

# CRITICAL LITERACY: WHAT'S WRITING GOT TO DO WITH IT?

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My address is entitled *Critical Literacy: What's Writing Got to Do With It?* If I were to give a succinct reply to this question, I could offer three words. On the one hand, I would say 'Everything' (one word) because I believe writing is central to the project of critical literacy and that a critical approach to student writing can make a difference - to student's capacity to understand and manipulate both the stories of their lives and the genres of schooling.

On the other hand, I would say 'Not enough' (two words) because in classrooms where teachers are enacting critical literacy as part of a repertoire of literacy practices, the focus has been more deliberately on reading than writing. So, too, in the research literature, where academics examine what critical literacy means in early childhood, middle years, high school and adult literacy contexts. Here it is reading practices and the discursive construction of the reader, rather than writing, which are centre stage.

I can illustrate by looking at an excerpt from a special issue on critical literacy from the journal *Interpretations*, put out by the English Teachers' Association of WA:

Sometimes explicitly and always implicitly the contributors argue that *writing and reading* are complex cultural processes which cannot be divorced either from the context/s in which they occur or the power of language to construct subjectivity. All the writers agree that institutional practices, the discursive networks in which texts are enmeshed, and the ability of society to legitimate certain meanings and speakers and thus marginalise or exclude others are crucial to *reading practices*, even at the most elementary level (my emphasis) (Hulton & Martino 1997).

Here the slippage from 'writing and reading' to 'reading practices' is fairly seamless and is symptomatic, I would argue, of a broader tendency for literacy to get read as reading or enacted as reading practices. In Barbara Comber's (1994) important text on critical literacy, she argues that in practice, critical literacy involves at least three principles for action:

- Repositioning students as researchers of language
- Respecting student resistance and exploring minority culture constructions of literacy and language use
- Problematising classroom and public texts.

I would add that in practice, these principles have been developed primarily in the context of reading – by engaging students as analysts of media or literature texts, by examining multiple and conflicting texts or the historical and cultural contexts of discourses in texts, by reading texts against one another, or by investigating how readers are positioned by ideologies in texts (Luke and Freebody 1997). And the work has been exciting.

I am thinking, in particular, of critical literacy approaches developed by Hilary Janks (1993) in her *Critical Language Awareness* series or by Wendy Morgan (1992) in her Ned Kelly materials or in Chalkface Press publications such as *Reading Fictions* by Bronwyn Mellor, Annette Patterson and Marnie O'Neill (1987). I am also thinking of critical reading practices developed in early childhood classrooms by Jennifer O'Brien, who worked in socially diverse low to middle socioeconomic communities in South Australia to position young children as text analysts and researchers – using texts

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ranging from *Hansel and Gretel* to Mothers' Day catalogues (O'Brien 1994); or by Vivian Vasquez (2001) in a multicultural Catholic school in Toronto, Canada, where she helped students develop an 'audit trail' -posting key artefacts and products of student work as a critical tool for examining the received curriculum (Comber 2002).

But I am still left asking what about writing? In their discussion of the critical dimension of literacy, Luke and Freebody emphasise that learners need to:

critically analyse and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral – that they represent particular points of view while silencing others and influence people's ideas – and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

I would argue that this learning applies equally to writing as to reading – perhaps even more so, given the emphasis here on design and redesign – on redoing and transforming texts. It may be, however, that writing has not been given the same attention as reading because it is more difficult to do – more difficult to gain distance on the texts students write – to see their writing as a representation, rather than the truth. It is certainly more difficult to examine the way student texts silence particular points of view, without simply being seen as humourless, or positioned as a teacher criticising the writer, their life, their point of view.

My question then is: How do we create sufficient distance between the writer and her text so that it is possible to do this kind of critical work? How do we relocate student writing in its social, cultural and political contexts? And what effects does this distancing and relocating have - on the writing, but also on the body and mind of the writer?

