

# Why Critical Discourse Analysis in Literacy Research

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While students in America's schools are acquiring literacy at unprecedented rates and levels, we know that a divide grows between the literacy skills of marginalized students and the increasing literacy demands of a print- and technology-rich society (Alvermann, 2001). Those who are unable to acquire literacies of power are significantly hindered in their ability to enjoy engaged citizenship or professional membership. We also know from social theory (Morrow & Torres, 1995) and educational sociology (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985) that the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" is largely determined by race and class and that schools often reproduce the very inequality they might intend to eradicate (Kozol, 1992; MacLeod, 1987).

Philosophers such as Bakhtin (1986) and Foucault (1972) have argued that meanings are constructed through social languages or discourse. These socially constructed meanings are not neutral and often privilege some while marginalizing or excluding others. Drawing upon the work of Foucault and Bakhtin in the context of the recent literacy crisis in schools, it becomes important for literacy researchers and educators to understand how classroom discourses shape meaning in ways that promote the social reproduction of inequality. Additionally, we need to understand how classroom discourses are situated within larger metainstitutional discourses that shape, limit, or preserve problematic representations of reality. However, it is not merely enough to understand the role of discourse in social reproduction. Literacy researchers are also called to intervene in, challenge, and deconstruct oppressive discursive structures to facilitate more empowering engagements with institutionalized discourses or the creation of alternative ones. We associate this language study and language praxis with the term critical discourse analysis (CDA).

This article considers new directions for CDA in literacy research as well as additional purposes for the methodological and analytic tool in literacy pedagogy, literacy policy, and literacy praxis. We begin by theorizing CDA. We then discuss new possibilities for CDA in literacy research. We consider two examples that range from the analysis of the development of critical language awareness among urban youth to the investigation of standards documents and the archive of texts that construct a discipline such as English education.

The next section examines CDA as a pedagogical tool, looking at its uses in a teacher education program interested in preparing teachers for diverse urban contexts. Section three looks at CDA as a policy tool. We draw upon the example of the construction of guidelines for the preparation of English teachers. The final section considers CDA as a tool for praxis. We examine a summer research program where urban teens employed the tools of CDA to advocate for social justice. We conclude the paper with comments for literacy researchers interested in considering CDA as a tool to promote student and teacher efficacy and to engage in scholarship in the pursuit of equity and educational justice.

## CDA: AN INTRODUCTION

CDA is one variant of a number of practices that fall under the rubric of “discourse analysis.” These variations overlap in terms of method and methodology and are used across disciplinary boundaries. Given their appearance in a number of contexts, along with the multiplicity of ways in which the term *discourse* can be used, we begin by briefly reviewing what we mean by *critical* “discourse” analysis. We begin with the latter term. Meanings for discourse are diverse and contested. In her exploration of discourse as a concept in academic research, Mills (1997) reviewed the ways in which it has been defined across competing theories. She points out its broadest definition as simply “verbal communication” (p. 2). Additionally, discourse has been defined as conversational talk, formal speech or writing on a particular subject, or a linguistic unit greater than one sentence, reflecting the origins of the word as a linguistic concept. Ultimately, our conception of the term is most closely aligned with Fairclough (1992a) who commented:

Discourse constitutes the social. Three dimensions of the social are distinguished--knowledge, social relations, and social identity--and these correspond respectively to three major functions of language...Discourse is shaped by relations of power and invested with ideologies. (p. 8)

The other term involved with CDA, *critical*, is contingent on the view of discourse above as it relates to ideology. CDA construes discourses as ideological because they are used to represent the systems of thought, manifested in language that groups and individuals use to identify themselves, filter information, and interpret meaning. As ideological systems, discourses tend to reproduce themselves along with the conditions necessary to sustain them. Further, CDA does not treat ideology as either “good” or “bad;” rather, it recognizes that ideology is not intended to be opposed to some concept of “the truth” that would otherwise render the term biased. At the same time, CDA asserts that an ideology *is* positive or negative depending on whether it helps to achieve some desirable end in a desirable way. This is a matter of perspective that highlights a mostly “inescapable Us/Them dichotomy” in CDA and an underlying belief that, from a critical perspective, some ideologies are “better” than others when the social project involves an attempt to achieve equity (van Dijk, 2004). The key is to maintain a stance wherein the researcher recognizes that ideologies and discourses interact in unpredictable ways and that even “positive” ideologies may have negative or unanticipated effects.

