

Dean Wells MP - Ideas and action

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Critical Literacy

The Year 11 and 12 English course in Queensland and much of Australia is based on 'Critical Literacy,' which treats all writings as 'texts' to be examined in their social contexts, and 'deconstructed' to expose their inherent contradictions. Wells makes the point that the 'Critical Literacy' has its own inherent contradictions.

Having established—or perhaps more accurately having laid down as definitionally true—that everything from the poetry of Tennyson to the transcripts of the evening news are “texts”, the critical literacy ideologues proceed, relying on the fact that they have affixed them with the same label to subject them to the same treatment. “Texts” of all kinds are to be “deconstructed”. This faintly violent metaphor refers to “a critical method that exposes gaps and contradictions in a text. It aims to show that the assumptions and structures a text relies on for its meaning are not as stable or trustworthy as they seem.” (Literacy Terms, A Practical Glossary, 2nd edition, Chalkface Press 2005). Thus the end result of our children’s literacy education is anticipated to be the exposure of the work of poets, novelists, dramatists and authors of various other “genre” as “unstable” and “untrustworthy”—a rather nihilistic medicine to administer to youthful idealists. The result might be that the collected works of Shakespeare could be seen as merely what you might expect of a white Anglo-Saxon protestant male genius writing at the turn of the 16th century. The writings of Descartes could be dismissed as merely what you would expect of a catholic male renaissance man operating in the context of a patriarchy. Such devastating revelations are not news. We knew all that. So did Shakespeare and Descartes. It leaves out the important question: what about what they said? Was Descartes right? Does Shakespeare illuminate the human condition? Literary studies should not be about sociology, although we might well bear the historical and social origins of an author in mind to understand his or her writings. They should be about truth and beauty, the extremities and the possibilities of human experience, the lilt, the cadences and the music of the English language, the hopes, the aspirations and the nadirs of human life. These are the stuff of a worthwhile course of English studies. To apply the techniques of critical literacy to the “texts” (including this syllabus) of

the critical literacy ideologues, critical literacy texts are simply what you would expect of disillusioned and cynical technocrats operating at the beginning of the computer age in a culture that sought to reduce everything to quantifiable units and thus turn the arts into sciences.

The ultimate problem for the critical literacy theorists is that their position is self contradictory — cultural relativism at its very heart. Deconstructionists are not looking for truth or beauty, for hope or inspiration, for catharsis or elation, but simply to lay bare the cultural assumptions of a work and thus “deconstruct” it. There is, for the deconstructionist, no universality and no transcending truth. If someone tells you that nothing is true and wants you to believe it, don't. If they are right, then it follows they are wrong.

The ideology of critical literacy is self-contradictory and should be abandoned.

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