

**Apathy, boredom or misunderstood? Engaging students in the politics of language and the language of politics in a critical literacy course**

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# Case Study: Sarah Hattam

My teaching challenge?

Low confidence and high discomfort with politics of language

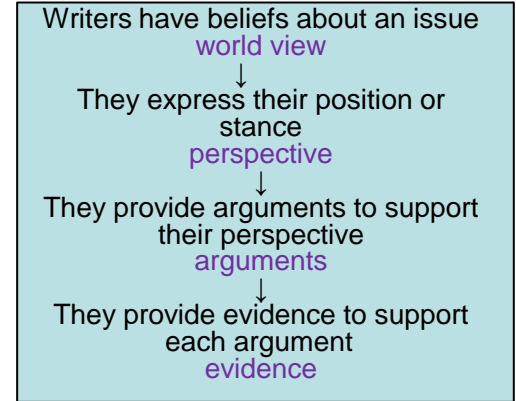
My Research Question?

How does utilising elements of enabling pedagogy - specifically connecting to student lifeworlds, scaffolding, setting challenging tasks and transformation- increase students' engagement with and understanding of 'politics' and provide the students with greater understanding of the way that language is utilised to promote a world view (such as progressive/conservative) in the media?

My intervention?

Increasing connection through lifeworlds & scaffolding of challenging tasks

Based on observations, I began developing a curriculum where 'politics' and ideology was taught more explicitly in my course.



A2 Responses =  
haphazard & patchy

yet....

'Woke' & 'Cancel Culture'  
part of student vernacular



# *Critical incidents (Tripp 1994)*

## Resistance to political discussions....

'....could she change course as she is not interested in discussing these 'political issues'...

'....another challenging me in front of the class about the suggestion to be aware of how our emotions may prevent our ability to think critically about a topic, that I was 'denying people's right to have views that are based on how they felt about something (in this case, the topic of immigration had just been raised)'....

'.... after hearing from a number of students who identified as experiencing discrimination based on their sexual or ethnic identities, that he strongly believed in freedom of speech even if it offended the person'....



# Pedagogies of discomfort

***Do I ignore the discomfort of my students or acknowledge it?  
What is the best course of action in acknowledging it?***

I chose to increase my focus on the 'affective' elements of teaching, because 'emotions' are critical to the sense-making process' (Blackmore 2009). I assumed the discomfort in exploring 'politics' distracted students from focusing on the learning task and produced an 'ill feeling' in the teaching space that was new and challenging for me.

This 'ill feeling' is shared by others (Shor 2007) and captured powerfully by Boler (2004) as she describes the three categories of students she encounters in her sociology course:

*There are those willing to walk down the path of critical thinking with me, who find their world-views shattered, but simultaneously engage in creatively rebuilding a sense of meaning and coherence in the face of ambiguity. Secondly, there are those who angrily and vocally resist my attempts to suggest that the world might possibly be other than they have comfortably experienced it. Third, are those who appear disaffected, already sufficiently numb so that my attempts to ask them to rethink the world encounter only vacant and dull stares...it is often the case that the most intense emotions of suffering are experienced by both myself and the students who loudly resist having their worldviews challenged'. (p.117).*



# 3 hopeful ideas

- 1. The enabling approaches of scaffolding, setting challenging tasks, supporting democratic teaching and learning spaces and connecting with lifeworlds would increase students engagement with and understanding of 'politics' and provide the students with greater understanding of the way that language is utilised to promote a world view (such as progressive/conservative) in the media.*
- 2. Students experience increased confidence in their future engagement with texts as they develop awareness of dominant forces in society and helps students to recognise, critique and create change and to give power over the meaning-making process.*
- 3. Paying attention to the affective domain, students could move past discomfort, disconnection and political apathy and engage with political categories and themes in the course to develop an insight to how people and issues are positioned by these categories.*



# Critical Literacy (aka Critical Thinking)

- Scaffolding - analyzing media texts to first develop criticality, leading to conducting a critical review of a peer reviewed journal article.
- Develop criticality across the genres so students learn that some are more credible sources of information than others.