In CDA, the term *critical* also distinguishes this method from others because of its interest in change and intervention. Although it is true that all forms of discourse analysis pay attention to the social implications of the texts they study (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999), not all forms of analysis are focused on affecting practice. As such, it is significant that CDA places the term *critical* at the forefront. Whereas other types of discourse analysis are primarily designed to *describe* discourse, CDA seeks to understand and change discourse processes in order achieve equitable social relations.

*CDA as Method*

As Fairclough described it (1992b, 1995, 2003; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), CDA attempts to bridge the divide between direct and indirect forms of discourse analysis. By direct forms of analysis, we mean those forms that deal directly with close linguistic analysis, while by indirect we mean those forms that deal with the contextual aspects of discourse. The method of CDA involves a triad structure to guide research. It assumes that discourse is both constrained and enabled by social structures and by culture and proceeds by examining relationships between (a) texts as speech acts (texts as ideological recordings of communication events), (b) discursive practices around a text (processes of producing, writing, speaking, reading, and interacting), and (c) the sociocultural context in which these practices occur and within which resulting texts circulate and regulate (contexts as coming with their sets of rights and obligations that affect what is likely to be said or not said (Fairclough, 1995).

CDA views texts as speech acts; that is, they affect how language gets used and how meaning gets made. Texts are further viewed as both products of discourse communities and as producers of discourse communities, operating dialectically to aid in the identification and representation of the group. Texts get used to talk desired realities into being, and in doing so, they develop and set forth the terms and norms for who gets to talk, what they may say, how they may say it, what they should value, how they may think, and how they may behave. Given the powerful effects that a text can have in shaping subjectivities, it becomes important to understand how texts reify ideological discursive positions and tools (Fairclough, 1989).

The work of CDA proceeds from the identification of a text as part of a social event or a chain of events that occur in a network of social practices. The text is then articulated with other texts that may come before or after it in a discursive chain in order to help establish the context of the analysis. After identifying the genre or mix of genres that constitute the text, the analyst might next characterize the text's orientation to difference and also attempt to determine the level of intertextuality in the text--that is, whether and how other relevant texts and references are included or excluded by the text being studied.

Having described the context, genres, orientations to difference, and levels of intertextuality, the analyst might identify the assumptions at play in a text that have implications for the representation of reality, truth, and value--a focus on the ideological orientations of a text. In addition to these moves, a critical discourse analyst might describe the semantic, grammatical, and lexical relations of a text--that is, how the actual construction of words, clauses, and sentences is accomplished. These activities may be accompanied by efforts to determine the grammatical mood, the kinds of statements a text makes, and the purposes of those statements in the context of the social event. Next, the analyst might identify the discourses a text draws on and discuss the features that characterize those discourses and represent social events in particular ways. Finally, a critical discourse analyst might identify and evaluate the styles involved with the construction of a text, truth claims and their modalities, and values that a text conveys.

We repeat that the process described above is not intended to totalize the practices of CDA, and the sequential organization of our overview is artificial; this is not intended as a rigid

procedure. Depending on the level of analysis and point of entry into a text, a critical discourse analysis may or may not involve detailed linguistic analysis. Many discourse analysts focus on the use of social theory to construct explanatory critiques of texts (Bhaskar, 1986, cited in Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) rather than linguistic descriptions of them. Both types of analysis are useful (and any given analysis is likely to include a mixture of the two), but in these latter cases, the focus of analysis will be on the identification of ideological positions, discourses and styles, and the value systems and power relations set up within a text and the social event it accompanies.

