

# What Can Count As Critical Academic Literacy Education?

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and Purpose:** The issue of what can count as “critical” in relation to academic literacy education has not been discussed in detail in relative review studies. Therefore, this opinion article aims to contribute to this issue by exploring the question whether a field of academic literacy education can be underpinned.

**Approach:** First, I revisit some models of academic literacy education (rhetorical models of critical consciousness, models of critical language awareness, genre-based models, multiliteracies, ethnographic-based academic literacies) which have been considered as “critical” in taxonomies of these review studies. Then, I compare these models showing their similarities and differences regarding what is “critical” and how it is situated within academic literacy education.

**Conclusion:** Finally, I argue that since there are contrasting conceptualisations among these models in relation to what is “critical” and how it can be associated with academic literacy education, critical academic literacy education can count as a relativist and not a unified field.

## KEYWORDS

academic literacy, critical language awareness, critical pedagogy, multiliteracies

## INTRODUCTION

The fundamental premise of critical literacy education is the dialectical relation between literacy education and social dimensions, in other words a type of literacy education with a political orientation to “the cultural, ideological, and sociolinguistic content” (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Many theorists (e.g., Freebody, 2017; Luke, 2012; Luke & Freebody, 1997; Pennycook, 2001; Yoon & Sharif, 2015), in their attempt to define and describe this kind of literacy, have suggested various relative taxonomies with models of critical literacy education.

However, since what differentiates a “critical” from a “non-critical” model is not always discussed explicitly within these taxonomies, the encompassed models vary from one taxonomy to another, e.g., ethnographic-based models are included in Freebody’s taxonomy but not in Yoon’s & Sharif’s. Furthermore, the various taxonomies do not specify what can count as critical academic literacy education, because they cluster various models without associating them with a particular level of education (e.g.,

primary or higher education). In other words, they do not discuss if there are certain issues of critical literacy at stake at different levels of education and if a specific approach could be more suitable for a specific level or not.

Although many studies (e.g., Blummer, 2016; Clarence & McKenna, 2017; Ivanič & Clark, 1997; Yu, 2021) have presented how critical academic literacy education can be implemented from the perspective of a particular model, e.g., a linguistic (Ivanič & Clark, 1997) or an ethnographic one (Clarence & McKenna, 2017), the issue of whether a critical academic literacy education can be delineated as a relatively stable (sub)field of research and teaching has not been discussed. For example, in some recent review papers on academic literacy education (e.g., Fu & Wang, 2022; Li, 2022), this field is depicted as a continuous shift among different trends (e.g., from the sociocultural to the new literacies studies) without a distinction between “critical” and “non-critical” ones. On the one hand, such fluidity could celebrate difference and openness. On the other, it could impede the development of the field as a distinct field de-

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marcating what should be considered as critical both in the context of empirical research investigating applications of critical literacy education but also in the context of educational practice informed by critical literacy education.

The goal of this paper is, then, to revisit and compare some models of critical academic literacy education which have been discussed in general terms in some of the above taxonomies. This can contribute to the international ongoing discussion (Fu & Wang, 2022; Wang & Derakhshan, 2023; Wang et al., 2022) regarding how the field of academic literacy education can be mapped out and how stimulating contexts of learning and teaching academic literacy can be organised.

## REVISITING SOME MODELS OF THE CRITICAL ACADEMIC LITERACY EDUCATION

### Rhetorical Models Focusing on “Critical Consciousness”

Although Paulo Freire did not coin the concept of “critical literacy” and did not use it in his initial works (e.g., Freire, 1972), he is considered by some theorists as its main founder (Luke, 2012, p.5). His model of literacy education (a pedagogy of raising “critical consciousness”) has been described as “emancipatory” from a Marxist perspective (Gee, 1990). In particular, Freire (1972) argued that language, apart from being a medium of communication, is a means of political action, since oppressed people can gradually discover that they can describe reality from their own perspective through literacy.

After Freire, theorists from the field of Critical Pedagogy (see for a review, McArthur, 2010) criticised the reproductive function of school literacy, which is supposed to be ideologically neutral, and proposed a “critical literacy” (Kretovic, 1985). This kind of literacy can help students not only reflect on what counts as a valid and reliable source of knowledge but also examine what is present and what is silenced in it (e.g., in textbooks of history).

