 instances of these language occurrences, 5 in introduction, 3 in level 5 and 6 level 6.

The Communication domain makes clear connections to the postmodern influences that appear in academic critical literacy discourse, in a much more overt way than the English domain document. The introduction to the domain sets up language as a multiple entity that is dependent upon the ‘discourse’ in which it is produced. They emphasise the need for students to understand that this phenomena creates
‘literacies’, rather than a unitary ‘literacy’. This can be seen in the statement, “…language and discourse differ across the curriculum and that there is a need to learn literacies involved in each subject they undertake.” (Communication, Introduction, p 91). The use of the term ‘construct’ and particularly ‘deconstruct’ also creates clear ties to critical literacy discourse. As with the English domain there is an instance of ‘construct’ being used in an ambiguous way, “Communication is central to the capacity to construct meanings” (Communication, Introduction, p 91), yet when combined with its other use, “Students share the meaning they have constructed with others and discuss any differences.” (Communication, Learning Focus, Level 5) and the instances when ‘deconstruct’ is used,

The Listening, viewing and responding dimension focuses on developing student understanding of communication conventions, strategies to assist them to make meaning of communication forms and the ability to deconstruct and respond to a diversity of forms. (Communication, Listening, viewing and responding, p 92)

To communicate successfully students need to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that empower them to respond to, make meaning of, and deconstruct a range of communication forms. (Communication, Introduction, p 91)

the meaning of ‘construct’ can be connected to the notion of texts (or communication forms) as being deliberate constructions that can be pulled apart, or deconstructed, to investigate what has been included, excluded and why. The students also then need to understand how they themselves ‘construct’ meaning which can differ from others (understanding multiple ‘readings’ in academic critical literacy discourse). The term ‘deconstruct’, in the postmodern sense, comes directly from the postmodern theorist Derrida, who had a major influence on academic critical literacy discourse. While this is the case, not all teachers will take the ‘postmodern’ view to the term ‘deconstruct’. Some may instead interpret it use as tying into Systemic functional circles where it means nothing more than ‘analyse the structure’.

Perhaps the writers of this document were not as concerned as the writers of the English domain about political and media backlashes against postmodern/critical literacy influences on education. Since it is not one of the traditional ‘core’ subjects it perhaps not in the public eye. Although this may be the case, as these documents are ‘interdisciplinary’, the focus on these skills consistent with critical literacy approaches appear to be considered important across disciplines, and not just specific to the English domain.

The Communication domain also makes mention of the importance of understanding the way power works, and the influence of ideologies, culture and societal norms. As can be seen in the example in the previous paragraph, one of the aims of the Communication domain is that students can become empowered to respond to texts and be able to deconstruct them. Implying they need to challenge the traditional power status of the author (tying into Barthes’ famous ‘Death of the Author’ essay). To be able to do this students need to begin to understand the ways power works in society, and how it influences texts and their production. The Communication domain views these skills as being present in level 6 students, which is reflected in the statement “Students respond to a range of aural, written and visual texts, reflecting on how cultural and societal norms and ideology influence the production of the material…” (Communication, Learning Focus, Level 6). To further this connection, as discussed in academic critical literacy discourse, students need to have an understanding of the relationship between power and language, which is again covered in level 6, “…students explore the relationship between language and power…” (Communication, Learning Focus, Level 6, p 95). On top of this, critically
literate students also understand the way discourses, and hence language in these discourses, can exclude audiences who do not have control of the language, this can be seen in the statement, “Student develop a high level of expertise and fluency in the language…They reflect on why it is important to have this knowledge, how it enables more precise communication, but also how it can exclude audiences who are not familiar with the language of particular subjects.” (Communication, Learning Focus, Level 6, p 96). While a critical literacy approach would take this another step to investigate reasons why audiences may be excluded from particular discourses, in regards to power relations, the fact that this statement requires students to recognise that audiences can be excluded due to control over language would appear to be a precursor to investigating why.

In the Communication domain it seems that by the time students attain level 6 they need to have a developed understanding about how texts are constructed, be able to construct their own texts, be able to deconstruct texts, understand that there can be multiple meanings constructed, understand how power works in the construction of texts and meanings, and understand that language can exclude audiences. A student with these capabilities, in critical literacy academic discourse, would be well on their way to becoming critically literate.