## NEW DIRECTIONS FOR CDA IN LITERACY RESEARCH

### *The Discourse of Standardization*

Much CDA in literacy research has focused on the level of classroom interactions. The first example of new directions in CDA research is drawn from the recent work of Burns (unpublished) on the analysis of *Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of the English Language Arts*, created by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 1996). At a macrolevel of analysis, Burns's CDA of the NCTE *Guidelines* began with a historical analysis of the English teaching profession. This level of analysis proceeded via the examination of archival documents and institutional histories; for example, Burns began with a review of NCTE histories written by Hook (1979) and Applebee (1974) along with a comprehensive review of texts associated with language arts curriculum from the late 1800's to the present. The development of such an archive enabled Burns to establish an argument regarding the episteme of English education, that is, "the sets of discursive structures as a whole within which [the profession] thinks" (Foucault, 1972). These historically situated discursive structures provided the ideas, concepts, and language used by English teachers to frame talk about what they do and believe and effectively provided a "common sense" network of ideologies that insiders used to make sense of their practices. Because this archive helped to establish the professional episteme, it also helped establish the knowledge context or "regime of truth" in which the creation of NCTE's guidelines occurred (Foucault, 1979, p. 46).

The epistemic historical analysis that Burns conducted around NCTE *Guidelines* provided a number of insights. First, elements of the archive established the privileged position of literature instruction in language arts curriculum, a position it has held from the beginning of the subject in US schools. This finding turned out to be crucial for the rest of the study by providing strong evidence that NCTE's discussions of literacy were dominated by a conception of functional literacy (the decoding and encoding of printed texts) that is associated with a focus on printed literary texts such as novels and short stories. In addition, the finding of a literary focus connected the development of English curriculum policy to a number of historical ideological positions, such as the treatment of canonical literature as a proxy for religious practice in public schools and as an instrument of social indoctrination and the "Americanization" of minority populations at the turn of the 20th century in the United States (Bailey, 1991; Mathieson, 1975; Protherough & Atkinson, 1991).

At the level of sociocultural context, Burns's study revealed a different kind of insight. By examining the various genres used in the composition of the *Guidelines*, as well as by examining the institutional structures within which the *Guidelines* were drafted, the analysis showed some of the ways in which social practices shaped the eventual play of meanings in the published text. For example, the acknowledgements and introduction of the NCTE *Guidelines* indicate an emphasis on professional experience and also on consensus in their discussions of authorship and intention. A reliance on experience rather than expertise in the development of the *Guidelines* suggested a treatment of knowledge that relied more on practice and tradition than on research and theoretical bases, while an emphasis on consensus suggested the submersion of alternative conceptions, dissent, or marginal points of view. Finally, an investigation of the genres used to create the *Guidelines* showed that the form of the text itself, a formal policy document, militated against the rationalization and justification of its own contents, thereby weakening its own arguments regarding disciplinary stability and rigor.

At the level of textual analysis, Burns's analysis produced findings that demonstrated particular ways in which the genres of the text, the historical roots of its topics, and the institutional structuring of its production manifested in ways that were not predictable or intentional. For example, even though the *Guidelines* articulated progressive visions of new knowledge in the language arts around diversity and technology, NCTE's focus on literature as the center of language arts curricula tended to make new knowledge marginal and supplemental, when such knowledge might otherwise have been treated as "new." In addition, close textual analyses helped to demonstrate how, although NCTE attempted to account for new knowledge, its "outsider" approach to discourses of technology led to a reproduction of the status quo and a loss of relevance for current curricula in the literate lives of students (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Finally, the textual analysis demonstrated convincingly how discourses of accountability had colonized NCTE's *Guidelines* and led the authors to frame their policies as resistant to such accountability. While on one level this frame of resistance or accommodation could be seen as desirable, the analysis indicated that such an accommodation to accountability actually led to a conservative position that served the interests of accountability while impeding the ability of the profession to account for knowledge and change.

#### *Becoming Critical Researchers*

Although most research in CDA is intended to show how prevalent discursive formations alienate and marginalize members of peripheral populations, we are arguing for another consideration of critical discourse analysis as the analysis of *critical discourse*--a way of assessing how marginalized populations have appropriated a language of empowerment. Morrell (2004) took as his data source a six-year summer program where urban teens were apprenticed as critical researchers of urban and educational inequality. The seminar brought students, teachers, and parents from urban communities throughout Los Angeles to a local university to design and carry out critical research projects on issues of immediate concern to these communities. Students were chosen from the most underperforming schools in the city. They were selected only for interest in

the program, providing students with a wide range of life and educational experiences.