The idea of critical literacy and how it signals implicit power relations and ideological positions was recontextualised in academic literacy education by some theorists within the field of New Rhetoric in North America in the end of the 80’s and the beginning of the 90’s. For example, Chase (1988) and Bizzell (1992), echoing Freire’s view that oppressed people should understand the political dimension of literacy, argued that students are politically oppressed individuals who should be helped so as to attain a “critical consciousness” in their attempt to master the academic discourse. They should realise that in their discourse communities textual

conventions are not monolithic but they have ideological perspectives, e.g., science should be written through an impersonal style because it is considered to be a systematic and “objective” form of knowledge.

This new rhetoric perspective is not based on a specific linguistic theory (e.g., a functional grammar) but on the contrary it places emphasis on explicating textual features by focusing on “unpacking complex relations between text and context” (Freedman & Medway, 1994, p. 8). For example, Chase (1988) was among the first rhetoricians who discussed the ideological perspective of academic writing by focusing on case studies. Following the critical pedagogist Henry Giroux who argued that students follow three different paths in the learning process within a dominant culture (accommodation, opposition and resistance), he suggested that these paths can also help us understand how students deal with academic writing conventions.

The first path refers to how students “accommodate” themselves within discourse communities without “risking”, e.g., a student effectively structures an essay following a standard conventional way -introduction, chapters which represent aspects of knowledge-general conclusions- without questioning any source or aspect of this knowledge. The second path is related to how writing conventions are questioned by some students because they find them too abstract to express themselves. They decide to write their texts in their own unsystematic way even if they take the risk to fail. Finally, the third path refers to how students decide to resist to what is considered to be a “typical” and an “appropriate” textual representation of knowledge. But, unlike the students above, they adopt an explicit perspective of using them in their own and alternative way. For example, a student decides to write history by incorporating strategies from creative writing because he/she believes that this manner reflects the subjective and interpretative perspective of history and he/she wants to construct a corresponding identity as a historian.

Therefore, students’ critical academic writing cannot be developed when university writing programmes have as a single goal to help students deal with courses writing demands by equipping them with standard and decontextualised language features (Bizzell, 1992, pp. 129-152). If disciplinary life is essentially rhetorical requiring from its members to find their own “voice” and participate in its dialogues about the status of knowledge and its useful social outcomes, students should then be academically socialised in such way; to realise the political aspect of writing and to make practice of it.

### Linguistic Models Focusing on “critical Language Awareness”

In the late 80’s and in the beginning of 90’s a group of linguists at Lancaster University (Clark et al., 1991; Fairclough,

1989) produced an approach of critical discourse analysis which was based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar. According to this grammar (Halliday, 1985), language is considered to be a semiotic resource of meaning making which serves social functions, e.g., people through modality (e.g., modal verbs, adverbs) commit themselves to truth and obligation to different degrees. Critical discourse analysis has an explicit Marxist perspective, e.g., society is stratified into dominant and non-dominant classes, in which language is considered as a medium of reproducing or challenging power relations and ideological positions, projected as "real", "given" or "stable" in human communication.

This group made a step further by transforming this linguistic approach into a pedagogy for all grades of education which was called "critical language awareness" (Clark et al., 1991; Fairclough, 1992). Regarding academic writing (Britton & Austin, 2022; Hankerson, 2023; Ivanič & Clark, 1997), the group focused on helping students from different backgrounds (e.g., overseas students), disciplines (e.g., science) and learning needs (e.g., writing essays or dissertations) perceive academic writing from a critical linguistic perspective.

According to this perspective (Ivanič & Clark, 1997, pp. 63-67), writing is not a set of skills, which can be passed up to learners, but a total of social practices in relation to various academic texts such as essays, assignments, articles and reports. Since these practices are shaped within specific contexts and social relations, students should reflect on their sense of the power relationships involved, and of their status in order to decide how they want to position themselves as writers: "a crucial aspect of critical language awareness is to empower students by providing them with the opportunities to discover and critically examine the conventions of the academic discourse community and to enable them to emancipate themselves by developing alternative to the dominant conventions" (Clark, 1992, p. 137).

