What's Whiteness got to do with it?

Exploring assumptions about cultural difference and everyday literacy practices

by **Sue Shore**

In recent times adult literacy practitioners and researchers have promoted the idea of literacy as a social practice. This view moves beyond simplistic understandings of literacy as a functional skill, or indeed something people don't have, to views which encourage research and teaching based on the ways in which learners (and indeed practitioners) might use literacy as part of their everyday lives. This view of literacy takes account of the cultural practices, local contexts and historical patterns shaping literacy use and, in my view, is an improvement on functional approaches. Nevertheless, this approach has its own assumptions which subtly shape what counts as literacy practice.

In this paper I want to talk about how Whiteness, as an example of 'cultural difference', is often ignored in analyses of everyday literacy practices.

Given the admittedly contested claim that improving literacy skills improves opportunities for adult literacy learners I want to ask how literacy teaching might be influenced by the relationship between daily life, everyday literacies and the concept of Whiteness.

At this particular time in Australian history, this is risky business as my own interests in the pedagogies and practices of Whiteness may well get caught up with the parallel developments currently sweeping the nation. I am referring to developments mirrored in our political system and in particular the rise of One Nation as a political party. Unlike the rhetoric employed by One Nation members and leaders I do not want to foreground the [supposed] problems created by non-white people in Australia. I want to challenge the assumption that White people are not part of these problems.

Perspectives on literacy practice

In the early days of adult literacy teaching, practitioners were encouraged to use language experience, a method that attempted to ensure that students' experiences were reflected in classroom writing. I was among those who used this approach and actively promoted it as a viable way of working with new or 'reluctant learners' as some of us called them in those days. This method produced texts that were generally relevant to students' lives, and at the same time provided an entry point for (volunteer) tutors uncertain about their capacity to teach reading. These language experience practices attempted to 'give' a legitimate literate voice to the social world inhabited by students in these early classes and this theme of 'giving voice' continues in much of the research, teaching and policy documentation of literacy work today.

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Unlike some versions of multiculturalism which implicitly suggest a harmonious working through difference, I want to suggest that difference can be a positive force for social change only if those of us who identify as White acknowledge that this is a difference in itself; a difference which amasses significant amounts of privilege and must be understood and acknowledged as having differential effects depending on the context.

My work and thinking (my practice in a university) has been influenced by feminist writers and non-white women who know that celebrating diversity can be hard work for those always positioned as the diverse, the different. These writers (see for example Ang, 1995; Razack, 1993) know that working across difference doesn't result in neat solutions. Rather, this work constitutes an ongoing process of change in which we all have a part to play.

So, in contrast to some of the positions outlined above, I want to put notions of difference and diversity on the agenda because they are fraught with complexity and also because they are inescapably associated with literacy teaching. More importantly, I want to raise these issues because I rarely hear terms such as difference and diversity used in relation to those folk who identify as White.

In more recent times, it has been common to talk of literacy as social practice, that is, literacy that is "almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted part of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs" (Gee p. 41). As James Gee has said, "You can no more cut the literacy out of the overall social practice, than you can abstract the white squares from a chess board and still have a chess board."[1]

By taking a perspective which sees literacy as a social practice, texts of different kinds – papers, maps, forms, films, even bodies – for we do 'read' bodies – serve as a 'text' or point of engagement between the word and the world.

Moreover what critical literacy work has shown is that this process of literacy as social practice is not a reflection of learner's experience unless networks of power are examined as part of the process. Therefore critical social literacy must engage with networks of power. It "makes explicit and overt the social relations of power around the text, and places squarely on the table for *learners* the issues of who is trying to do what, to whom, with and through the text" (Luke & Freebody p. 20, *italics added*). But this agenda also reflects an assumption that educators

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[1] When I first read this quote I was intrigued that Gee had chosen the impossibility of removing the White squares. I wondered what kind of world would be needed to posit removal of black squares as an unimaginable condition.

will already know what social relations of power are possible within the text and furthermore that they will be able to 'see' these relations of power and act on them.

Making Whiteness visible

I have had a lot of faith in critical social literacy practice in the past, and still do, but more and more I believe that we – particularly those of us who think of ourselves as a White 'we' – do not 'see' or experience power relations within the same event in quite the same way as non-white people. Our histories, our schooling, our friendships, our personal and professional practices, our private spaces, do not prepare us for seeing the world through the hearts, bodies and minds of Others. In fact, I think it is questionable whether it is possible to ever fully understand from the Others' perspective. This is a view of the world advanced by liberal educators which is underpinned by Western rationalism, a view that actively encourages the belief that we White people can in fact know the Other.