This approach aligns with Luke's (2012 p. viii) argument:

*In sociocultural terms, this entails upping the ante of intellectual demand, teaching in advance of development, and generating substantive engagement with curriculum knowledge and technical discourses as ways of reading and remaking the social and scientific lifeworlds around us.*

The scaffolding from media to academic texts means the students are encouraged to view 'literacies as sets (sic) of practice, the focus shifts towards the ways in which students learn to participate and make meaning within an academic context' (Henderson and Hirst 2007, p. 26).

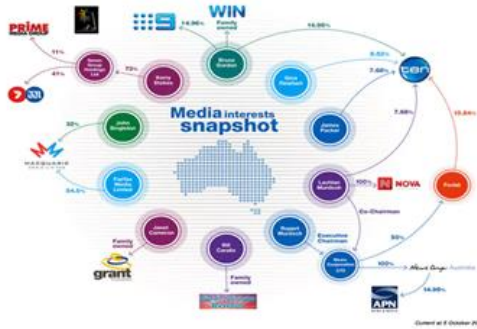
**Setting 'challenging tasks' earlier on as part of the curriculum produced greater confidence with and higher grades overall for the assessment.**



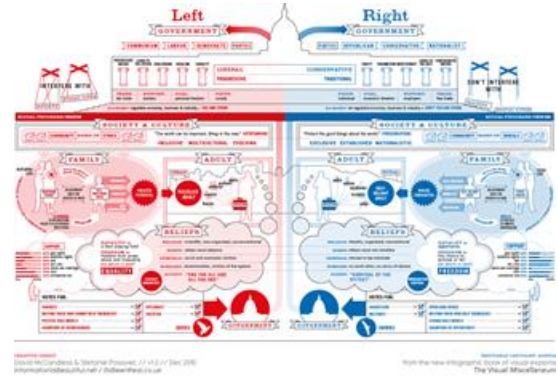
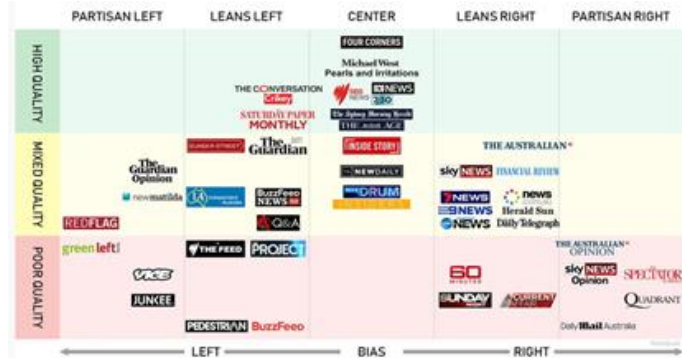
# Scaffolding: Intervention (Pt 1)

## Building media literacy is important (week 2)

I highlight for them that part of being media literate is understanding not just how the algorithms work in our social media platforms to show us content that will confirm our biases, but that we also need to ask: *Who owns the media? If there is a lack of diversity of media ownership, what does this mean for democracy in Australia? Can we identify a specific world-view being represented by the different media companies in their content?*



Media Interests Snapshot, ACMA, current at October 2016. Australian Communications and Media Authority.



# Scaffolding: Intervention (Pt 1)

To highlight that different media platforms may present stories with a specific stance that connects with a left or right political perspective, the students are given two articles on a contemporary social issue that may impact many of our students – **increasing social welfare payments**. One presents a progressive stance and one presents a conservative stance, and the students are encouraged to consider these questions:

**Compare the ‘evidence’ included to support the discussion in both articles? Whose voices are included?**

**What is the stance adopted by the News Corp article on the issue? What is the stance adopted by SBS News? Does this implicate the broader values of the news group?**

**What language techniques are adopted to inspire an emotional response in either article?**





## Article A: Daily Mail Article

Australians on the dole are set for a pay rise as JobSeeker nears its end - after warnings workers could become addicted to handouts - <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8466181/Dole-boost-Australians-pocket-extra-3900-JobSeeker-set-slashed.html>

### Key features of the texts:

Stance: positions young people as lazy and exploiting the payments. Negative perspective conveyed of the payments overall (does not support the welfare payments).