These are key questions I address in my recent book published by AATE Interface Series *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing*

*Pedagogy*. I will base my address on the ideas developed in this book about what it means to develop a critical writing pedagogy. I will outline some of the key conceptual principles, but primarily I will look at some of the strategies I have developed for working with writers to relocate the personal in its social and cultural contexts. My aim is to make visible what this work can look like on the ground – so that others can engage with the ideas and take them forward – and so that critical literacy really comes to encompass writing practices as well as reading practices.

### What do I mean by a critical writing pedagogy?

I can best clarify some of the principles of a critical writing pedagogy by deconstructing the title of my book, *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy*.

#### 1. A

I use the term A critical writing pedagogy rather than The – to signal that I am not offering the answer, or the latest and greatest orthodoxy, or a new set of recipes for teachers. I want to disrupt debates about THE best method (Luke 1998) and argue that there is not one generic critical literacy. It is, as Barbara Comber (2002) argues, an evolving concept, which is locally contingent, dynamic and subject to revisions in terms of its effects (Kamler and Comber 1996; Luke 2000). In the most productive critical literacy work, researchers specify how critical literacies are constituted in different teaching situations (Comber & Simpson 2001, Knobel 1998).

My book takes a similar position in developing four case studies of writers in high school, undergraduate and graduate university courses and in adult/ community contexts. I offer many examples of student writing, many glimpses of specific strategies I have tailored for local contexts. My aim is to work against the notion that there is one right way to be critical and invite readers to use the book as a starting point for their own explorations.

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### 2. Critical

The term *critical* signals my concern with addressing questions of language, power and representation – the way language operates as a social practice, inescapably linked to networks of power and authority. My argument is that student writing is never simply neutral or innocent. The meanings students produce are as ideological as those in the texts they read and are also involved in producing, reproducing and maintaining relations of power which are unequal. It follows that in order to develop critical writers, teachers need to help students detect and handle the ideological dimensions of writing and call attention to the relations between language and power. This involves helping them ‘move between the micro features of the text and the macro conditions of institutions, focussing on how relations of power work through these practices’ (Comber 2002).

In my experience, however, this is where many teachers get uncomfortable because critical literacy calls attention to the fact that language/writing is political. To see language as political does not mean selling a political point of view. It means that language is ideological and has effects on readers and writers whether we acknowledge it or not (see for example, Comber & Kamler 1997).

### 3. Relocating

The term *relocating* signals my concern with developing a writing pedagogy which aims to create sufficient distance between the writer and her text, so that it is possible to do critical text-work. I use spatial metaphors in the book – *location* – *relocation* – because my aim is to relocate practices we have already developed in the teaching of writing, as well as develop new ones. I am not promoting a new orthodoxy, but I am interested in how we might do things differently and more critically.

This does not mean that I wish to discard the useful understandings of writing already developed by genre theorists or by advocates of process writing. But I want to be selective, I want to inflect these pedagogies differently by bringing to bear feminist and poststructuralist theorising

on the subject and discourse to accomplish relocation of the personal.

A major strength of this critical writing pedagogy is its use of multiple frameworks (process, genre, systemic linguistic, critical discourse analytic, poststructuralist feminist) for working with the personal. In particular, I develop at least four kinds of literacy practices for working with student writers in particular institutional contexts:

1. writing process practices for crafting and revising text
2. genre-based practices for developing text structure
3. systemic linguistic practices for thematising, modalising, nominalising and building authority in text
4. poststructuralist practices for examining questions of subjectivity, power and the ways in which texts are produced.

As a writing teacher, it is the way these practices intersect that is of interest to me. I don't promote one at the expense of the other, but use them in combination – foregrounding some, backgrounding others – and incorporating these within a larger set of political purposes that treat writing as social action.

I am thinking of parallels here with the inclusive approach taken by Freebody and Luke (1990, 1997) in their four resources model of reading. In their initial conceptualisation, four roles of the reader were delineated to encompass the complex and multiple strategies required of the competent reader:

- code breaker (how do I crack this?) text participant (what does this mean?)
- text-user (what do I do with this, here and now?)
- text-analyst (What does this do to me?)

