

LEARNING TO READ CRITICALLY IN

Language & Literacy

EDITED BY

ANDREW GOODWYN

ANDREW STABLES



Learning to read critically in language and literacy

Learning to Read Critically Series

This series, edited by Mike Wallace, supports research-based teaching on masters and taught doctorate courses in humanities and social sciences fields of enquiry. Each book is a 'three in one' text designed to assist advanced course tutors and dissertation supervisors with key research-based teaching tasks and aims to:

- develop students' critical understanding of research literature;
- increase students' appreciation of what can be achieved in small-scale investigations similar to those which they undertake for their dissertation;
- present students with major findings, generalisations and concepts connected to their particular field.

Each book includes reports of professionally conducted research not previously published in this form. Students are shown how critically to review research literature, while the research reports provide them with extensive material on which to practise their critical reviewing skills. The research reports are selected as models of good practice, showing different national contexts, foci, research designs, methods of data collection and analysis, and styles of reporting. They are accessibly written with key concepts defined, and each contributor presents findings and explains how his or her research was carried out.

The books are suitable for:

- students on advanced courses or research training courses;
- academics responsible for designing and teaching advanced courses and for supervising students on these courses;
- academics who seek information within the field of enquiry.

Books in the series:

Learning to Read Critically in **Educational Leadership and Management** edited by Mike Wallace and Louise Poulson

Learning to Read Critically in **Teaching and Learning** edited by Louise Poulson and Mike Wallace

Learning to Read Critically in **Language and Literacy** edited by Andrew Goodwyn and Andrew Stables

Learning to read critically in language and literacy

Edited by
Andrew Goodwyn and Andrew Stables



Sage Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

Introduction and editorial material © Andrew Goodwyn and Andrew Stables 2005
Chapter 1 © Mike Wallace and Louise Poulson 2005
Chapter 2 © Louise Poulson and Mike Wallace 2005
Chapter 3 © Sally Mitchell and Mike Riddle 2005
Chapter 4 © Janet Maybin 2005
Chapter 5 © David Skidmore 2005
Chapter 6 © Richard Beach 2005
Chapter 7 © Judith Baxter 2005
Chapter 8 © Peter Smagorinsky and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen 2005
Chapter 9 © Andrew Goodwyn 2005
Chapter 10 © Richard Andrews 2005

First published 2004

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.



SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panshsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

Library of Congress Control Number: 2004104806

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 4473 7
ISBN 0 7619 4474 5 (pbk)

Typeset by PDQ Typesetting, Newcastle-under-Lyme
Printed in Great Britain by Athenaeum Press

Contents

Notes on contributors	vii
Preface	ix
Part 1 Becoming a critical consumer of the literature	1
1 Critical reading for self-critical writing <i>Mike Wallace and Louise Poulson</i>	3
2 Designing and writing about research: developing a critical frame of mind <i>Louise Poulson and Mike Wallace</i>	39
Part 2 Meeting the challenge of reporting research	63
3 Developing a toolkit for tackling academic discourse <i>Sally Mitchell and Mike Riddle</i>	65
4 Researching children's language and literacy practices in school <i>Janet Maybin</i>	86
5 The dialogue of spoken word and written word <i>David Skidmore</i>	107
6 Researching response to literature and the media <i>Richard Beach</i>	123
7 Analysing spoken language in the classroom <i>Judith Baxter</i>	149
8 A study of students' artistic interpretations of <i>Hamlet</i> <i>Peter Smagorinsky and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen</i>	170
9 Literacy versus English?: a professional identity crisis <i>Andrew Goodwyn</i>	192
Part 3 Meeting the challenge of reporting a review of the literature	205
10 Systematic literature reviews: the impact of networked ICT on literacy education <i>Richard Andrews</i>	207
Appendices	223
1 Useful sources of guidance	223
2 Blank form for the critical analysis of a text	226
General index	235

Notes on contributors

Andrew Goodwyn is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Teaching and Learning at the Institute of Education, University of Reading.

Andrew Stables is a Professor of Education at the University of Bath.

Mike Wallace is a Professor of Education at the University of Bath.

Louise Poulson is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Bath.

Sally Mitchell is the coordinator of the Writing in the Disciplines initiative at Queen Mary, University of London.

Mike Riddle is a Visiting Academic at Middlesex University, London.

Janet Maybin is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Communication at the Open University.

David Skidmore is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Bath.

Richard Beach is Wallace Professor of English Education at the University of Minnesota.