For example, one of the important issues in academic writing is how writers organise the responsibility for the propositions mentioned in their texts. The degree to which a text appears to be "authoritative" or "believable" depends on the language features which in Halliday's functional grammar are associated with modality as described above. According to Ivanič & Clark (1997, pp. 171-72), such features of modality are the following: (a) modal adverbs (e.g., "perhaps"), (b) evaluative adjectives (e.g., "tentative"), (c) modal auxiliaries (e.g., "may"), (d) lexical verbs (e.g., "think"), (e) context-dependent nouns (e.g., "factor", "variable"), (f) use of active or passive voice (e.g., "It is widely believed...") (g) appeals to authority (e.g., Fairclough argues that..") and (h) lexical choice (e.g., "collateral damage vs civilian deaths").

By reflecting on the epistemological consequences which emerge from selecting some of these features with regard to the status of knowledge and the construction of their

identity, students can develop their awareness of writing as a social practice. For example, they can challenge the use of an abstract and "objective" academic discourse which is usually highly valued in the most industrialised and educated societies (Ivanič & Clark, 1997, pp. 145-146).

### Linguistic Models Focusing on the Empowering Function of Genres

In the mid 80's another group in Australia, which was also influenced by Halliday's systemic functional grammar, worked on a common agenda on how models of genre-based literacy education could be developed (see for different models, Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). Although a Marxist perspective or an alternative sociological one was not explicitly adopted, a common feature of these models is the belief that an overt instruction of genres -recurrent textual patterns of real social life (Rose, 2015)- can be empowering for students. In particular, if they learn how to fit the appropriate linguistic forms into various communicative situations (e.g., to use the conventions of descriptive and argumentative genres), it will facilitate them in having an easier and more active access and participation in social life.

At the academic educational context, this required that students should acquire the writing conventions which are dominant in their discipline (Swain, 2009; Tribble & Wingate, 2013; Yu, 2021) in order to be capable of reproducing them without problems. To give an example (Swain, 2009), one of the main issues in writing an academic essay with evaluative propositions, is how students can orchestrate these propositions and produce arguments which are simultaneously personal (signaling writers' beliefs) and collective (signaling shared beliefs within a community). If coherent argumentation and how it is built within essays is a significant feature for the success or the failure of these essays, students can be helped to deal with it through an explicit teaching on how to "engage" themselves with propositions, arguments and value judgements.

Specifically, they can learn that "engagement" is organised into systems that are divided further into smaller subsystems. For example, the system of "dialogic contraction" is divided into "disclaim" and "proclaim" (White, 1997) and the latter into "concur" (e.g., the phrase "of course"), "pronounce" (e.g., the phrase "It is clear") and "endorse" (e.g., the phrase "the paper shows"). Therefore, through mastering the features of engagement students will be able to present and evaluate shared beliefs within a community from their own perspective, signaling a step further in their academic socialisation.

### Linguistic Models Focusing on "Critical Framing"

Another model of literacy education, multiliteracies, was suggested in the mid 90's by the New London Group (1996).

The fundamental premise of this model is that contemporary communication incorporates resources of meaning which were not dominant in the past (e.g., images, sound), “traveling” through technology (e.g., social media) from global to local contexts. This model is based on both, Halliday’s Functional Grammatical Perspective as well as on its extension to the understanding of other semiotic systems such as images and music. For example, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) suggested that the representation of reality, what Halliday (1985) called the “ideational” function of language, can be accomplished in images through narrative and conceptual representations (the former as sequences of actions while the latter as taxonomies and systems of ideas).

This group, as the previous one, does not adopt an explicit Marxist agenda or an alternative one but its proposed four stage model of literacy education contains a stage of “critical framing” (1. “situated practice”, 2. “overt instruction”, 3. “critical framing” and 4. “transformed practice”). In this stage students -using features of a metalanguage of text design which were taught in the previous stage- are called to analyze texts by associating text functions with participants’ interests and power in the process of communication. Although this seems to be to some degree similar with what is suggested in CLA, it is not clear if this type of analysis aims to raise a kind of consciousness toward a challenge of the existing conventions or aims to help students gain access in the new complex communicative landscape, in a corresponding empowering way as described in the previous section (Pennycook, 2001, pp. 99-100).