In more recent iterations of the model, the roles have been renamed as resources -coding, pragmatic, semantic and critical (Luke & Freebody 1997) – to stress a social rather than psychological

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approach to literacy as assembling repertoires of practices. 'A social view of reading requires that teachers give attention to the sociopolitical nature of their work and the non-neutrality of textual practices' (Comber 2002).

In a recent analysis of this model, Barbara Comber (2002) argues that one of the reasons the four resources model has been so attractive to teachers and policy makers in Australia is because it is inclusive – because it acknowledges the importance of dimensions of literacy with which educators are already familiar (such as code breaking and understanding the text) and because it does not discount the importance of any aspect of literate practice. That is, it adds to what educators do already. It does not contest that code breaking or meaning making are essential, but it does stress that those dimensions of literacy are insufficient on their own and that critical literacy is also an essential part of a coherent model of literacy practice – not an additional extra.

Like Freebody and Luke, I see my critical approach to writing as inclusive of older traditions and practices – genre, process, whole language – and like them I am keen to bypass unproductive debates about one kind of writing approach being better than another (Kamler 1994) or one method of teaching being best (Comber 2002, Luke 1998). Later, I will illustrate how a critical lens has helped me relocate the writing conference developed in a process writing paradigm and relocate the teaching of argument developed in a genre paradigm.

### (4) The personal

My focus is on *the personal* – on allowing writers to make personal experience the focus of their writing, in more critical ways than often occurs in process writing pedagogies. But my focus is also on redefining the kinds of writing that can be considered personal. I argue, for example, that writing argument is no less personal than writing recounts of personal experience because questions of identity are as much at stake – and that the factual/personal binary developed in genre pedagogy may not be useful in this regard.

But I argue for a notion of the personal that is not equated with voice. Metaphors of voice where 'students are advised to find their own voices in writing, teachers are advised to listen to such voices and a clear personal voice in writing is often regarded as the mark of an effective writer' (Gilbert 1990:61) are problematic in a critical pedagogy (Lensmire 1998) which aims to create distance between the writer and the text she produces. Metaphors of voice are located in the body and are difficult to disconnect from the body of the person writing.

In order to disrupt the link between person and voice and voice and authentic experience, I opt for the metaphor of narrative and story instead. Story allows for a more textual orientation to writing than voice, a closer attention to text (what is written), a different treatment of the person (who writes) and the personal (the text they write). Metaphors of textuality are more productive for a critical writing pedagogy because they:

- allow a clearer separation between the writer's life and the experience she is writing about;
- make the labour of the writer more visible, less naturalised and therefore more accessible to interaction with the teacher;
- treat stories as a learned cultural practice, so that the process of production and the stories produced can be unpicked, examined and analysed rather than just celebrated or surveilled for the right/ wrong voice. (Kamler 2001:46).

So how might we become more self-conscious about how questions of power, representation and identity play out in the teaching of writing – and what' does it look like to relocate current writing practices so they are more critical? I will illustrate by looking first at critical writing conference questions I've developed and then at the teaching of argument using spatial strategies and linguistic play. My emphasis throughout is on how this text work is always identity work and how our teaching creates a design not only for effective text production, but for the production of subjectivity as well (Kress 1996; The New London Group 1996).

### Writing conferences relocated

I want to look at the writing conference, a strategy initially located within a process writing paradigm (eg. Graves 1983, Murray 1985, Atwell 1987), and consider how it can be relocated within a more critical framework that foregrounds issues of representation, power and positioning. Within such a framework, the aim is *not* to reveal the truth of the writer's personal experiences or express who the writer really is, her authentic voice. It is to understand that in writing subjectivity may be defined, contested and remade (Kamler 1995).