Voices : anonymous minister, manager of hotels group (Ric Torchia), WA Premier

Language – pub boss; struggling; no employees lift a finger for their \$1,100 allowance; they're being paid too much to do nothing; young people in well-off affluent suburbs; like a designer drug that they don't want to come off; get off their backsides; has become widespread

Evidence: lacks credibility, anecdotal, anonymous and only one business owners perspective of his experiences how the payments are being exploited by his employees.

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## Article B: SBS article

Government accused of playing 'cruel games' with JobSeeker after denying it's looking at boosting the rate - <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/government-accused-of-playing-cruel-games-with-jobseeker-after-denying-it-s-looking-at-boosting-the-rate>

Stance: Positions federal government as the villain, jobseeker payments need a permanent review and increase, welfare payments should be supported.

Voices of Labor Ministers, critical of Liberal-Coalition government – misrepresentation of misleading reporting from Newscorp. Other strong voices from community and other political factions in support of permanently raising the Jobseeker payment.

Language: 'cruel games'; crisis, struggle; inadequate, dignity; put food on the table; holding hostage.

Evidence: The voices included are those in authoritative positions (such as government ministers or heads of organisations).

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# Scaffolding: Intervention (Pt 2)

## Language is not neutral (week 3)

Collectively we discuss how the meanings of 'family' have changed and differ according to context and over time. I ask, why does it matter how 'family' is defined by society, different institutions (such as religion and politics) or the media.

This generates a lot of discussion in the learning space as meanings of family have strong political, social and cultural implications, that are quickly highlighted by students who may come from sole-parent families, blended families, are members of the LGBTIQ+ community or from a country where families take a different approach to managing intergenerational relationships.



In addition to this activity, students are given another text analysis task. This time they are given two media texts on the topic of Aboriginal deaths in custody, as it connects with the global Black Lives Matter movement (another contemporary social issue).

This time their task is to answer the critical literacy questions from week 2, but to also pay attention to the different methods of the authors to include 'facts' (through statistics, reports, policies) and emotive language. We discuss which article more successfully persuades the reader to adopt the authors stance, and to inspire action.

### **Week 3 Critical Thinking Text analysis**

Now we have spent some time thinking about the importance of language and the 'meanings' we attach to language, let's do our first text analysis. In this analysis we are paying attention to the evidence or the language techniques that are used to support the story in the article. Can you identify the use of efferent or aesthetic techniques that were introduced in our reading for this week on critical literacy?

We are analysing two media texts related to the topic of Aboriginal deaths in police custody. This was recently raised as a national concern with the death of George Floyd in the US, in relation to the high number of African American deaths in police custody. The Black Lives Matter movement has become a global phenomenon and in Australia we witnessed national concern over the high number of Aboriginal deaths in custody with protests happening across the country.



He said that 12 times in the few minutes before he died.

The brouhaha that led to his death didn't kick off because he had attacked another inmate or a guard, but because Dungay was eating a biscuit and was told to stop.

So tell me again how all lives matter. Explain to me why "come to Australia" is trending on Twitter when an Aboriginal man can die because he was eating a biscuit when he wasn't supposed to be.

When we saw that awful video of George Floyd being restrained by those officers in Minneapolis, black mothers in Australia saw the faces of their sons beneath that knee. When he cried out for his dead mother with his last breath, he may as well have been calling their names because they, too, are scared this is what will happen to their babies in Australia.

We've watched on in horror, clutching our pearls at the sight of the destruction, rioting and looting. But like Bob Dylan says, "when you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose". What hope do you have of a prosperous future when there's 20 per cent unemployment, 100,000 people around you have died from COVID-19 and police are killing your brothers and sisters for no good reason? Not that there is ever a good reason...