Judith Baxter is a Research Fellow at the University of Reading.

Peter Smagorinsky is a Professor of English Education at the University of Georgia.

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Colorado State University.

Richard Andrews is a Professor of Education at the University of York.

Preface

The purpose of this series of books is to assist students working at an advanced level with learning what it might mean to be critical and how to become a more critical consumer of literature in a particular area of enquiry. Each volume is addressed directly to students participating in masters and doctoral level programmes. The material may be studied independently by individuals and also incorporated into the formal input of a programme as a source of critical reading and writing exercises supported by tutors and supervisors. Undergraduate students, postgraduates pursuing vocational programmes and their tutors will also find useful the guidance on learning to be critical.

The book, like its predecessors in the series, is a 'three-in-one' text, which students may use to:

- ▶ develop their critical understanding of research literature through a focus on reviewing relatively small-scale investigations in a particular field of enquiry;
- ▶ increase their appreciation of what it is possible to achieve through professionally conducted research investigations of modest size or components of larger studies, informing their thinking about the scope and focus of their own dissertation or thesis;
- ▶ learn about major findings, generalisations and concepts connected with a diversity of important topics in their field of enquiry.

Programme tutors and supervisors may also use the material as sources of critical review activities and assessed assignments, as models of research to inform the planning of empirically based dissertations and theses, and as research-based information on various substantive topics in the area covered.

The book is divided into three parts. Students are offered a particular view in Part 1 of how to read literature critically and build such a critical approach into their writing, whether of assignments, a dissertation or a thesis. A structured approach to the critical analysis of a single text is offered, linked to two exercises in critically reviewing either one or several texts on the same topic. Consideration is given to the process of conducting such small-scale research and of developing the written account of it that is eventually presented for examination. Throughout Part 1, there are indications of where readers may find a relevant example among the accounts in Parts 2 and 3.

Part 2 consists of research reports written for publication (rather than examination) by leading academics in the field of language and literacy. Students are invited to practise their critical reviewing skills on them. The research reports represent models of good practice in researching and report writing that may inform students' own investigations. But as with all research studies, it is legitimate for students and others to critique these authors' arguments, their claims about what they have found out, and any recommendations they may offer for practice.

Part 3 consists of an exemplary critical literature review chapter that not only offers insights into a key aspect of the area of study but also demonstrates how a high quality literature review may be constructed. Here, too, it is legitimate to

consider how far the reviewer's claims to knowledge embodied in his or her argument are convincing. Together, the reports and the review make up a collection that is international in scope, displaying different national contexts, foci, research designs, methods of data collection and analysis, and styles of reporting.

Finally, there are two appendices. The first provides reference to selected additional sources of information. The second consists of a blank form for analysing a single text that students may wish to photocopy or to use as the basis for creating a template on their computer.

We wish to acknowledge the contributions of all those whose collaborative efforts made this book possible. The authors of chapters for Parts 2 and 3 are all busy academics who were nevertheless willing to squeeze in the time required to draft and revise their chapters to a tight deadline. 'Language and literacy' comprises a distinct area of enquiry that demands some understanding of research approaches that are not common to many kinds of educational research. In particular, the contributors to this volume place much more emphasis on forms of discourse analysis, cultural and critical theory and rhetoric than those elsewhere in the series. Indeed, terms such as 'data' and 'critical' can be heavily contested in this field. This notwithstanding, we believe that the basic template offered by the series editors continues to serve as an excellent starting point for postgraduate students intent on making informed contributions to debates in language and literacy education.

Part 1

Becoming a critical consumer of the literature

Chapter 1

Critical reading for self-critical writing

Mike Wallace and Louise Poulson

If you are a student studying for a masters or doctoral degree, you are likely to notice that the word 'critical' crops up repeatedly in phrases like 'critical understanding', 'critical evaluation', 'critical engagement' or 'critical review', together with the closely associated words 'critique' and 'criticism' – whether in the student handbook, course unit outlines or assignment titles. These words and phrases are all connected with something that course designers value, and they are giving you the opportunity to learn how to do it to the literature in your chosen area of study. Assessors, supervisors and examiners also value 'critical' activity. Criteria for assessing your course assignments, dissertation or thesis all convey the expectation that you will be able to demonstrate how you have learned to perform this activity in whatever written work you submit, often through some form of literature review. Demonstrating your competence in critical reading of the literature through the critical academic writing you produce for assessment will be a condition for the award of your qualification. So you will have to be critical in your reading from the point where you begin preparing to write your first assignment.