Elsewhere, I discuss this strategy in detail in the context of my work with older women writers aged 70-85 with whom I worked in community settings (Kamler 2001; Kamler 1999). Here I want to draw a suggestive outline only of the group conference questions I have used to relocate the personal. The aim of asking critical questions is to create distance – helping the writer see that her text is a representation of experience — *not* the same as experience itself. Some of the questions we've developed include the following:

- What was powerful in the writing? Identify an image, line, metaphor, or representation of person that was powerful.
- What was omitted? Who/what was absent and/or hinted at or over generalised?
- What cliches have been used to gloss over experience, facts, feelings?
- What doesn't fit? What contradictions, if any, emerge?
- What aspects of the experience or issues are constructed/concealed?
- What common issues/storylines do the texts have in common?

It is important to emphasise what these questions do not do. They don't ask writers which part they liked best or which person they identified with or how they felt about the writing, as often occurs in process writing conferences. Instead the focus is placed on the textual practice not the person, on the writing as

a representation. This is a conscious relocating of Donald Murray's (1985, 1992) notion of conferencing using poststructuralist feminist theorising:

It's not a question of throwing out the innovations of teachers like Elbow and Murray or of shutting down the voices and personal experiences of students; rather, it's a question of relocating those practices and interests in a different theoretical context – getting a larger sense of what produces them and of what the writing based in them should do (Jarratt 1991:113).

Murray (1982) conceived the writing conference as a conversation between teacher and student, where the purpose was not to correct the text or fix it up to the teachers' satisfaction — but to see how it works and consider how it might work differently. Typical questions include:

'What did you learn from this piece of writing?'

'What do you intend to do in the next draft?'

'What surprised you in the draft?'

'Where is the piece of writing taking you?'

'What do you like best in the piece of writing?' (Murray 1982:159).

Such conversations have been characterised by Lensmire (1994:38) as interviews, where the teacher asks questions about the writing to understand how students are attempting to solve writing problems and to support them in their efforts. A major value of such conversations is that they create agency for student writers. A major weakness is that they create a reluctance by teachers to interfere with the writer's personal voice.

What the critical writing pedagogy I am arguing for would do, is to relocate that conferencing practice by relocating the teacher's notion of text and the relationship between text and experience, something Murray never theorised from the humanist paradigm in which he operated. If, as the teacher, I treat the student text as truth, as the *reul* expression of the individual writer (whose identity is received, unitary and stable),

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then I am loath to touch the text. I can create no space to intervene and no rationale for why I should meddle with 'you.' After all I am not your therapist, nor am I qualified to be so.

But if I understand that the text is not 'you that it is from you but is not the same as 'you' — that it represents a particular way of telling your experience — a representation a construct — then a different curiosity can be aroused in the conference. I can ask what aspects of experience have you selected? Why have you selected these? And what have you left out? Not to psychologise you, but to examine your multiple locations in a number of discursive practices. I can become interested in the text you have created and can begin to scaffold different questions about it.

The question, for example, which focuses on image or metaphor keeps the focus on the choices made in language and the fact that these are selections. It makes the first reading self-conscious with regard to structure, but also creates a space to affirm what writers have achieved.

The questions on absence have been particularly powerful in helping writers understand that what is omitted may be as important as what is included. If writing involves selection, we can ask what was *not* represented and thereby investigate how writing silences some aspects of experience (consciously or unconsciously) and privileges others. Absences are about what cannot be said or what it is difficult to say, not because of a reluctance to reveal personal secrets, but because dominant narratives and/or one's discursive positioning make it difficult to imagine other positions from which to speak or write.

I can illustrate how absence operates by looking at a piece of writing by a teacher who I recently worked with in New York, where our purpose was to write a text that relocates a significant experience in the writer's life. The teachers were attempting this writing themselves in a summer school workshop in order to better understand how to teach their own students from a critical perspective. Janine (pseudonym) wrote about a pivotal experience from her teens – a story she had crafted and retold many times before – and

one which she deliberately chose to work on at the summer school in order to come to terms conceptually with what it meant to 'relocate the personal.' She struggled with the idea but the focus on absence, in particular, seemed to help her begin to relocate her experience discursively.

I was seventeen and only days away from graduating high school. I lived with my father in an apartment three blocks away from where my brother lived with my mother.