The students worked in groups of four or five on research teams led by teachers from the local schools. Throughout the five week seminar the students read seminal works in the sociology of education and critical methods of educational research; they developed research questions, read relevant literature, collected and analyzed data, and created research reports; and they presented these reports to university faculty, policymakers, and on occasion, to regional and national conferences of educational researchers and practitioners. Students also wrote individual papers where they contemplated the practical applications of their research to the issues in their own communities.

Morrell (2004) was interested in how students were appropriating the language and tools of critical research and how this appropriation translated into the acquisition of academic literacies. Additionally, Morrell sought to understand the relationship between changing participation in the critical research-focused community of practice and the development of empowered identities of these teens. As part of the data collection enterprise, he recorded observational notes and videotaped seminar sessions and students' experiences in the field. He also collected individual journal assignments, individual essays, and group research projects. Finally, Morrell and his colleagues invited distinguished education and social science faculty members to sit on the panel and to evaluate the quality of the students' papers and presentations.

Morrell interviewed faculty to get a sense of whether the students successfully appropriated the dominant discourses of social science research. The faculty responded overwhelmingly in the affirmative. He next analyzed student generated texts and classroom conversations to determine the change over time in reference to issues of social justice, in use of the language of social science research, in reference to themselves and their peers as critical researchers, and in their implied or expressed sense of agency. Specifically, he coded organizationally across activity settings, chronologically across time periods, and analytically across literacy events to understand how students incorporated the language of social theory and sociology into their discussions of educational inequality and into their research design, data collection, and data analysis. Additionally, Morrell analyzed these conversations and texts for references to critical research and the process of becoming a critical researcher, in seeking to understand the relationship between the mastery of empowered academic discourses and the identity development of these students as researchers and intellectuals.

Morrell also coded student work for any and all discussions of language, text, discourse, and power. He analyzed student texts and conversations primarily for *critical language awareness* (Faircloth, 1995), that is, where students showed an understanding of the uses of language and power. He looked for student explanations of ideology or language hegemony, where students revealed an understanding of how discourse shapes meaning, how they are shaped by discourses, and how they see themselves as shapers of discourse. Morrell (2004) was able to demonstrate a positive relationship between apprenticeship as critical researchers, the mastery of dominant discourses, and the development of a counterdiscourse of urban youth as intellectuals and agents of social change.

### CDA AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

In addition to functioning as a useful research theory and method, CDA has a number of pedagogical implications. Noting changes in economic structures and the expansion and monopolization of communications media, in addition to changes in power relations, Fairclough (1995) pointed out that schools are “heavily involved in these general developments affecting language in its relation to power” (p. 220), and argued that this “problematic of language and power” is “fundamentally a question of democracy” (p. 221). He argued that if individuals are to deal productively as citizens with the challenges of the social world, they need to be educated toward the development of a critical language awareness that “develops their capacities for language critique, including their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself” as well as analysis of the larger social, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which education occurs (p.221). Burns’s (unpublished) recent work on multiculturalist discourses in an English education classroom illustrated some of the ways in which CDA might become a tool both for teachers to use in the assessment of their students’ talk and also for students to use in reflecting on their own education experiences as they learn to teach within school contexts.

Critical language awareness as a pedagogical tool may perhaps be most powerful when it is used as a form of metadiscourse in classroom discussions. By metadiscourse, here, we mean taking a step back from the discussion of a given topic to talk about the ways in which group members are using language to make meaning that embodies assumptions and beliefs or ideological positions. In the nearly all White class of preservice teachers Burns taught and studied, for example, ideological and culturally situated perspectives on race and ethnicity had a marked impact on the ways the class made sense of multiculturalist research, diversity in classrooms, and the nature of literacy and linguistic diversity. For example, many White students professed a value for diversity but did not view themselves as part of that diversity and therefore spoke as “outsiders” to that topic. Alternatively, some students used pluralist conceptions of multiculturalism to argue that while “awareness” of diversity was important, the only necessary accommodation in classrooms was for teachers to be inclusive of their students during activities. Others who were less comfortable with discussions of race frequently shifted the conversation by using the term “American” as a proxy code for “White” or “English speaking,” while others argued that assigning labels such as White or Black created difference where there should not be any. Each of these positions informed students’ understandings and uptake of course material and led to significant levels of conflict and variation within the class both among students and between Burns (as the course instructor) and his students.