**Constructions of critical literacy in Queensland – English Senior Syllabus**

The Queensland English Senior Syllabus that is currently being used in Queensland was published in 2002 and first used with Year 11 students in 2003. It is stated that the syllabus is “approved for general implementation until 2009, unless otherwise stated.” Drafts for the new syllabus have been created, but it is still under discussion and review. The current syllabus is a 55 page document (including the glossary, resources and appendix). The course has four general objectives, ‘Affective objectives’, ‘Knowledge and control of texts in their contexts’, ‘Knowledge and control of textual features’ and ‘Knowledge and application of the constructedness of texts’. Out of these four objectives the last three are linked to the three assessable exit criteria for the course.

The ties to academic critical literacy discourse in this syllabus document are clearly apparent, especially in the three exit criteria and objectives. For the purpose of the analysis in the project the most relevant parts of the syllabus that indicate the approaches to teaching that may link to critical literacy discourse were selected, being the rationale, global aims, general objectives, course organisation, learning experiences, assessment, glossary and resources (36 pages). The document was scanned for the use of the term ‘critical literacy’ and ‘critical’ and for any terms that link to academic critical literacy discourse. As with the other curriculum documents it was discovered that the term ‘critical literacy’ is excluded, yet the word ‘critical’ is included (albeit only 4 times). Also a clear indicator of the documents’ positioning on approaches influencing the document come from the glossary, in which there are many terms present that concur with academic critical literacy discourse. This is also evident throughout the document as these terms (and others common to critical literacy discourse) saturate the rationale, aims, objectives and exit criteria. There are also many suggested resources at the end of the document that focus on critical literacy, or are written by critical literacy proponents. For the purpose of this paper I will be covering sample analysis from the following sections of the project analysis;

A Exclusion of the term critical literacy and the limited uses of the word ‘critical’

B The glossary
C Inclusion of critical literacy key words/phrases

A closer look at the language

A Exclusion of the term critical literacy and the few uses of the word ‘critical’

The exclusion of the term ‘critical literacy’ does not appear to be as much of a political decision in this document as in the VELS document. As the document is saturated with critical literacy ideas and concepts, media pundits and politicians would have no difficulties creating the links. The critical literacy ties are not covertly hidden in ambiguous statements, they are clear and upfront. This perhaps also explains why the whole document only uses the word ‘critical’ four times, as it does not need to overemphasise the word due to the strong critical literacy discourse running throughout the document. If a teacher were to read the glossary, use the suggested resources and be well versed with the three exit criteria and objectives, the use of ‘critical’ (whether surrounded by critical literacy words and phrases or not) in the context of this document can clearly be linked to academic critical literacy discourse.

Of the four uses of critical two are used in non-specific ways that do not link it to any particular discourse and two can be tied to ideals and aims of academic critical literacy discourse. For this paper I will briefly discuss the two examples linking to academic critical literacy discourse, and that may also be interpreted as linking to Personal Growth discourse. Links can be seen in the uses of the word ‘critical’ in the Global Aims at the beginning of the document, where the term ‘critical’ is linked to students’ capacity to reflect on their own world and worlds they would usually not engage with, “creative and critical engagement with texts, to explore the students’ world and worlds beyond their own.” (Global Aims, p 4), and it is suggested students participate and contribute to communities and culture in a way that can be seen to have ties to critical literacy discourses about critical active citizenship, “ability to use language appropriately, effectively, purposefully, aesthetically and critically to participate in communities and cultures and contribution to their enrichment.” (Global Aims, p 4).

B The glossary

The glossary in this document is the most comprehensive out of all of the English glossaries. It includes terms that are not found in the VELS glossary. These terms being discourse, intertextuality, positioning, readings, representation as well as texts being defined in a postmodern way. The inclusion of the definitions of these terms set up the rest of the document to be aligned with critical literacy approaches. I will briefly discuss the ways each term is defined.

Discourse in this document is defined as

Discourse refers to the cultural and social practices through which individuals and groups use language to establish their identities and membership of groups, and to become aware that they are playing socially meaningful roles. Discourses provide ways of being, thinking and acting and of using language so that individuals and groups can identify themselves or be identified in social and cultural networks. (p 47)

It is seen as providing ways for these individuals and groups to associate themselves with “social and cultural networks” (p 47). Describing language and identifying discourse in this way (and indeed even by simply including the term throughout the document) directly links the view of language throughout
the definition appears to be consistent with the definition by James Gee in his text. By understanding ‘discourse’ and language in this way is an underlying tenet of academic critical literacy discourse.