My parents were somewhere in Utah, trying, after a year of separation, to make a go of their marriage. Before they left, I agreed, with some adolescence resistance, to check on Gary every couple of days. At fifteen, he was still my baby brother.

It is Friday evening now. Four days have passed since my parents left and no word from Gary. I walk up the east side of York Avenue, toward seventy-sixth street, and wave to the dry cleaner. We exchange smiles but no words, though we gesture to each other, confirming our mutual disgust with the early summer's humidity index. Whenever I walk to my mother's building, I play the same game: I try to find the apartment from the street before reaching the entrance. My eyes begin travelling up fourteen floors, skimming the white brick and flower-filled terraces. But no luck tonight, I arrive at the entrance before I can spot the apartment.

I step off the elevator. Music travels toward me from the end of the hall. The walls vibrate. I ring the bell several times and wait. I knock loudly on the door. When Gary doesn't answer, I let myself in. Disarray: the lights are dim, the blinds are drawn, doors ajar; papers are strewn about, on the floor and furniture, and my mother's two cats are crying in unison, searching frantically for the litter box. My brother is whirling around the living room. I stand in the foyer and watch him in flight, but he doesn't notice me. My eyes scan the dark room, taking inventory, searching for clues to explain this madness. On the dining room table, next to a vase of nearly dead tulips, I notice a plastic baggie filled with pot. Close by, a small wooden pipe and some crumpled rolling papers form a still life. Relief washes over me: he's just stoned, I think. Maybe he's

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been drinking, too, though there are no bottles in sight.

Gary's eyes meet mine. His voice surges at me, words racing, like a record playing at the wrong speed. His body still spins around the room. I can't make sense of what he's saying. At the same time, the cats dart toward me and begin stroking each of my legs; their stiffly arched backs and wiry tails point straight toward the ceiling. They are hungry. No, they're pleading for help. Gary lunges toward the stereo and cranks up the volume.

I can't hear myself think.

Cautiously, I move toward my brother and gently tap him on the shoulder. 'Hey Gary,' she says. 'Where's the litter box? The cats are going crazy.'

'Oh, I gave it to the doorman,' he responds, laughing wildly at this question, pausing only for a second, then continues to whirl.

That summer marked the beginning of my brother's odyssey. Just two days after I found Gary whirling around the apartment, he was admitted to Payne Whitney Psychiatric Unit of New York Hospital, for six weeks. At fifteen years old, my brother was kidnapped to a place from which he never has returned, never to be seen again, like a game of hide and seek.

But the sister continues to search. And suddenly a disruption: she notices how absent she is from the story, from this text, the one that she has tried to craft so deliberately. Though she has told it over and over and over and has anchored it safely in her history, she has no presence here ... Perhaps, she thinks tentatively, that what she has been searching for all this time is in fact, not her brother, but her own self that went missing when their lives collided over twenty years ago.

This is a highly crafted narrative – rich in detail, movement and dialogue and evocative of an intensely painful experience. It is the last paragraph, however, that I want to focus on because it is here, I think, that we see traces of a discursive shift – of a relocation. It is here that Janine names the absence from this text and previous tellings– and the absence is 'her

own self that went missing,' a self that 'has no presence here.' Through the writing, however, Janine creates another speaking position (signalled earlier by the abrupt shift to third person) from which to re-see the experience. This is not simply shifting point of view and it was not easy for her to achieve. Like Janine, many teachers in the workshop struggled to understand what it meant to relocate the personal in their own writing. They asked, 'How will I know when I've done it? What will it look like?'

Janine's comment after reading was that she felt she had just begun to get it, and that this discursive shift in text had effects on her subjectivity. It had effects on her subjectivity as a sister/daughter – her understanding of her place in the family drama – and on her subjectivity as a teacher of writing and how she might work differently with her own students in future.

### Teaching argument relocated

I now want to talk about teaching argument as creating a design for both the writer's text and subjectivity. When I use the term subjectivity I refer to the most abstract aspect of writer identity, to the subject position that writers take up in text. Subject positions are not characteristics of specific individuals, they are possibilities for selfhood that exist in the sociocultural context of writing, both the broader context of society and the more immediate context of a particular act of writing (Clark & Ivancic 1997:136).