I want to shift the focus away from common understandings of diversity and difference. I want to ask how common framings of literacy as a social practice 'forget' that dominant discourse in adult

social practice is misleading if it encourages us to think that the effects of these practices are the same on all bodies.

Critical social literacies involve understanding the kind of knowledge(s) available for use but more than this these literacies also assume that we understand what is required to participate in literacy events. Many advocates of critical social literacy propose that we need to be able to draw on literate practices at the very same time as we are aware that these practices are but one means by which we can communicate. The critical in critical social literacy is about knowing how knowledges are used at the same time as we make choices about whether it is strategic to contest those knowledges. Moreover in terms of thinking about Whiteness and its impact on pedagogy, the 'critical' in 'critical social literacy' is about knowing when and how those of us who might identify as White, unwittingly use language to reinforce our White social privilege.

The key point I want to make today is that what I call 'White' knowledge frames much of what is valued in the world, but nailing down the specificity of White knowledge is difficult, particularly where discourses of Whiteness collude with discourses of dominance, and 'the mainstream'.

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literacy education is deeply structured and framed by White Western understandings of textual and social practice. Yet these understandings are not always visible to those of us (White folk) who take them for granted.

I want to suggest that particular forms of Whiteness saturate the social and cultural forms of literacy we use and that this may often have an oppressive effect that those of us who are White take for granted and either ignore or simply do not notice as oppressive. It is also true to say that White practice doesn't have to be oppressive always. White educators have little control over the effects of particular practices, nevertheless this should not be a reason for us to make no effort to understand the effects of our Whiteness on our pedagogy.

If the same experience of literacy is lived differently by different people, on the street and in the classroom, using the terminology of literacy as a

I have found that moving outside adult literacy and adult education literature there is a wealth of writing about what constitutes the White body. Many of us who are White, and even those who would not identify as White, often think of Whiteness as skin colour. However this is only one way of representing Whiteness.

Patti de Rosa thinks of Whiteness as three things: the *description*; "those who are light-skinned with Western European physical features; the *experience* (in the US) of unearned privileges: and the *ideology* representing a system of exploitation based on White supremacy" (de Rosa cited in Thompson p. 357). Authors who cite de Rosa's work note that these three categories do not necessarily provide sharp clarity given that "White people are symbols and individuals at the same time" (Ibid). That is, we act as individuals but we are also influenced by the long and complex

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history of ideas associated with our (White) cultures. Whiteness is complex and not readily conflated to an homogenized self. However, many writers also remind us that Whites as a group still receive many benefits through a range of "universalised measures of merit, hiring criteria, grading standards, predictors of success, correct grammar, appropriate behaviour, and so forth, all of which are said to be distributed as differences in individual effort, ability, or intelligence" (Scheurich p. 7).

A quite well-known paper by Peggy McIntosh (1988) chronicles the ways in which McIntosh believes her white skin gives her privilege in everyday ways. I don't want these descriptions to seem like some shopping list, where we can move down the aisle checking the boxes to see if we are a 'good' or 'bad' White person, because I believe Whiteness as ideology and experience must accompany whiteness as description. That is, we have to understand how our Whiteness is bound up in what we think and do, and how we are formed historically, as much as who we are individually.

Peggy McIntosh provides some help here. She suggests conventional schooling

> gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor... I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will...When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilisation" I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is... I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial... My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of other races.

In the Australian education settings in which I have worked over the past twenty years it has been possible for me to sit in curriculum meetings and not comment when racist or incorrect comments are made about indigenous people or people from various parts of Asia. I can choose to be quiet when white ethnicity is accepted as natural and unproblematic. I would suggest, though, that many educators are ready to explore these issues and focus on the White self as distinct from the Other as a

strategy for understanding the ways in which we too are part of the problem when Whiteness is ignored or avoided in discussions of difference. The complex of factors making up White background is slippery. As McIntosh says:

> White privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country... as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivi- ous, other groups were likely being made inconfident, uncomfortable, and alienat- ed. (McIntosh p. 9,12)

McIntosh also suggests that the notion of privilege needs to be interrogated from the point of view of the psychic loss engendered by those Whites who recognize what it is that we lose when we subscribe to oppressive and narrow conceptions of identity which favour White superiority. Many indigenous women in Australia have also spoken of this loss. Lillian Holt (p. 7) describes the processes of formal schooling as "the check-up from the neck up" – a process which usually manages to dodge talk of spirit and soul.