But what does it actually mean to be critical as a reader of literature and to demonstrate being critical as a writer in your area of study? And if you do not already know what it means and how to do it, how are you to learn? In our experience, many students are unsure what is involved in being critical but are unwilling to say so because they assume that they are expected already to know. Some lack confidence in their ability as 'beginners' or 'amateurs' to challenge the arguments and evidence put forward by respected academics and other professional writers, often very persuasively. Others have strong opinions about practice born of their years as practitioners in the area they have chosen to study. But they frequently find difficulty in justifying why these opinions are worth holding and in coping with challenges to their views.

In some cases, students' previous academic training has emphasised deference to 'older and wiser' authority figures. Such students may naturally perceive that writers are expert purveyors of knowledge and wisdom that

should not be questioned, but rather accepted and absorbed. The cultural adjustment to critical engagement with the ideas of those in 'authority' can be disorientating, but it must be achieved in order to meet the criteria for assessing postgraduate study in the western university tradition.

The process of academic enquiry reflected in postgraduate courses has its historical roots in this tradition. But with rapid globalisation it is increasingly being adopted in higher education institutions right across the world as a way of thinking and informing practical action. Here, while all individuals are entitled to respect as people, there is a cultural expectation that any person's work may legitimately be challenged, exposed to criticism, and even rejected if there are strong enough grounds for doing so. Therefore, it is quite acceptable for students to question the ideas of leading academic figures in their area of study, as long as they can give convincing reasons for their view.

Box 1.1

Being critical: great expectations

References to being critical are commonplace in official statements describing advanced courses. Anything that applies to masters level also applies to doctorates. Here is a selection from a masters course at the University of Bath offered in 2002:

Aim

- ▶ to give participants opportunities to improve their skills of **critical** thinking and analysis.

Learning Objective:

- ▶ to identify, and engage **critically** with, appropriate and representative literature in the field.

Assignment Assessment Criteria

- ▶ to what extent has the student made **critical** use of appropriate literature and professional experience to inform the focus of the study?
- ▶ to what extent has the student made **critical** use of the literature in the development of the study and its conclusions?

A national policy requirement

In 2001, the UK central government's national framework for all higher education qualifications included the following descriptors.

Masters degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- ▶ a systematic understanding of knowledge, and a **critical** awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study or area of professional practice;
- ▶ conceptual understanding that enables the student:
 - to evaluate **critically** current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline;
 - to evaluate methodologies and develop **critiques** of them and, where appropriate, to propose new hypotheses.

Indeed, the process of developing and refining knowledge and using it to inform efforts to improve practice proceeds through a never-ending sequence of claims to knowledge and counter-claims. There is a widely held belief among academics working in this tradition that no one can have a monopoly on what is to count as knowledge or on what will work in practice. Lack of agreement among experts is especially prevalent in social fields of enquiry because of the nature of the social sciences and of their application to practice. The social sciences are intrinsically value-laden ways of understanding. It is possible to adopt an explicitly value-oriented stance – positive or negative – about the phenomenon being explored. It is equally possible to adopt a relatively impartial stance, but not one that is wholly neutral. Decisions on the focus for study reflect values about what is worth investigating in the first place. Carrying out a study will be implicitly and often explicitly underpinned by positive or negative values about the topic, about ideas informing which aspects of the topic should be attended to or ignored, and about the choice of methods of investigation. The practical use to which findings may be put through related policies is bound to reflect particular political values. Unsurprisingly, there is rarely consensus among academics or practitioners on the values informing their views. Nor is there any means of proving to everyone's satisfaction which values are the right ones to hold.

Therefore, learning to be critical as you engage in academic enquiry implies accepting a particular approach to your work. We are probably all familiar with being critical in the sense of not accepting things that happen in our family, social and working lives with which we disagree, whatever our cultural background. But for students who do not have a western university cultural background it may require a bigger cultural step to feel comfortable with being publicly critical, according to the implicit rules of academic enquiry and debate, than for students who have been immersed in this tradition.

A place for being critical in academic enquiry

Postgraduate courses and research programmes leading to academic qualifications are an induction into the world of academic enquiry, writing and ways of thinking. Your participation in them offers you a form of academic apprenticeship. There are many opportunities to learn from experts by observing how they contribute to this process, whether by interacting with them face-to-face or through the medium of their writing. Even more important is the extended opportunity for you to learn-by-doing through trying out academic activities including critically reviewing literature, presenting an argument at a seminar, applying an idea to see if it works in practice, and receiving expert feedback.