## So if the rate of deaths in custody is lower for Indigenous people, then why is it an issue?

The key finding of the royal commission was that Aboriginal people are more likely to die in custody because they are arrested and jailed at disproportionate rates. That remains as true in 2020 as it was in 1991.

In 1991, 14.3% of the male prison population in Australia was Indigenous. In March 2020 it was 28.6%. And, according to data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics this month, 4.7% of all Indigenous men are in jail compared with just 0.3% of all non-Indigenous men.

Then, as now, non-Indigenous people died in greater numbers, and at a greater rate, in custody than Indigenous people. But then, as now, Indigenous people made up just 3% of the total population.

*That means more Aboriginal people are imprisoned and dying as a proportion of their total population.*





# Student lifeworlds: Intervention (Pt 3)

In the first few weeks of the course, students are asked to pick a topic they are passionate about and to find a media text on the topic (some examples of popular topics were domestic violence, mental health, climate change).

This also provide opportunities to tap into their 'lifeworlds', as they explored a topic that connected with them personally.

Building on the scaffolding that has already occurred in weeks 1-3, in **week 4** we map out how these issues they are interested in could be influenced by whether government chooses to legislate or support through policy or provide adequate resources.

This was a significant part of the learning process, as I began to see a shift in the discussion from expressing views such as 'I think politics is boring', or 'what does it have to do with me', to a realization that 'politics is everywhere' (Mooney 2015) and the topics they have selected and are discussed in the media texts are often highly contested in political spaces.



# Student lifeworlds: Intervention (Pt 4)

Another intervention that highlights my pedagogical strategy to connect with the students lifeworlds was through conducting a case study of important issues facing students in **week 7** of the course. I searched for news headlines on the topic of graduate employment prospects, costs of education and surviving while studying.

I asked 'how are these issues framed or problematised in the media, analyzing the worldview represented in the framing'. The headlines we deconstructed in the lecture were:

1. *New data reveals which universities have the worst employment outcomes* (News.com, August 26th 2017).
2. *Five myths about Australian university graduate outcomes* (The Conversation, 24th November 2017).
3. *Cost of Australia university degrees set to soar by up to \$15k* (9 Finance, 5th April 2018).
4. *One in seven uni students often forced to go without food: new study* (Sydney Morning Herald, 13th August 2018).
5. *Was your university degree worth the debt? High-paying jobs aren't a sure thing, experts say* (ABC News, 11th April 2018).





# I problem pose 'What possible ideological position exists for this topic?'

I highlight that the stance presented across these sources is of concern for the students (as victims) of an employment market that is insecure, therefore links can be made to left/progressive side of politics for a number of reasons.

However, another way of looking at this story is that there is a scare campaign or 'panic' about employability on completing a degree. Who would be most unsettled by this news that the financial investment in education may not pay-off? People who are already marginalized and may not want to take the risk

Interestingly, it is the left/progressive media outlet '*The Conversation*' that published the article on the 'myths about university outcomes' that constructs a much more positive account of employment prospects.





# How is Adam Goodes Positioned by Andrew Bolt and Charlie King?

| <b>Andrew Bolt positions Adam Goodes as the villain</b>   | <b>Charlie King positions Adam Goodes as the victim and a hero</b>                                 |
|---|--|
| His behaviour is seen as an 'Overreaction' to the racist comment  | 'Hero' of Aboriginal people and standing up against racism no matter the age                       |
| 'Black vs. white' & 'racial divide' created by Adam Goodes  | 'Destroying' of the hero by making racist comments and booing him on the field                     |
| 'Provoking', 'threatening', 'war like' in relation to the spear throwing dance  | 'Celebration' of Aboriginal people in relation to the spear throwing dance                         |
| 'Unfair' of Goodes to single out young girl as she was only 13 years old  | 'Impact' racial comments have on people  |
| 'No lack of love' for Goodes from Australian public as he was made Australian of the year yet he 'plays on racial division' | 'Monkey', 'Ape' & 'King Kong' All racist comments towards Adam Goodes. 'Put yourself in his shoes' |
| Australia is not a 'racist society'   | 'Dangerous' for Australia not to fix this issue  |