Thinking about Whiteness and its impact on pedagogy is about knowing when and how those of us who might identify as White unwittingly use language to reinforce our White social privilege.

While McIntosh points out that White privilege takes a number of forms, her list subtly reinscribes forms of privilege which only White people would count as advantage. She eventually rejects the word 'privilege' as being woefully inadequate to describe the unearned resources which many White people accumulate but fails to fully recognise that her "brutally honest" (Hurtado & Stewart p. 305) list of White privileges comes from a comparison of the White self and the lack or deficits she implicitly

reinscribes on the Other. The slippage in McIntosh's writing reminds me that those of us who identify as White and who want to explore these issues, need to persistently rethink how we might unwittingly reinscribe the White centre in our efforts to think differently about culture and diversity.

There are numerous examples of this which occur daily as social literacy practices. For example, culture is often seen as something for others; Whiteness is rarely identified explicitly with culture, but is often implicitly assumed to be the centre, that place where everything happens.

Richard Dyer suggests:

> The absence of reference to Whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of White people in the West....The assumption that White people are just people... is endemic to White culture... [t]here is no more powerful position than that of being 'just' human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that – they can only speak for their race. (Dyer p. 2)

Two things in fact are happening here. Dyer suggests that not only is Whiteness ubiquitous, "everywhere and nowhere", it is also non-raced. In adopting this position of a non-race, White people and Whiteness frame what counts. The effects of this discourse range from generic use of the term 'we' to mean 'White' (Bannerji), to purportedly innocent questions (or indeed angry abuse) about one's roots. See, for example Ien Ang's work which draws on the persistent need felt by 'mainstream' people in Australia to categorise apparently non-White Anglo citizens as migrants who receive differential levels of welcome. In a similar vein, Yee's work in Canada draws attention to the need by Anglos to sheet home [or securely locate] ethnic (Other) origins to some distant, foreign place; "the forces of racism that always keep [her] asking questions of identity, belonging, place and voice" (Yee p. 4).

Media debate in Australia in recent times has done little to provide a space to talk about the links between social practices and racism, except in terms of blaming or demonising the Other as the usurper of jobs and futures for (White) children. This type of media politics currently growing in response to the race debate in Australia builds a space of fear, silence or resentment. It does little to engender a discursive field which might move debate beyond simplistic notions of a benign multicultural Australian identity.

Hurtado and Stewart (p. 299) in fact connect these notions of loss and resentment for the Other to the deeply discomforting, and I would suggest largely unrecognized, processes by which some of us actually do discover our Whiteness, and thus come to see that we do have colour. This awareness occurs precisely through the loss of privileges (often

What is Whiteness?

For Ruth Frankenberg, Whiteness is

> A location of structural advantage of race privilege... a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.

from *The social construction of Whiteness: White women, race matters.* London & New York: Routledge (1993).

A useful introduction to this perspective is included in "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack", by Peggy McIntosh. She says,

> I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

"White Privilege" is excerpted from Working Paper 189– "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), available for $4.00 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley MA 02181 USA

An Aboriginal perspective

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Keonpul woman from Quandmooka (Moreton Bay), Australia, reminds us

> ...most white people give little or no thought to the way that Whiteness makes its presence felt, or how stressful it can be for Indigenous women, men and children living in their country controlled by white people...White race privilege means white people have more lifestyle choices available to them because they are 'mainstream'. Belonging to the 'mainstream' means white people can choose whether or not they wish to bother themselves with the opinions or concerns of Indigenous people.

from Moreton-Robinson, Aileen (1998). "White race privilege: Nullifying Native Title". *Bringing Australia Together. The structure and experience of racism in Australia.* Woolloongabba: Foundation for Aboriginal & Islander Research Action. 39-44.

Nailing down the specificity of White knowledge is difficult, particularly where discourses of Whiteness collude with discourses of dominance and 'the mainstream'.

through loss of jobs) which are so much an assumed part of being White. This loss of privilege is deeply embedded in the precarious political economies of Western states in the 1990s whereby many White people have lost the relative financial security afforded the working and middle class as a result of these unstable political economies and are faced, often for the first time, with the realization that we can no longer assume access to employment as a right. Popular political and social discourses of the times provide no way to speak into existence the complexities of these issues and therefore many people in these positions do not come to the realization that their resentment is in part due to a sense of loss of our White privilege.