Your own academic expertise will develop through this apprenticeship experience. Your habitual way of thinking about your area of study will probably become more sophisticated. You will find yourself gaining knowledge about the field including some which is at the leading-edge of what any expert knows, about topical areas of debate where experts disagree, about the limits of what is known, and about the extent to which prescriptions for practice derived from one context can be applied to another. You will also develop insights into

the critical nature of the academic enquiry that produces this knowledge and its areas of controversy. You will become familiar with the ways in which academics holding very different views about the same phenomenon will put forward their own argument persuasively while seeking to counter or refute the arguments of other academics who oppose their view.

One aspect of your thinking that you will surely notice changing is your ability to adopt a critical stance towards others' claims to knowledge about aspects of the area of study, and a self-critical stance towards your efforts to produce knowledge through your research and writing. The notion of 'being critical' tends to have a particular meaning in the academic world, reflecting values deriving from the western university cultural tradition. Here is our definition. Being critical in academic enquiry means:

- ▶ *adopting an attitude of scepticism* or reasoned doubt towards your own and others' knowledge in the field of enquiry (e.g. a theory, research findings or prescriptions for improving practice) and the processes of producing this knowledge (e.g. 'armchair' theorising, research investigations, reflecting on practice);
- ▶ habitually *questioning* the quality of your own and others' specific claims to knowledge about the field and the means by which these claims were generated;
- ▶ *scrutinising* claims to see how far they are convincing in the light of checking (e.g. whether the components of a theory are logically consistent, whether there is sufficient evidence to back a generalisation based on research findings, or whether the values underlying prescriptions for improving practice are acceptable);
- ▶ *respecting* others as people at all times. Challenging others' work is acceptable, but challenging their worth as people is not;
- ▶ *being open-minded*, willing to be convinced if scrutiny removes your doubts, or to remain unconvinced if it does not;
- ▶ *being constructive* by putting your attitude of scepticism and your open-mindedness to work in attempting to achieve a worthwhile goal. Challenging others' work to find a better way of doing things is acceptable, but indulging in destructive criticism of others' work just to demonstrate your intellectual prowess at their expense is not.

Easier said than done, of course. But the more you learn to be critical, the more you take responsibility for your academic learning activity and efforts to inform your own and others' practice (rather than being merely the passive receiver of others' wisdom, or the over-active promoter of your unjustified opinions that leave others unconvinced). Through engaging critically with the literature relating to your field of enquiry in a constructive way, you develop your capacity to understand and evaluate practice, research, theories and policies. You may also inform your efforts to conduct research and possibly to commission investigations, and to apply practical prescriptions derived from the literature.

Your ability to take responsibility for your academic learning rests on becoming a critical consumer of literature who is also a self-critical writer. In our

view, it is essential that you apply to your own work the same critical approach that you are learning to apply to others' writing. For the academics who assess your work will be critical readers of what you have written. The assessment criteria will in all probability include the extent to which your work demonstrates your ability to be critical in engaging with the literature.

In Table 1.1 we have highlighted the link between elements of your endeavours in your academic apprenticeship as a critical reader and their application to your writing for assessment by other critical readers. Those entailed in critical reading will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter, and their reflection in self-critical writing will be considered in Chapter 2. For now, we wish to draw your attention to the way each element of critical reading has its counterpart in self-critical writing. Whatever you look for as a critical reader of literature, your assessors will also look for in your writing when judging the extent to which your account of what you have read meets the assessment criteria.

Table 1.1 *Linking a critical approach to your reading with a self-critical approach to your writing*