# Data Collection

My data collection phase of the project involved the distribution of a hand-written survey to 200+ in the final week of the course that featured the following questions:

1. How confident are you to identify the political worldview that is being represented in what you read in the media?
2. How confident are you in detecting the way specific groups and people are represented in the media?
3. Do you feel confident to assess whether you should believe something as the 'truth', whether in the media or academia?



# Hopeful idea number 1

1. The enabling approaches of scaffolding, setting challenging tasks, supporting democratic teaching and learning spaces and connecting with lifeworlds would increase students engagement with and understanding of 'politics' and provide the students with greater understanding of the way that language is utilised to promote a world view (such as progressive/conservative) in the media.

In response to question 3 of the survey: *How confident do you feel about identifying the political worldview that is being represented in what you read in the media?*, many students offered positive accounts of how the course has transformed their understanding of the link between politics and the media.

Such as this response *'Before starting this course, I had very little understanding of politics, despite many people attempting to explain the concept to me in the past. I certainly had no idea political bias exists in the media. I'm now not only aware it exists, but I am able to identify it'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).



# Hopeful idea number 1

Another student reflects on their increased confidence: *'Before this course I stayed in a bubble and had no ideas about politics. After doing this course I have found myself watching the news and to try and follow what is happening...I feel more confident about understanding what I watch, read and listen to'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

This skepticism is echoed in this student comment *'I am definitely better at recognizing and identifying worldviews and now have a more skeptical approach to consuming media as well as a bigger interest in politics'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

Other students reflected on how the course assisted their understanding of politics more broadly; *'I finally understand what political parties stand for and what they try and do. Do I like politics....NO! I think most of them are dumb. However, the course has helped me understand what the media and politics is trying to do'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).



# Hopeful idea number 2

Student artefacts – demonstration of identification of political worldviews or ideologies

*This speaks to 'hopeful' idea number two regarding the student's increased confidence in their engagement with texts as they develop awareness of dominant forces in society and helps students to recognise, critique and create change and to give power over the meaning-making process.*

## 1. Students analysis of article on death of George Floyd in police custody in the US

*As News Corp Australia owns news.com.au it could be assumed the article is **right-winged**. However, the text is condemning the officers and the stance of the writer tells the audience their belief is the officers should be charged, and police brutality is evident. So, while those with right-wing ideologies believe criminals choose to be criminals and are for upholding order and survival of the fittest; the **left-wing** believes criminals are social and economic victims and are for champions of downtrodden and helping those who cannot help themselves. Therefore, showing it is a left-winged perspective and the **writer has a progressive world-view stance, believing in freedom from power, abuse and inequality** (Student #1).*



# Hopeful idea number 2

## **2. Student analysis of article on conservation of sharks in South Africa**

*The argument presented in the text condemns the actions of fisheries, governments and consumers for the decline in the great white shark population. As per cage diver operator Mr Fallows statement, “small sharks comprise up to 60% of the diet of great white sharks”. Furthermore, the highlight of this statement shows that the writer believes a decline in this population, would directly affects the population of great white sharks. **Additionally, this stance is informed by a progressive viewpoint,** as it does not consider the fisheries financial gains and is more adapt to conserving this shark species instead. The Australian government is also targeted, as shark meat exported imported “enter our fish and chip market as flake”. The author highlights this issue as it becomes harder for consumers to differentiate what they are eating. **This belief is a progressive view,** as the author is striving for change to assimilate with the current situation. The progressive ideologies in the beliefs of the author are shared with all of their stances, as they strive for reform and changing of current situations for a better future (Student #2).*