According to academic models of “multiliteracies” (Blumner, 2016; Jones, 2009; Newman, 2002), contemporary academic learning environments are inevitably multimodal and hypertextual. Students are asked not only to comprehend but also to produce oral (e.g., power point presentations) and written texts (e.g., essays) which are combined with visual categories (e.g., figures, charts, tables, equations, graphs). For example, Jones (2009) discussed in detail how technical (e.g., scientific terms hyperlinked with internet glossaries or databases of images) and abstract information (e.g., graphs showing measured scientific phenomena) constitute important visual learning materials in an undergraduate first year science course. If new information and communication technologies are used in today’s universities shifting from print- to multimedia-based learning materials with an important role of images, then academic literacy shifts correspondingly to academic literacies (e.g., visual literacy, verbal literacy).

Therefore, specific practices should be designed by academic institutions so as to develop new multimedia competencies in students (Blumner, 2016). For example, through supportive courses students can learn how to design academic genres by analysing and reflecting on specific texts in order to take decisions not only on how to maximise their effectiveness, i.e., to decide which information will be written

and which information can be depicted through images, but also on how to construct their identities as designers.

## Ethnographic-Based Models Focusing on a Heuristic Critical Dimension

The issue of academic literacy has also been approached by ethnographic-based models which have emerged within the field of New Literacy Studies (Clarence & McKenna, 2017; Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). The starting point of these models is not a specific linguistic perspective (e.g., a functional one as described above) which predetermines to some degree the meaning of literacy (see for details, Street, 2000). On the contrary, literacy is seen as a set of practices, namely patterns of using literacy which are shaped within specific sociocultural events. This entails that meaning which emerges within practices, cannot be isolated from the events and, therefore, it is difficult to make generalisations in advance regarding the functions fulfilled by literacy.

For example, “writing a note” seems to be an easy task which is learnt once and for all but when this task is associated with specific contexts -writing a note to a family member compared with a note to colleague- it becomes more complex. The former cannot be considered in advance as simpler at the level of style and grammar compared with the latter; parents might write relatively complex notes by giving detailed instructions to their children while two colleagues may use a simple codified language in their communication (e.g., using elliptical sentences) in order to save time.

Concerning academic writing these models aim to pinpoint that academic writing is a situated, complex and nuanced issue which is associated with students’ epistemological practices of using literacy (academic literacies). Since these practices are framed within specific institutions and affected by asymmetrical power relations between academic staff and students, an effective academic writing presupposes not only an appropriate use of academic language but also a way to “fit” this language to institutional context which many times is an implicit issue.

Despite the fact that ethnographic-based models are not labelled “critical”, concepts which are associated with the critical dimension of literacy such as “ideology” or “power” are used in them in a heuristic way. Lea & Street (1998, 2000), for instance, showed through ethnographic techniques (e.g., interviews with tutors and students, instructions for writing assignments) that a failure of fitting content to context might be the outcome of the tension between the epistemological and power relationships between tutors and students. They might have contrasting expectations and interpretations concerning how academic knowledge should be approached which might not be articulated explicitly, e.g., which ideas should be taken for granted and not included in an essay or an epistemological stance which is not con-

sidered as compatible with a specific way of approaching a topic). Additionally, tutors might not be interested in exploring why some students “fail” or in helping them “improve” their texts, because they might consider their role as assessors and not as facilitators. In other words, the success of academic texts lies on the epistemological and power relationships among all those who are involved in writing and evaluating knowledge represented in writing and not in writing per se.

If the boundaries between what is “good” and “poor” academic writing are not completely predetermined since the criteria of evaluation vary from discipline to discipline and from tutor to tutor (even at the same department), academic writing can be conflicting and contested. Therefore, it is important for students to understand through specialised workshops and materials on academic writing (e.g., Lea & Street, 2006) that there is no an academic literacy as a neutral skill which can be packaged up and passed to students.