Writers create a representation of self through the discourses they enter – this representation in turn has tangible effects both on the text produced and on the writer's identity. This means that the actual act of writing has material effects on those who write – on the person and the stance they take in the world, their identity. Conversely, their stance in the world affects the texts they can and cannot shape.

I can illustrate this principle by considering two argument texts written by high school students. The first, written by a year 9 writer who I will call Greg is all assertion with minimal development of argument.

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We have been forced to wear school uniforms for two and a bit years and it is crap.

The second, written by a year 11 student who I will call Sasha, lacks any capacity to assert authority or take a stand, although on the surface it is a more developed and conventional text than Greg's.

### ***Should historian David Irving be allowed in Australia?***

*The historian David Irving argues 'that the Jewish Holocaust is exaggerated, he is not saying it didn't happen he is just saying that people have added that all the people who died in the gas chambers, where not all Jews, in fact, he states only very few of them were Jews. His statements and allegations cause some people frustration and confusion. As well, the Foreign Affairs Department has refused the right for David Irving to come into Australia. The reasons given are that it may offend some people who are still mourning their losses, and also it might begin protest. The decision to refuse entry to David Irving is based on keeping the peace.*

*A member of the Australian civil liberties union, John Bennett implies that it is wrong not to let David Irving into Australia, because Australia is a free country and freedom of speech is a right. Mr Bennett, has chaired two meetings for Mr Irving in 1986 and 1987, and says that his lectures were well attended, and there was no protesting against his beliefs, nor was there any racial tension or provocative violence.*

*On the other-hand Gareth Evans, the Foreign Affairs Minister disagrees with John Bennett, believing that it is an unsuitable time for Mr Irving to come, because of the elections, and also seeing that people are very moody around this time. Further-more Gareth Evans states that David Irving's views are 'morally repugnant' and are not based on facts, and since his last visit he has become more 'offensive.' The Foreign Affairs Minister believes that this will only cause problems in Australia which is not really*

*needed, and may cause a 'breach of the peace.'*

*It is interesting to note that the print-media has published articles on both sides of this question. It seems to be a matter of, freedom of speech verses potential violence unrest and breaches of peace. The government of the time is obliged to protect all inhabitants of Australia hence its decision to refuse entry to David Irving.*

The most notable feature of Sasha's text is that she doesn't, in fact, construct an argument about David Irving, but instead summarises the ideas of a variety of male experts and puts them together paragraph by paragraph: 1) David Irving, 2) John Bennett, 3) Gareth Evans. Paragraph four highlights the media viewpoint with some oblique reference to her own position. But for the most part, she excludes her point of view entirely from the text.

While Greg has no trouble asserting his opinion, he can provide no detail, no substantiation or structure for argumentation

- all 'hands on hips' with no textual resources.

The importance of identity in writing is always more visible when working with students like Sasha and Greg who find academic writing difficult. Sasha, in particular, taught me that all the explicit genre work in the world was not going to help her write argument, unless I could also help her learn how to take up an authoritative stance in the world and occupy new subject positions in the discourses in which she was located (see Kamler 2001 for a detailed discussion of her history as a 'failed writer' in English and her incapacity to argue). My argument is that when writers attempt to inhabit subject positions they do not feel comfortable with, this can become a focus of discussion and analysis as much as the content of their argument.

My approach with Sasha was threefold:

- To develop a poststructuralist metalanguage to reposition the writer
- To develop a spatialised metalanguage for structuring argument



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- To develop a linguistic metalanguage for building authority in text.

My focus on 1 and 2 above, in particular, working consciously with questions of identity, can be understood as a deliberate relocation of a genre approach to teaching argument. While I call on important understandings developed within this paradigm – concerning text structure and linguistic features, I am working much more deliberately with notions of argument as a design for text and subjectivity and with finding ways to make argument more tangible and embodied.

