

1 Literacy under attack

'The Literacy Debate' was the lead story in the *Weekend Australian* of 23–24 September 2006. The front-page puff piece for the coverage within affirmed the paper's support for the 'neutral, apolitical teaching of English' (Ferrari 2006a). It was accompanied by a cartoon that encapsulated many parents' anxiety about their children's literacy. Said a young boy in response to his father's concern about the quality of his homework: 'Don't worry. I can google my way through life.' There were also two more articles, five images and an editorial—all dedicated to the failings of literacy education. There was only one piece that defended current practice. This was a major offensive in the literacy wars as they are fought in the print media.

Central to the assault on literacy education were extracts from an article by David Freesmith (2006a), an English teacher at Adelaide's Prince Alfred College, which had been published several months earlier in the teachers' journal *English in Australia*. Freesmith (2006b) had accused the *Australian* of mounting a political and ideological attack on critical literacy but of failing to understand it. The goal of critical literacy, he explained, is to create a questioning, critical, ethical citizenry; critical literacy

2 THE LITERACY WARS

is integral to a healthy democracy. Abridged to the point of incoherence, his defence of critical literacy was set up to compare badly with the other contributions.

Freesmith pointed out that the latest round in the debate about critical literacy had been sparked by academic Wayne Sawyer's editorial in *English in Australia*. Disappointed at Howard's re-election in 2004, Sawyer (2004, p. 8) had asked whether a critical literacy needed to become 'more direct and deliberate in its ethics and its critical stance' against a government that had lied about refugees throwing their children overboard, set up detention centres and gone to war with Iraq, despite evidence that there were no weapons of mass destruction. Sawyer's musings have been used over and over by the *Australian* to caricature the enemy.

There was a lengthy response to Freesmith by Kenneth Wiltshire (2006), J.D. Story Professor of Public Administration at the University of Queensland's business school, and chairman of the review of Queensland's curriculum under the Goss government. The focus of the literacy debate, wrote Wiltshire, is the core curriculum and who decides its content. Endorsing the *Australian's* stance against teaching school students critical literacy in English, he said that school was for 'basics and knowledge, certainly accompanied by critical thinking, but not in a milieu where all is relative and there are no absolutes'.

Wiltshire dismissed critical literacy as 'at best negative and at worst nihilistic', holding it responsible for 'dumbing down' the curriculum. He concluded with a tribute to the *Australian*, which he said had 'played a vital role as a national presence for the fourth estate in our robust democracy', providing 'a forum for intellectuals of both the Left and Right'. He commended the way the paper had handled the literacy debate in exposing the 'reality of our education systems'. There was not a hint of irony in Wiltshire's judgment of the Murdoch newspaper.

With captions that drew on his words, four pictures illustrated Wiltshire's article. Under a photo of a statue, representing a

man deep in thought, the caption read: 'Our culture: Aristotle is still valid today.' There were also photos with captions of the Howard government's three education ministers: 'Reform views: Brendan Nelson', 'Idealistic: David Kemp' and 'Explicit values: Julie Bishop'. Not all readers would have agreed with Wiltshire's portrayal of the ministers responsible for educational leadership and policy in Australia since 1996.

The second response to Freesmith was written by Kevin Donnelly (2006f), former chief of staff to Liberal minister Kevin Andrews and an education consultant who writes often for the *Australian* on literacy matters. Describing himself as a 'conservative education warrior', Donnelly declared that he was proud to be part of the *Australian's* two-year campaign that began in 2004 'against political correctness in education and the destructive influence of critical literacy and postmodern theory' on the school curriculum. Instead of valuing 'the moral and aesthetic quality of literary greats', claimed Donnelly, students are taught to 'deconstruct' the words of Wordsworth and Shakespeare. The result? Students leave school with a 'fragmented and disjointed understanding', the victims of 'postmodern claptrap'.

Illustrating Donnelly's article was a picture of a male teacher with a sheet of paper in his hand, standing in the middle of a class of what looked like Year 8 or 9 students. The teacher was talking and some of the students were looking at him. Aimed at ridiculing postmodern approaches to the study of literature, the caption read: 'Deconstructing the Bard: Macbeth is examined in terms of "patriarchal concerns with order and gender"'. *Macbeth*, a staple of the English curriculum across the states of Australia, is usually studied with older students. There were no books to suggest the reading of a play, nor the kind of engagement that might be expected in a drama lesson. Without an obvious connection between the stock photo of a classroom and Donnelly's accusations, the header, 'Subject for Complaint', printed in a very large font, was required to deliver the message.

4 THE LITERACY WARS

Although in this instance the effect of misusing an image was benign, there were traces of the media manipulation employed by the Coalition government in the ‘Children Overboard’ affair, referred to by Wayne Sawyer in his editorial. Just prior to the election in 2001, when the polls were not predicting a Howard victory, government ministers told the Australian people that blurred images of a boat and people in the water depicted illegal immigrants throwing their children overboard. The prime minister used the photos as ‘evidence’ of the ‘kind of people’ who were trying to get into Australia without going through the ‘proper’ processes. Many commentators have attributed the re-election of the Coalition for a third term to this cynical misrepresentation of images for political gain.