Via the use of CDA, Burns was able to use video-recordings of this classroom discussion to revisit what had happened and begin to unravel the complex array of discourses that were at play during this talk about race and multiculturalism in the teaching of English. By examining the students’ backgrounds, the content of the course, the structure and physical arrangement for the discussion, and his own pedagogical moves during the class, Burns was able to begin making more sense of his students’ talk than he could have in the process of more informal reflections. CDA

offered the lenses and procedures Burns needed to begin recognizing patterns and variations across student responses and to recognize the needs of individual students for developing conceptual understandings of diversity and multiculturalism that could be useful to them in their later work as classroom teachers. Furthermore, the analysis led him to critique his own positions and practices as an English educator and helped him to understand the ways in which his own position reflected various power relations between himself, his students, and the institutional program that framed their interactions. CDA highlighted the ways in which Burns's own positions and roles shaped what he said in the context of the class discussion and underscored the discursive structures that affected what his students might have said in an institutionalized program that valued multiculturalism highly.

In addition to highlighting the ways in which personal identities and institutional positions affected the ways in which they talked about race and multiculturalism, Burns's analysis of this classroom interaction led his students to begin an ongoing discussion about the structure and content of their university program. Their attention to the sociocultural context of their discourse drew attention to the fact that their curriculum did not provide important opportunities to learn about linguistics, history, cultural theory, and English as an academic discipline that would otherwise have shaped their talk and understanding differently. They discovered a number of ways in which knowledge necessary for the teaching of English had been "occulted" due to the way their curriculum had been designed. This discovery led them to become much more aware of the ways in which school curricula were not neutral. As Fairclough (1995) asserted:

Critical language study and critical language awareness can...be reflexively applied within educational organizations to the practices of such organizations. ... Accordingly, such reflexive work could involve learners and teachers in analysis of and possible change in their own practices, as speakers and listeners (and viewers), writers and readers. (p. 227)

While Burns notes that his own study described above does not constitute a pedagogical exercise in critical language awareness per se, it does highlight some of the practices that such awareness work might entail, and it points to the value of such work in enriching learners' and teachers' understanding of education as critical work. The absence of critical language awareness in teacher education programs has allowed critiques of critical pedagogy in schools that show how such projects can simply replace one oppressive system with another, and the teaching of such awareness could help to mitigate this problem and stress what Fairclough notes as:

The difficulty in contemporary society in being entirely confident about the target, in the sense of what needs changing, and what it needs changing to. People on the ground must make up their minds about these complex issues, as they will whether critical language work is in progress or not. (1995, p. 231)

#### CDA AS A POLICY TOOL

In addition to its functions as a tool for research and pedagogy, CDA holds promise as a policy tool. A major implication of Burns's (2004) work analyzing teacher preparation guidelines is that, complementary to its function as a research tool, CDA could be used *in the process* of text

construction to address the complexities inherent in the production of policy texts, which are intended to shape, direct, sustain, and reproduce educational practice. In this context, CDA becomes a tool for the aligning textual components, addressing problems of intertextual representation, and mitigating or resolving the problems and limitations of various policy genres. The reflexive role of CDA allows it to play a powerful role in the pragmatics of educational policy and curriculum design.

One of Fairclough's (1989, 1995) primary goals in the use of CDA was the creation of spaces that allow for talk across difference. Particularly in policy discussions, where consensus models frequently interrupt the articulation of differences, CDA can help to ensure that discourse proceeds along lines that lead to *more* if not *total* critical discourse. As described by Habermas (1973), a context of absolute critical discourse is one in which all parties and interests are represented equally and free of constraining relations of power. According to Habermas, this totally inclusive critical discourse is impossible to achieve; however, a context of critical discourse is still a worthy goal and one worth striving for. CDA provides a set of tools and dispositions that enable social groups involved in conversations across difference to *better* and more completely involve concerned parties and to place them on more equal footing toward the achievement of equitable outcomes.