I will briefly discuss my strategy for developing a spatialised metalanguage for structuring argument. I took seriously Sasha's need to understand how to structure argument in text. I assumed it would not be sufficient to simply tell her how to do this, as years of previous advice had failed. In a genre based approach, students are typically introduced to a structure for writing argument, such as the following from Derewianka's (1990:76) popular genre-based approach for primary teachers:

The beginning of an Argument usually consists of a **statement of position [thesis statement]**

often accompanied by some background information about the issue in question.

There may also be some broad foreshadowing [*preview*] of the line of argument to follow.

To justify the position taken, the writer must now present the **argument**.

Usually there is more than one point put forward in the argument, and each one should be supported by evidence (eg, statistics, quotes), and possibly by examples. The points are carefully selected and developed and add weight to the argument. All points should relate directly back to the statement of position, and there are often internal links between the various points too. At some stage the writer may suggest some resolution of the issue.

Finally, there is an attempt at **summing up the position**

in the light of the argument presented, reaffirming the general issues under discussion and possibly calling for action (Derewianka 1990:76).

The strength of this kind of description is that it provides specificity and foregrounds the kind of meaning being made in each segment of the tri-partite structure. What it also does, however, is present a static structure. While Derewianka herself would argue against a prescriptive pedagogy, her representation allows teachers to construct genre as a checklist of features that occur in predictable sequences.

I attempted to relocate this description by developing a more spatialised and tangible metalanguage for argument, for treating language as clay and sitting beside the writer, sculpting, taking away, adding, messing up and rewriting. My aim in developing the notion of clay work was to rewrite genre as a more malleable text structure and to develop a spatialised metalanguage that could guide progressive drafts as the argument finds its form.

To provide structure to this claywork I have used another metaphor of a tree to spatialise argumentative writing — a metaphor taught to me by a wise secondary English colleague, Katrina Ratner, sharing some of her ways of working. She taught me to make the metaphor as visual as possible by actually drawing the tree. First the TRUNK, the base that holds up the tree, which is compared to the contention, or thesis, the overall argument the writer is making.

From the trunk I draw a number of BRANCHES. These grow out of the trunk, they are organic to it, a branching out from the central contention. These are the writer's main arguments, the major three or four points that make up the contention. Branches are stated in general terms and can be thought of as reasons for why the contention is held. I point out that when teachers make ticks in the margin of a student essay, often they are looking for branches; the tick signifies they have found one.

I then draw a number of LEAVES on each of the branches. These are the specifics that go

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with each branch. The leaves are the details, illustrations, quotes, statistics that support the branches. I stress the organic nature of the relationship between branches and leaves, leaves and trunk, and suggest that commonly students write masses of leaves without branches. The details are given (the leaves) but they are free floating, without any branch to be attached to. While the reader may be flooded with detail, they never know what the argument is because it remains implicit and unstated.

Having established an organic model that is easy to visualise, I then transform the tree into a paragraph schema. It is important to stress that I oversimplify greatly in order to establish a sense of pattern, a sense of ordering that some students seem unable to grasp without explicit teaching. Later, as they gain strength, it is possible to fine tune and move away from such formulaic representations.

The first paragraph is the trunk. Here the writer states her position unambiguously. As the trunk will of necessity be longer than one sentence, I demonstrate how this might be developed. I choose a topic the student is familiar with and model the kind of background information and contextualising needed to set up the trunk.

I then show how branches and leaves are distributed in subsequent paragraphs. I emphasise that the first sentence of each paragraph, what teachers call a topic sentence, is what I am calling the branch, and that attached to the branch are the relevant and appropriate leaves. The next paragraph states a new branch, a new argument, and attached to it are the relevant leaves, and so on until the conclusion or summing up.

Clearly oversimplified, yes, but there is impact in embodying the paragraph, in showing how the branch operates at the start of each paragraph as a signpost to the reader. I highlight the writer's agency as a guide who must direct the reader through the branches, while connecting those branches both to the trunk (the overall position) and to the leaves that support and elaborate it. I highlight as well the writer's rhetorical location

as someone who needs to anticipate and imagine what those with a different perspective might argue and build a rebuttal into their branches.