Also central to academic critical literacy discourse is the use of the term ‘text’, in the sense that a text can be of multiple forms and need not just consist of the written word. This is reflected in the Queensland English glossary definition of text. It states that

> The selection and combination of signs and symbols from different systems of language form texts, which are the material result of purposeful human activity. Texts are coherent, meaningful forms of communication created and shaped through selections among discourses, genre, register and textual features. A text can be a novel, a film, a pop song, a speech, a poem, a cartoon, a news magazine, a webpage. (p 49)

By making a clear definition of text in the glossary teachers who refer to this section of the document may operationalise this meaning into their practice. If there is confusion regarding the meaning the resources suggested at the end of the document further imply to teachers a critical literacy view of text.

Once the notion of text is set up in this way, the use of the term ‘intertextuality’ coined by Kristeva in 1969 (trans 1984) (which was influenced by Bakhtin (trans. 1977)) further creates ties with the many important underpinning concepts influencing academic critical literacy discourse. As covered in the mapping section of this paper academic critical literacy discourse view texts as cultural and historical constructions influenced by the texts surrounding them, and the readings audiences construct of these texts are influenced by the multiple texts that have existed and continue to exist in their lives. This view is reflected in the glossary’s definition of intertextuality in that it argues “No text occurs in isolation, but must be understood in the context of the web of texts that precede and coexist with it.” (p 48). This also clearly ties in with the postmodern idea, greatly influencing academic critical literacy discourse, that the ability to create a true and pure meaning that does not have the taste of texts preceding or surrounding it is impossible.

Tying into this view is the definition of representation. The glossary clearly positions the term ‘representation’ in a way aligning with critical literacy notions of how texts construct views of the world and the people in it. It argues that “Texts do not mirror or reflect transparently the real world; they represent or construct the relationships and identities of individuals, groups, times and places, mediated by the attitudes, beliefs, values or world view of the writer, shaper, speaker (and of the reader, viewer, listener). (p49). This clearly links to critical literacy academic discourse as representations are seen to be influenced by the lenses individuals wear while constructing them, which can change over time and depending on the context. This term is often used in association with the terms positioning and readings, also covered in this glossary.

Two terms that were coined by academic critical literacy discourse to be used in the way this glossary defines them are ‘positioning’ and ‘readings’. The two are intimately connected and can not be discussed without reference to the other. This can be seen in the way the glossary defines the term positioning as referring “…to how texts influence readers to read in certain ways. Readers are positioned or invited to construct particular meanings in relation to the characters, the arguments, or the groups in the text. (See Readings).” (p 48). So readers are positioned by texts to produce the invited, or dominant, reading of the text, but this reading is always dependent on the ideologies of the reader and
their context. Academic critical literacy discourse also discuss other kinds of ‘readings’, other than dominant readings, that can be produced by readers. Students in critical literacy approaches are often asked to identify the dominant reading, alternative readings and resistant readings. The glossary not only defines ‘readings’ but goes to the extent of defining each category which they split into ‘Reading with the text’, ‘Reading across the text’ and ‘Reading against the text’ (p 48), which they label as ‘invited readings’, ‘alternative readings’ and ‘resistant or oppositional readings’ (p 48), which is in line with theoretical discussions of the concepts.

Glossaries are designed to give guidance and define key concepts that influenced the design, and should influence the implementation of curriculum documents. The fact that the Queensland English Senior Syllabus contains many key concepts from critical literacy discourse in its glossary demonstrates the intentional links to this discourse by the writers.

C Inclusion of critical literacy key words/phrases

Throughout the Queensland English Senior Syllabus the terms defined in the glossary and several others indicative of critical literacy approaches are apparent, particularly in the assessable general objectives and their associated exit criteria. All up across the whole documents terms that were classified as closely linked to academic critical literacy discourse appear 116 times. The analysis for this paper focuses on the assessable general objectives and the associated exit criteria, hence only the terms that appear in these statements will be discussed here. The terms appearing in these objectives are discourse, Social practices/culture/cultural context/assumptions/attitudes/values (terms all intertwined with each other), readings, positions, represent, constructed/shape and power/influence, inclusions/exclusions. I will very briefly discuss the use of these terms as they appear in the objectives/criteria.