Without anything new to add to the debate, the editorial (Editorial, 2006b) recycled opinions that the paper has paraded regularly since 2004: ‘[y]oung Australians must be taught how to think and write, not what to think and write,’ it pronounced. Opposed to the dissection of the Western canon according to ‘Marxist, feminist or racial analysis rather than according to the universal truths such as love, hate, pride, ambition and jealousy’, the editorial rejected Freesmith’s views as part of the ‘lunatic fringe’. It presented the writers at the *Australian* as a united team with a shared view on literacy education: ‘We are unabashed fans of the modern Western liberal democracy, the literary canon and Judeo-Christian values.’

The editorial referred to academic Wayne Martino (1994), whose words, plucked from the journal *English in Australia*, have been used repeatedly in the *Australian* to exemplify the arcane language of the promoters of critical literacy. Wrote Martino: ‘the English classroom is conceptualised as a socio-political site where alternative reading positions can be made available to students outside of an oppressive male–female dualistic hierarchy—outside of an oppressive phallogocentric signifying system for making meaning.’ (1994, p. 39) The sentence may be theoretically dense and overly complex but, like Freesmith and

Sawyer, Martino was writing for a professional audience, not the readers of a newspaper. The editorial concluded by anticipating the ‘inevitable passing of critical literacy into the large well of dumped educational fads’.

The following week, the *Australian* published a number of letters on the Literacy Debate. Except for Freesmith’s self-defence, most supported the views expressed by Wiltshire, Donnelly and the editorial. On Wednesday, 27 September, the newspaper’s agenda was given further weight when senior political writer Paul Kelly (2006) entered the fray. He urged the federal government to intervene in determining the content of the school curriculum ‘on behalf of the interests of parents and children’.

Kelly repeated some of Wiltshire’s accusations—the reign of deconstruction as an approach to the study of texts, knowledge-free curricula and the absence of standards and accountability. He called for ‘a transparent review of what is being taught, its effect and its rationale’. Kelly also ridiculed Wayne Sawyer’s editorial as indicative of the ideological base of English teaching in Australian schools and criticised the website of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English for supporting Sawyer’s views. Kelly’s only concession to teachers was his suggestion that reform would get nowhere unless ‘it carries the teachers, improves their status and values their professionalism’.

What were readers to make of the *Australian*’s treatment of the literacy debates? Those who are not experts in literacy education, but who have entrusted their children to schools, must have been alarmed at the wildly different views about what constitutes a good literacy education. How were they to interpret the polarised positions? For readers who believe that literacy education is simply about teaching children and young people an unchanging, fixed set of basic skills, the *Australian*’s coverage spoke directly to them. Even readers who suspect that there might be more nuanced and balanced ways of thinking about literacy could not have helped but be concerned.

6 THE LITERACY WARS

As mentioned, the national newspaper has run a succession of articles promoting a similar political line since 2004. More than half of them have been written by Kevin Donnelly. Dissenting views have been published from time to time as op-ed pieces, but most often as letters to the editor. For people interested in learning about the challenges facing literacy education at the beginning of the twenty-first century, reading the *Australian* would suggest that the debates are fierce but that only one side has the answers—those with different views are dismissed as part of the ‘loony left’. Rather than facilitating public discourse about literacy issues, the *Australian* has actually suppressed such discussion.

The articles published that weekend in September 2006 highlighted some of the questions central to the media debates about literacy education. Should there be a core literacy curriculum? How much attention should be given to basic literacy skills? Which books should be included in a literature course? Does popular culture have a place in the English classroom? Has the English curriculum been dumbed down? What does postmodern theory have to offer literacy education? Should critical literacy be an integral component of the curriculum? To what extent are the battles over literacy about other things?

Literacy education is of great interest to everyone, young and old, because understanding written words—whether in print or on a screen—is something that most people do every day, often many times over. Also, everyone is an expert and has an opinion about how reading and writing should be taught, as everyone has been to school. These reasons help explain why the literacy debates command so much attention in the media. However, they are only part of the answer. The debates command so much attention because they are rarely just about literacy, as illustrated in the articles and images published in the *Australian* in September 2006. They are also related to broader ‘social and cultural issues, and to political and economic forces’ (Green et al. 1997, p. 22). These broader

issues and forces affect, even determine, the form and content of the debates about literacy in the media.

Debates or wars?

Characterising contemporary media coverage of literacy education as the literacy wars captures the intensity and force of the controversies. Competing views—from which method to use for teaching reading to the choice of texts for a Year 12 English course—have become battlegrounds. However, it is the defenders of traditional approaches to literacy, not the advocates of contemporary practice, who have enjoyed consistent media attention. Before the Coalition gained office, the conservative forces were sometimes given a run in the press but not with the relentless regularity of the Howard years.

In their attacks, the conservative literacy warriors often employ abusive language directed against their adversaries. Literacy teachers are accused of lowering standards by using child-centred approaches that do not provide children with a strong foundation in literacy learning. The attacks extend to what literacy teachers and educators say about literacy and how they say it, dismissing anything more complex than a simple sentence as edu-babble. The aim of the concerted attacks has been to raise public anxiety and undermine confidence in literacy education. Under the Howard government, public concern has reached new heights, with many people now believing that there is a literacy crisis.

However, the notion of a literacy crisis is not a new phenomenon. Literacy crises have been declared at other points in Australian history and have usually arisen in relation to socio-economic change of some kind. Each time, there are reports in the print media, letters to the editor and discussion on talkback radio as teachers, unions, professional organisations, academics and parents respond. The effect is always powerful, with the public assuming that there is a literacy problem and that educational