In addition to the potential for CDA to function as an inclusionary device for policy conversations, it also has the capacity to allow for the pragmatic design and administration of curricula and policy. As Cherryholmes (1988, 1999) has noted, *all* curricula are temporal, contingent, flawed, and historical; as such, they are limited in their sustainability--what was effective and desirable fifty years ago (or twenty, or ten, or even five) is unlikely to be effective and desirable now. By using critical discourse analysis as a means of periodically revisiting curricula and policy, it becomes possible to reevaluate their effectiveness and make judgments about what needs changing, how it might be changed, and what the consequences of change might be. As Fairclough (2003) states, any change in policy that might result in social transformation has winners and losers. As educators making curricular decisions that affect millions of people's access to literacy and opportunity, CDA should be indispensable. Particularly when it is used in combination with resources from the various social sciences, CDA can be a powerful instrument for social equity from *within* the construction of education policies, not just a powerful instrument for reaction *to* them.

### CDA AS PRAXIS

To consider CDA as a tool for praxis, we draw upon Gee's (1999) ideas for making students social theorists of social languages and Freire's (1970) problem-posing dialogic pedagogy based on a project of collaborative inquiry rooted in a praxis of social change. Toward these ends we examine Morrell's (2004) summer seminar project, which set out to develop urban teens' ability to use CDA to make sense of the dominant institutions that circumscribe their existence. This sense of "critical" in CDA is resonant with the streams of critical theory that are concerned with power and the locus of revolutionary thought and action. Critical pedagogues have envisioned a practice where

students play an active role in the construction (and reconstruction) of meaning. Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) and Morrell (2004) have theorized critical qualitative research as involving marginalized populations as collaborators in research, not merely as objects of research.

If CDA is to follow in this tradition and, if it is to become an authentic tool for social change, then it cannot exist merely as a tool for sanctioned researchers to make sense of the alienating potential of dominant language. Rather, CDA must be shared with marginalized populations and used with them and by them in the struggle for social justice and empowering identity development. In this final section we will return to the research seminar to understand the practice and outcomes associated with apprenticing urban teens as critical discourse analysts.

During the summer seminar of 2000, one student group investigated urban youth access to the media and the media's portrayal of urban youth. Toward these ends, the teen researchers interviewed media representatives, but they also performed a content analysis of all of the major daily newspapers published during the week of the Democratic National Convention, paying close attention to the context of the descriptions of urban youth as well as the adjectives and nouns that were associated with urban youth, other young people involved in the official convention, and protests of the convention. The results of the content analysis were powerful, if not surprising.

The research activity itself was an important and powerful one for these teens in that it provided them with language and tools to change their own relationship to the media that played such an important role in their lives. The activity became social praxis when the student researchers used their research as a pedagogical and advocacy tool. They presented their research to teachers, university faculty, and elected officials; they wrote editorials in their school newspapers; and they developed curricular materials for incoming freshmen to make them more critical and engaged consumers of media discourses. In this praxis, the teens developed a language to critique media discourses but they also employed print and electronic media to promote viable counternarratives.

## CONCLUSION

Critical Discourse Analysis is an analytic tool that has much to offer for literacy research and education. While CDA is being applied with increasing frequency in literacy studies, we argue that we have only scratched the surface in that regard. We hope that we have made the argument for more studies of critical language awareness among marginalized school populations, as well as studies of literacy education and literacy research as discourses in and of themselves. Additionally, we would like to push the field by advocating for the use of CDA as a tool for literacy pedagogy, literacy policy, and literacy praxis. We argue that CDA as a tool offers tremendous potential for training teachers, for affecting policy conversations, and for transforming classroom instruction to facilitate the literacy empowerment of our most marginalized populations. These uses represent praxis in its truest sense: using a theoretical and conceptual tool to act more powerfully upon the world in ways that increase student and teacher efficacy and humanize our curricula and our scholarship.

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