# Apathy, boredom or misunderstood – what did I learn about my students?

The data collection demonstrated students acknowledged that they may not complete the course with an increased interest with politics or political bias, but that their eyes have been opened to this process in the media and they are aware of the significance of political bias:

*'My interest in politics has not changed. I still don't have a view on it but now when I see the media exposing it, I do look up key words on the topic to gain a better understanding about what the media was wanting to expose'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019);  
*'I never really had a thought when it came to politics, however with media I have learnt not to also rely on what is being shown without looking it up with evidence'* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

Hess and Gatti (2010, p. 22) propose that 'teaching controversial issues through discussion strengthens democracy because of the causal relationship between discussion and the cultivation of political tolerance', that is vital to democracies like Australia.



# Apathy, boredom or misunderstood – what did I learn about my students?

The responses to question 2 of the survey about the course increasing confidence in identifying the way specific groups and people are represented in the media, indicate this awareness of marginalization as one student responded *‘I guess the lesson of asking ‘whose voices are being heard/ignored is important to remember’* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

Another student reflected *‘I was unaware of how much minorities were not represented in the media. I previously never thought much about the voices that were excluded’* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).

The scaffolding of concepts and application to different texts each week provided the tools for students to apply in their everyday ‘reading of the world’ (Freire 2004) as this student shared: *‘Seeing biased articles and news had always upset me, but being able to identify methods of bias and manipulation and poor research makes it easier for me to understand’* (Student feedback, Survey 2019).



# Apathy, boredom or misunderstood – what did I learn about my students?

Choosing themes that connect strongly with their lifeworlds means the students develop an enhanced awareness of the relevance of understanding political ideologies. This inspires students to challenge what is being presented as the ‘truth’ in the media across a whole range of issues.

In Freire’s terms, through the course students can become ‘masters of their own thinking’ (1974, p. 124), as their consciousness has been raised and they are empowered to create their own ‘truth’ claims, or narrative, about the world and their place in the world.

As one student reflected: *‘I think coming out of this course I will be more aware of how I might be being manipulated’* (Student feedback, Survey 2019). Another student reflected: *‘Before this course I had no interest in politics, now I find I have gained a new respect for it’* (Student feedback, Survey 2019). I have learnt that students might struggle and resist, but our role is to provide them with the ‘critical hope’ and a sense of possibility as we rebuild the world around us together through practicing compassion and being aware this is difficult in an ‘increasingly polarized society’ (Shor 2018, p. 98).



# What did I learn about my practice?

The **strategy of inviting the students** to select a topic they strongly connect with led to increased engagement and heightened sense of the relevance of politics in their lives. I also observed that often students discomfort dissipated or eased by week four or five of the course as they focused on critically analysing their own article, giving them agency over their learning and avoiding a scenario where I 'talk knowledge (Shor 1992, p. 85) at them.

Also by **demonstrating an interest in their lifeworlds** through the case study of news articles on graduate outcomes may also help alleviate the discomfort and build 'trust' and 'goodwill' between the students and myself as I demonstrate by this careful topic selection, I care about their education and employment opportunities.

I am **more attuned to my emotional reactions** in the teaching space, as I understand the importance to 'pause' and manage my own emotions (Cutri & Whiting 2015).



# In conclusion....

Enabling pedagogy enacted in a critical literacy course presents opportunities of transformation not just for students, but for educators as well. To borrow from hooks (1994, p. 21), *'any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place that teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That transformation cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks'*.

Participating in a collective action research project gave me the confidence to face my vulnerability and overcome teaching challenges that has contributed to increased student engagement, outstanding student outcomes of high challenge curricula and increased hope for the students: *I have doubted myself for most of my life but I am finally starting to realise that I am capable, I just have to believe in myself a bit more* (student email communication, 2020).

As the student cohort in Bachelor level study becomes increasingly diverse, adopting 'critical' pedagogical approaches in undergraduate teaching not only supports a social justice agenda for widening participation, but also improves overall student engagement, retention and satisfaction with teaching.