What can literacy researchers and educators do?

In the early days of working through these ideas about Whiteness it was suggested to me that I needed to be careful about asking (White) practitioners, researchers and academics to challenge the privilege of their own positions when so many in this marginal field of practice – or indeed the marginal field of studies within universities – were feeling so done over by bureaucracies, so overworked, undervalued, exploited and stretched to the limit. It was suggested that I needed to be careful that my work was not used as a tool against educators, while structural reform was ignored. I understand this concern that my suggestions may be viewed as yet another way of telling teachers or researchers that their practices are the problem; teachers have got it wrong; once again individual educators must be responsible for addressing the deep and systematic wrongs in the world – and all of this is to be done while institutions manage to avoid providing the necessary resources to support the work which needs to be done to promote change in students' lives.

Yet I maintain that 'thinking through' whiteness (Frankenberg) is both a

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personal and political/structural issue. It is not just about being white (skinned), it is about White ideologies that have the power to discipline and regulate both white and non-white bodies to 'know' what social practices will count as legitimate literacies; it is about the very structures that make up most of the institutions (in public provision, workplaces and community settings) for which many of us work.

It has become clear to me that there is a rich heritage of adult literacy writing which borrows heavily from the field of adult learning, commonly citing 'adult learning principles' as a key source of theory to inform pedagogy. I think we have to acknowledge that much of this work erases issues of colour and diversity by using terms such as 'us' and 'them', terms which then proceed to mark implicit (White) standards for actual social practice.

What I am suggesting is a process of reading and writing against a grain which posits White as the norm; a process which makes us rethink our relationship, not only to our (white) selves but to our (White) histories as well. So what would this require us to do 'in the flesh'?

First I think this requires that those of us who identify as White think of ourselves as having culture and ethnicity and that this culture may have effects not of our choosing; that is the effects are at times experienced by Others as oppressive, whether we mean them to be or not.

Given the mainstream resistance to taking adult literacy seriously in some academic and training circles, it has been understandable for some of us to talk of 'a field' and 'the field'. This has served as a useful device to promote the concept of unity and coherence across an emerging area of work which in practice maintains an uneasy alliance across many divisions – for example ESL, numeracy, indigenous programs, genre theory, whole language, critical literacy, feminist practice and so on. However, this way of speaking has erased some of the specificity of diversity within the field and I want

to suggest another aspect of difference it has obscured. I want to suggest that using the term 'we' to create a sense of coherence and unity has resulted in a linguistic and social practice which assumes a white subject (practitioner, learner, bureaucrat or researcher) at the centre of much discourse and ignores the exclusions this attempt at linguistic inclusivity generates.

I think there are a number of strategies researchers and educators can adopt to move beyond this form of colour blindness but most of these strategies require first and foremost that those of us who identify as White become more responsible for understanding and acknowledging the 'invisible knapsack' of differential privilege we carry with us every day.

As Donna Haraway has noted, this is a project of learning how we have come to see, of understanding how Western Science has been implicated in our thoughts and practices and at the same time knowing that there are other ways of naming the world. For those of us who identify as White this involves a conscious choice (Moreton-Robinson pp. 39-44). Many of you may have heard the saying "If you are not part of the solution, maybe you are part of the problem." While I agree with the sentiment, I think the simplicity of the message is deceptive in that it suggests there is a solution. I'm not sure there is ONE solution. What I do know is that understanding the relationship between Whiteness and dominance, and unlearning my privilege, is a long journey of personal and collective change. The outcomes have not always been those that I would have wanted. Part of this journey involves recognising that I won't always have the answers, that this may leave me feeling frustrated and wronged and that this too is part of a racialised reaction that is bound up with my desire to have some level of comfortable closure around my Whiteness and its effects on my pedagogy. I don't think this kind of comfort is possible if critical social literacy practices address the problem of white privilege. ■

Sue Shore is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of South Australia, and Past Chair of a national committee funded to promote practitioner research in adult literacy and numeracy in Australia (http://www.staff.vu.edu.au/alnarc). She is a key researcher in the Centre for Studies in Literacy Policy and Learning Cultures and her research interests include the uses and abuses of practitioner research, explorations of literate subjectivities, and understanding the effects of whiteness on theory building.

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