As a critical reader of the literature, you:	As a self-critical writer of assessed work, you:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ consider the authors' purpose in writing the account ▶ examine the structure of the account to help you understand how the authors develop their argument ▶ seek to identify the main claims the authors make in putting forward their argument ▶ adopt a sceptical stance towards the authors' claims, checking whether they support convincingly what they assert ▶ question whether the authors have sufficient backing for the generalisations they make ▶ check what the authors mean by key terms in the account and whether they use these terms consistently ▶ consider whether and how any values guiding the authors' work may affect what they claim ▶ distinguish between respecting the authors as people and being sceptical about what they write ▶ keep an open mind, retaining a conditional willingness to be convinced ▶ check that everything the authors have written is relevant to their purpose in writing the account and the argument they develop ▶ expect to be given the information that is needed for you to be in a position to check any other literature sources to which the authors refer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ state your purpose in what you write to make it clear to your readers ▶ create a logical structure for your account that assists you with developing your argument, and make it clear to your readers ▶ state your own main claims clearly to help your readers understand your argument ▶ assume that your readers adopt a sceptical stance to your work, so you must convince them by supporting your claims as far as possible ▶ avoid making sweeping generalisations in your writing which you cannot justify to your readers ▶ define the key terms you employ in your account so that your readers are clear what you mean, and use these terms consistently ▶ make explicit any values that guide what you write ▶ avoid attacking authors as people but are sceptical about what they write ▶ assume that your readers are open-minded about your work and are willing to be convinced if you can adequately support your claims ▶ sustain your focus throughout your account, and avoid irrelevancies and digressions in what you write ▶ ensure that your referencing in the text and the reference list is complete and accurate so that your readers are in a position to check your sources

For instance, you may wish to know what the authors' purpose was in writing their account of, say, some research they have conducted. Knowing their purpose will help you to identify whatever argument they are developing and why they are developing it, and how they are attempting to support their argument through their claims to knowledge based on what they have found. You should similarly clarify and state your purpose in what you write as a self-critical writer reviewing this research. Your assessors will wish to know what your purpose was in writing your account, to help them identify what argument you are developing, why you are developing it, and how you have attempted to support your argument through your critical evaluation of these researchers' work. Make it easy for your assessors to find out!

As you read down the list of elements of self-critical writing, you will see that they relate to meeting the needs of your readers so that they can grasp what you are trying to communicate. But just as important, they also maximise your chances of convincing your readers that whatever argument you are putting forward is compelling. Both meeting your readers' needs and convincing them will help to ensure that your account meets their assessment criteria. So it is vital to develop a strong sense of the audience for whom you are writing.

Box 1.2

A sense of audience: profile of the typical academic who assesses your writing

<i>Age</i>	Anyone's guess
<i>Lifestyle</i>	Busy – appreciates writing with a logical structure, clear focus and fluent writing style that communicates efficiently
<i>Attitudes</i>	Fair and respectful – concerned solely with the quality of your writing Sceptical – will not accept your argument unless you can prove your case Open minded – ready to be convinced
<i>Favourite subject</i>	The area of study – knowledgeable about the area in general but not about detailed issues or about your professional experience, so welcomes a brief description but only insofar as it is relevant to your argument
<i>Likes</i>	Books – so knows the literature well and expects you to have read the literature you write about and to report it accurately Reading high quality writing – carefully constructed, well-argued, balanced, meticulous on detail, and reflective
<i>Pet hates</i>	Waffle – ill-structured writing whose focus is diffuse and which leads nowhere Avoidable errors – whether typographical, punctuation or grammatical, which careful proofreading could have picked up Over-generalisation – wild claims that go far beyond any backing they may have Poor referencing – failure to acknowledge authors, inaccurate or incomplete reference lists
<i>Most likely to say:</i>	'Address the question or task set in your assignment!' 'Keys to writing success are a logical structure and a clear focus.' 'Take the criteria for assessment into account when planning your written work.' 'Your literature review should be critical, not just descriptive.'

When reading the literature, it is worth making a habit of noticing what other writers do that helps or hinders your attempt to grasp whatever they are trying to communicate to you. Emulate the good and avoid the bad practices in your own writing, because your top priority is to communicate to your readers. The chapters in Parts 2 and 3 incorporate various techniques designed to assist readers, like dividing the text into a series of sections separated by subheadings (e.g. Chapter 3), or providing an indication in the introduction about what will be covered in the remaining sections of the chapter (e.g. pages 108–110). As you read these chapters, look out for techniques that give you clues about what their authors are trying to communicate to you. Build these techniques into your own writing.

A mental map for navigating your way around the literature

It will be helpful to develop a mental map to guide your thinking when engaging critically with literature in your area of study. The literature will probably represent unfamiliar and potentially confusing territory, especially when you are just starting out on your intellectual journey. A map enables you to find a route through the sheer quantity and complexity of the literature by working out what you need to know and then navigating your way towards the answer you seek. We will define a set of tools for thinking that form a key to this map, and then outline four of its most significant components. We will exemplify how these components contribute to people's ability to make sense of the social world and indicate how they interrelate. Together, these tools and components can be used like a map to guide you in making sense of what you read. You may refer back to them at any point to help you see what the authors of the literature are doing as they attempt to convince you through their writing. But you should also be aware that our attempt to provide you with a mental map has its own limitations. We have greatly simplified complex ideas that philosophers spend their lives critically thinking and arguing about, so you will need to consult other sources if you want to learn about such ideas in depth. (Our attempt at mental map-making is, of course, as open to critique as any other academic writing.)