The first general objective is called ‘Knowledge and control of text in their contexts’, with the associated criterion, Criterion 1 stating “This criterion requires students to interpret texts and construct their own texts, taking account of the way that meanings in texts are shaped by purpose, cultural context and social situation.” (p 29). This criterion, which is expanded on with dot points in the objective, asks that students are able to understand the ways purpose, cultural context and social situation influence the kind of language used and meanings produced from texts. They need to understand that texts are constructions and be able to use this understanding to ‘construct’ their own texts. As can be seen from earlier discussions about critical literacy there are strong ties between these skills and the discussions about the skills that epitomise critically literate students.

The second objective ‘Knowledge and control of textual features’ is not as strongly linked to critical literacy, which can be seen in its associated criterion, Criterion 2, “This criterion requires students to gain knowledge, understanding and control of how different language systems (written, spoken/signed, visual, nonverbal, auditory) work in texts and to select textual features appropriate to purpose, genre and register.” (p 29) This criterion appears to be focused on functional linguistics and genre theory, but can be tied to academic critical literacy discourse when the objective is tied to the criterion. The objective discussion makes it very clear (with 5 out of 8 dot points emphasising this language) that the students’ knowledge and control of textual features must demonstrate an understanding of the importance of ‘cultural contexts’ and ‘social situations’ (p 6), how these factors influence the creation of texts, and how they influence the meanings made, tying back into the first criterion’s focus on how ‘texts are shaped by purpose, cultural context and social situation.’ (p29).
The final objective ‘Knowledge and application of the constructedness of texts’ has the strongest ties to critical literacy academic discourse. Simply stating the term ‘constructedness’, which is a term specifically used in critical literacy academic discourse, links this objective and its related criterion to this discourse. This link is made more evident by the saturation of the criterion, and objective discussion, with concepts of great importance in academic critical literacy discourse, and outlined in the glossary of the document. Criterion 3 states, “This criterion requires students to recognise that discourses available in the culture affect the representations in, and readings of, texts. It requires students to identify how readers, listeners and viewers are positioned by the choices that writers, speakers and shapers make about what to include and exclude from the text. Students apply this knowledge in the production of their own texts by making choices about what to represent and how to represent it.” (p 29). The use of the concepts discourses, culture, representations, readings and what to include and exclude, when used in combination with the glossary definitions, creates clear ties between this criterion and academic critical literacy discourse, and it is this criterion that the Queensland Studies Association has suggested needs to be modified for the new curriculum currently being designed to tone down what it feels is too much of a focus on the ‘socio-cultural’ or ‘critical literacy’ approach in the syllabus, “Criterion 3 should be extensively revised to clarify and broaden its dimensions, so that its current narrow focus on the socio-cultural element is rectified” (QSA, 2007, p 3).

Whether this modification will come to fruition or not in the final document is yet to be seen, but there is clear acknowledgement that the critical literacy (or what QSA call ‘socio-cultural’) approach is strongly evident in the current Queensland English senior syllabus document. This much can not be said for the VELS document as seen in the earlier discussion. The two states appear to have had differing political contexts around the creation of the documents, with one creating covert ties to critical literacy, except in the interdisciplinary domain of Communication (which some could argue teachers may not value highly), and the other having clear links to critical literacy.