## COMPARING THE REVISITED MODELS

Comparing the above models of academic literacy education and reflecting on how all or some of them have been associated to critical literacy education in the relevant taxonomies, we might end up with the following three interrelated points. First, not all models were labelled “critical” by their initiators which raises an important question on whether this label is a prerequisite for someone to categorise it within a critical academic literacy education. For example, Yoon & Sharif (2015) do not encompass in their taxonomy ethnographic-based models of literacy education, believing probably that despite their social perspective, they do not have an explicit “critical” dimension or a transformative element. On the contrary, Pennycook (2001) and Freebody (2017) include these models by arguing that ethnographic-based models foreground a social and empowering dimension of literacy which “fits” a critical literacy education. Therefore, genre-based literacy models, multiliteracies and ethnographic-based models might be included or excluded from taxonomies or reviews of critical academic literacy education depending on theorists’ perspectives on whether such model of literacy education should foreground a critical perspective or not.

Second, not all models of literacy education adopt an agenda of resistance and consciousness, inspired by the Marxist theory. Rhetorical models which focus on critical consciousness and models of critical language awareness call for pedagogies which can help students realise the political aspect of academic writing. According to these models, writing is not just a medium of presenting how knowledge is negotiated but it is also a medium through which tutors and students construct identities, as writers and readers, as well as regimes of truth by depicting reality from various, and many times, contrasting perspectives. On the contrary,

the other models (genre-based models, multiliteracies and ethnographic-based models) do not promote an agenda of resistance and consciousness by raising explicit questions of the political aspect of academic writing. Instead, they seem to focus on how students can be empowered through a kind of reflexive academic socialisation within the academic discourse communities. Specifically, if students realise the complex textual, multimodal and contextual aspects of academic literacy, they will be able not only to participate more effectively in their communities, but also to reflexively position themselves in them as well as to explain possible tensions and failures in their assignments.

Third, the revisited models were produced within different epistemological orientations. Models of critical language awareness, genre-based literacy models and multiliteracies were based in Halliday’s systemic functional grammar. They place emphasis on linguistic and multimodal structures, for example how an argumentative genre can be thematically organised or how images contain narrative, conceptual or mixed representations as well as how students can build specific identities within them through language features of modality. In contrast, rhetorical and ethnographic-based models are not committed to a specific grammar or a linguistic perspective. The former aim at showing how students might struggle or not in how to position themselves concerning the representation of academic knowledge which is reflected in the thematic and stylistic organisation of their texts. The latter focus on how textual meaning is interdependent with literacy practices which are shaped within a specific academic context signaling explicitly or implicitly epistemological and power relations among students and teachers.

The above comparison denotes that there are no tight criteria for what really counts as a critical literacy model of education, since what is “critical” and how it is linked with academic literacy education are issues which are conceptualised explicitly or implicitly in different ways. Fu and Wang (2022) have argued that it is important for teachers to perceive academic literacy education as a field with continuous shifts among different trends (e.g., from a socio-cognitive to a sociocultural one). Given that contemporary academic literacy is complex (e.g., consider the development of global digital practices), such a view presupposes a kind of sharp delineation of this field which seems to be impossible.

However, by accepting a contrary conceptualisation of critical academic literacy education as “a historical work in progress” with “no correct or universal models” (Luke, 2012, p. 9), we slip explicitly into “relativism”, an admission that critical academic literacy education cannot be delineated as a relatively stable field. Although this might be celebrated in the academic debate, it cannot offer secure criteria regarding which model is critical and which one is not. The delineation of such criteria could inform research aiming to evaluate the application of critical literacy education models,

everyday teaching practices by those wishing to apply critical literacy education and also higher education training in critical literacy education.

## CONCLUSION

In this opinion article, I have argued that given the contrasting conceptualisations among different models, critical academic literacy education should be considered a relativist instead of a unified field. Yet, the opinion presented in this article offers a brief, limited and potential picture of how critical academic literacy education can be depicted. Such opinion can be used as a starting point for reflection and as a stimulus for further systematic research. Future research could investigate the application of critical models in practice and collect relevant previous reviews and descriptions of such models which we might not be aware of. Elaborating further on what can count as critical academic literacy edu-

cation and understanding its complexity within the global/ interactional context could fruitfully inform critical academic literacy education practice. In sum, we should rather perceive the field as a type of historical work in progress by making steps not only forward but also backwards.

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## DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

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