Tools for thinking are necessary for understanding the social world, because your experience of it and your ability to communicate that experience does not rest solely on your senses. The social world is also interpreted through language – as we are doing here to communicate with you about engaging critically with the literature. The notion of 'education', for example, is a social construct: education is an idea employed by convention to refer to various experiences, activities and even the state of being of the educated person. But there is not a direct correspondence between the social world out there and people's interpretation of it in their minds. In common experience, different people understand what may be the same social world in different ways using a variety of terms to interpret and evaluate their experience. One person's valuable educational activities (say, opportunities for children to learn through play) may be another person's deplorable waste of time (if opportunities for learning through play are interpreted as merely encouraging playing around, without learning).

We will consider how our set of tools for thinking – the key to the mental map – is incorporated in finding out about the social world through:

- two dimensions of variation among claims to knowledge;
- three kinds of knowledge generated by reflecting on, investigating, and taking action in the social world;
- four types of literature whose authors are attempting to develop and convey different kinds of knowledge;
- five sorts of intellectual ‘project’ in which people engage who are working in a field of enquiry, leading to the creation of literature.

One set of tools for thinking...

These tools for thinking are embedded in the language through which people communicate by means of literature. They enable you to understand the social world and they have a hierarchical structure. But be warned: writers vary in what they mean by each of these tools for thinking, how they employ each tool, and how they conceive the relationship between the tools. No idea, even a tool for thinking, has an absolutely fixed and universally agreed meaning. Here is our version of what these tools are.

What are concepts?

Ideas like ‘education’ are *concepts*: terms used for classifying, interpreting, describing, explaining and evaluating aspects of the social world. The meaning of any concept may be defined using other concepts, so ‘education’ may be defined using concepts like ‘instruction’, ‘creativity’, ‘training’ or ‘skill formation’. But there is no guarantee that everyone will define any concept in the same way. If no one has a monopoly on the possession of knowledge or prescriptions for practice, no one has a monopoly on the meaning of any concept either. Consequently, there is great potential for confusion and failure to communicate if the implicit definition of key concepts adopted by authors does not match their readers’ implicit definition of these concepts. *What authors can do, however, is to offer a ‘stipulative definition’ of concepts to indicate what they mean when using particular terms (e.g. page 150).* We, as authors, are giving a stipulative definition of concepts for making sense of the social world to provide you with your map. (But we cannot guarantee that all authors would define them according to our stipulation.) For clarity in communicating about ideas, it is important to consider what you and others mean by particular concepts. Otherwise you may find yourself unclear, as a reader, about what authors mean when they use undefined terms that are central to their argument. As a writer, you may confuse your readers unless you give a stipulative definition of the core concepts that you are employing.

Since the social world is infinitely complex, it is not humanly possible to focus on all aspects of social phenomena like education at the same time. Concepts may be grouped in various ways, and used as symbols where a concept (like the idea of a ‘map’ to guide your thinking) is used to represent something

else (here, a multiplicity of concepts and ways of using them to structure thinking about aspects of the social world). Grouping concepts has the advantage of enabling you to attend closely to certain parts of the phenomenon you are studying. But to do so carries the inevitable disadvantage that you are likely to ignore other parts of the phenomenon that another group of concepts would have drawn to your attention. There seems to be no single best way of making sense of the social world. All ways entail compromises because no one is capable of attending to everything at once. Let us examine more closely how concepts are used in the creation of different sorts of knowledge that you will find represented in the literature.

What are perspectives?