**Constructions of critical literacy in teacher textbooks**

I will now very briefly turn the focus to critical literacy in teacher textbooks. There have been a number of teacher textbooks based on conceptualisations of critical literacy published for secondary English classes in Australia from the late 1980’s. The biggest publisher of these texts was a Western Australian company called Chalkface Press. In the late 80’s and early to mid 90’s texts such as Reading Stories (Mellor, O’Neill & Patterson, 1987), Reading Hamlet (Mellor, 1989), Studying Literature (Moon, 1990) and Reading Fictions (Mellor, Patterson & O’Neill, 1991), all carried similar views of what a critical literacy approach to texts meant. There was then another spate of textbooks released in the late 90’s which included the texts Gendered Fictions (Martino, 1995), Investigating Texts (Mellor & Patterson, 1996), From the Margins (Martino, 1997) and Studying Poetry (Moon, 1998). AATE’s video and text resource, coordinated by Wendy Morgan, Critical Literacy: Readings and Resources (1996) and her teacher resource Ned Kelly reconstructed (1994) were also published around this time. Since the end of the 90’s there have been far fewer textbooks published exploring the area of critical literacy for the classroom, a few recent titles are Queensland Senior English: theory practice connections (Miller & Colwill, 2003), What’s Hot: a way into teaching critical literacies in the middle years (Ludwig & Holm, 2006) and Reeling them in: a critical literacy anthology (Smith, M., 2006). As the project has not commenced the teacher case studies yet, these texts can assist in giving an insight into the ways critical literacy is used in classrooms around the nation.
The texts by Mellor, Patterson and O’Neill (1987, 1991, 1996) contain constructions of critical literacy that have been heavily influenced by poststructuralist views on textuality. Their views were that reading is influenced by historical moments, ideological positionings, gender, class and a myriad of other factors that make up the subjectivity of the individual reader. Their construction of critical literacy also places the meaning of the text in the hands of the reader, rather than the view that there is an ‘elusive’ singular meaning to be found in the text. In the foreword of this text they argue that

…reading produces possible meanings of a text, and that they are always plural. What is more, it is claimed that there can never be only one final reading of a text, because there is no possibility of a neutral or objective judge to decide which reading or meaning is correct…Rather than considering that there are ‘correct’ readings of texts, we argue that there are dominant readings…Other readings which disagree with the dominant readings of texts are described as alternative or resistant readings. (1991, p 4)

This view is also reflected in the student activities.

Mellor’s work with Martino (Gendered Fictions, 1995) and Martino’s text From the Margins (1997) both have a strong focus on challenging disempowering readings and representations in texts. Gendered Fictions specifically focuses on stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity in texts and society, and invite the students to examine how these representations are regulated and how they can be challenged. Martino’s text From the Margins (1997) uses a postcolonial lens to encourage students to question their own and others’ subjectivities, readings, historical and cultural constructions of texts and the use of marginalisation to disempower certain groups of people. It links closely to critical social literacy variants influenced by theorists such as Freire.

As stated since the end of the 90’s there have been very few texts published with the specific aim to develop students’ critical literacy. In 2003 Miller and Colwill produced Queensland Senior English: theory-practice connections. This text includes chapters on representation, discourse and intertextuality and includes activities and text that can be used to “…explore invited, alternative and resistant readings of texts, including consideration of the cultural assumptions, values, attitudes and beliefs that operate in the construction and reception of texts.” (p v). The glossary includes terms such as carnivalisation, deconstruction, gaps, marginalised, readings, silences and a poststructural definition of text. It is exactly as the title suggests, a link for students between critical literacy and poststructuralist theory and practice.

Two texts published in Victoria in 2006 are Reeling them in: a critical literacy anthology (Smith, M) and What’s Hot: a way into teaching critical literacies in the middle years (Ludwig & Holm). The text Reeling them in seems to define critical literacy in a Freirean way by making arguments such as “Students’ immersion in these texts will facilitate active participation in the shaping of their expanding society. By reading the world, they will better understand themselves and others.” (p v) and with activities and texts that aim to expose students “…to many social justice issues that they encounter in their daily lives…empower students to solve real-life problems…” (p iv). Hence fitting into the category of ‘critical social literacy’. The text What’s Hot draws directly on Luke and Freebody’s four roles of the literacy learner for their definition of critical literacy. Their definition aligns closely to the older Chalkface publications. They argue

Practising critical literacies…calls for an awareness that learning about texts and the texts themselves are not natural or neutral. Students in the middle years must understand that texts are selective constructions
of representations of people, places, events, things and concepts and embody a version of society’s organisation, thus either reinforcing or challenging that version. (p 5)

**Concluding statement**

Critical literacy is an interesting entity that attracts attention from many spheres within education and outside of education. I chose Queensland and Victoria because they have some interesting differences in the way critical literacy is represented in curriculum documents, and was interested to see if this was reflected in the ways teachers constructed the entity. As can be seen there are many constructions of critical literacy across several discursive spaces. When it comes to the field of education, one can not investigate these spaces without considering the voices of the teachers who operationalise these constructions and create their own constructions, which is the next stage of the project.
References
Misson, R. (1997). *You can't change the world in every lesson (but at least you can try)*. *Interpretations*, 30(2).