The strength of spatialising the structure in this manner is that students seem able to remember it and teachers can use it to guide successive student drafts. It also provides a more tangible design for shaping text and identity, for working with writers who are trying to inhabit authoritative subject positions in text they may not feel comfortable with – especially in the argument genre, where relations of power are more explicit and there are conventions about how strongly and in what ways students can assert their power.

To illustrate how I used the tree metaphor with Sasha, we can look at her 'failed' essay written early in Year 11 on the Australian flag.

### *The Australian Flag*

*Last year the flag was being discussed by parliament, but this year it has been included in the issues for the election which makes the communities get involved.*

*It is interesting to note that 63% of 18 and 19 year olds say that they want to keep the flag as it is, and 72% of 50 year olds say to change the flag.*

*Considering that the flag has been with us for many years it represents our past and our connection with England, but we must also consider the fact that if Australia becomes a Republic, we need a flag to represent Australia not England. The only part on the flag that represents England is the Union Jack. The Union Jack represents the state of the Queen, but the Queen is not really ruler of Australia, so even more people resent the flag because it's not about Australia but about England.*

*As for myself, I am apathetic to this issue. I feel that there are more important issues to consider, but if I had to decide whether or not Australia should change its flag, I would have decided that they do need a new flag.*

Using the tree structure, we can regard Sasha's first paragraph as a trunk and ask what is Sasha's position on the issue? It is clear there is none.

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We can look at her second paragraph and ask: What is the branch? What is the argument being made? It is clear there are only leaves, but no branch. This analysis helped Sasha make sense of her teacher's comment in the margin 'What conclusions do you draw from these percentages?' For the first time she could see he wasn't just being difficult, but was asking for the branch; as a reader he needed to know what point this leaf (63% of 18 and 19 year olds, 72% of 50 year olds) was trying to support.

To the extent that Sasha asserts any opinion, this occurs in the final paragraph where her begrudgingly honest assertion of apathy is tacked onto the end (*as for myself, I am apathetic to this issue*). While structurally this was an advance on her earlier David Irving text, where she states no opinion and only compiles the opinions of others, my challenge was to teach her how to structure opinion into the trunk and at the start of each paragraph, in the branch position. We also needed to consider the politics of representation, in particular the consequences of admitting you don't care about an issue such as the flag and of the possibility of sometimes creating a fiction (Walkerdine 1990) in order to take a more culturally appropriate (and assessable) stance in text.

When I later worked with Sasha on grammatical understandings of modality, I took a playful stance to help increase the linguistic resources available to her for asserting opinion. We played, for example, with the possibilities of using modality to soften (may, might, could) or strengthen (must, should) or exaggerate (absolutely, must, always) her developing assertions of opinion. The work was always done in the context of her writing (rather than as grammar exercises), taking texts apart, treating them like clay, and aimed at helping her understand her own positioning as a high school writer wanting to be favourably assessed by her teacher and external examiners. In this way I strategically located the conventions of genre in a set of institutional power relations and created a critical space to ask questions about other language choices and their effects.

### Conclusion

I have argued that we need to reframe critical literacy so that it includes writing -and relocate writing pedagogy so that it includes the critical component. I have discussed some of the conceptual framing and relocating strategies I have been exploring with students in a variety of contexts. I take seriously the material effects of this writing – the way it creates a design for both effective text production and the production of student subjectivity. I believe this relocation work is important because it opens new subject positions for students/ writers, and makes available new ways of taking action in the social and cultural contexts students inhabit.

I would like to end by returning to Luke and Freebody's (1999) discussion of the critical dimension of literacy, in particular their argument that learners need to:

critically analyse and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral – that they represent particular points of view while silencing others and influence people's ideas – and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

My question is, what if teachers really took these ideas seriously in the context of teaching writing? How might teachers begin to think about relocating the experiences their students write about in broader social cultural and political contexts? I invite you to join me in this work – and in my book and by experimenting in your own local contexts, which is after all the site where critical literacy practice is made and remade.

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