Sets of concepts are often combined to form *perspectives*: selected facts, values and assumptions forming a screen for viewing social events and processes. A cultural perspective focuses on facts, values, assumptions and codes governing what can be thought and done connected with the central concept of culture (Firestone and Louis, 1999). People may pick out different features of the social world through different screens, but they cannot look through all possible screens simultaneously. Any perspective, such as cultural orientation, forms a lens for interpreting phenomena in the social world. So a cultural perspective on education might constitute a screen, directing your attention to the way educational activities contribute to moulding the beliefs and values of those being educated. It incorporates a bundle of related concepts that draw attention to some aspects of the social world while downplaying others. Cultural concepts include the sharing of beliefs, values, and 'norms' or rules of behaviour. An important concept within this perspective is the notion of ritual, where an activity symbolises something else. Degree ceremonies in higher education institutions are celebratory rituals. The procession of academics and the award event symbolise how academics are publicly acknowledging the achievement of their students who have successfully completed their degree studies, and are now welcoming them into the ranks of graduates of the university or college. The degree certificate that each successful student receives is physically just a piece of paper with her or his name on it. Yet it also symbolises the student's achievement. This particular piece of paper can be acquired only by passing the assessment requirements for the award of the degree.

What are metaphors?

A *metaphor* is a way of describing one thing as something else that is perceived to be like it in some way. Where a screen for interpreting the social world is viewed as centring on a particular idea, key concept or image, this screen is often viewed as a metaphor for those aspects of a social phenomenon to which it draws our attention. The notion of a metaphor is a good example of an idea or concept whose meaning varies between writers. Some use the term 'metaphor' interchangeably with the term 'perspective' to highlight a central concept forming a particular screen, as where reference is made to the 'cultural

metaphor'. Others implicitly define metaphor more narrowly, to capture in a single concept the image of some activity in the social world. Our image of tools for thinking as a key to a map for navigating your way around the literature is an example of such a metaphor. They do not literally provide you with a physical key, nor is there a physical map, but we hope that the image sums up for you what we are actually trying to offer.

A well-known metaphor in organisation theory is March and Olsen's (1976) image of a 'garbage can', created to sum up the process of decision-making in organisations. They wished to draw attention to a particular aspect of the phenomenon of organisational decision-making: the extent to which there may be ambiguity and unpredictability over why opportunities for making decisions arise, who participates in which decisions, and why they do or do not participate. The 'garbage can' metaphor captures the aspect of decision-making on which they wish to focus in a single image. Streams of different kinds of rubbish, representing opportunities for decision-making or organisation members who are entitled to participate, are thrown into a garbage can or dustbin. What eventually emerges from the mix is tipped out in the form of decisions. Notice that by drawing attention to ambiguity in decision-making, this metaphor draws attention away from other aspects of the phenomenon – not least the extent to which organisational decision-making may be orderly and predictable. As a critical reader, you will often find yourself engaging with an account where a particular perspective or metaphor has been adopted. It is important for you to reflect on which aspects of the social phenomenon being discussed are highlighted, and which underplayed or ignored altogether.

More than one perspective or metaphor may be used to interpret the social world in the same analysis. A common approach is to examine a phenomenon first from one perspective, then from another. Difficulties can arise when the two perspectives involve concepts that are not compatible with each other. If a cultural orientation emphasises how people share beliefs and values but, say, a political perspective emphasises how they use power to achieve their personal goals at others' expense, which explanation are you to accept? Another approach is to combine two or more perspectives by adopting stipulative definitions of the concepts from each perspective that are compatible with each other. A combined cultural and political perspective may use a stipulative definition of power that allows for power to achieve goals by working together as well as power to achieve goals through conflict. But employing combined perspectives becomes difficult because of the large number of concepts that may be involved. There is a limit to human capacity to keep a large number of ideas in mind at one time.

What are theories and models?

These terms refer to explanatory and often evaluative accounts of some aspect of the social world, incorporating a bundle of related concepts defined in a particular way. *Theories* are widely viewed as a coherent system of connected concepts, sometimes lying within one or more perspectives. They may be used to interpret, explain or, more normatively, to prescribe what should be done to

improve an aspect of the social world, as in a 'progressive theory of education'. Such a theory may be couched within a psychological perspective on individual development embodying the metaphor or image of 'nurturing growth'. *Models* generally entail a small bundle of concepts and their relationship to each other. They tend to refer to specific aspect of a phenomenon, which may be incorporated as part of a broader theory. A model of progressive education may concern a specified sequence of activities designed to provide a progressive education in a particular setting. Theories and models may or may not be informed by research or practical experience.

What are assumptions and ideologies?

Any interpretation of the social world rests on certain *assumptions*: taken-for-granted beliefs of which a person making a claim about the social world may be unaware. A progressive theory of education, for example, may rest on the assumption that learning how to learn is more important as a preparation for adult life than learning lots of facts. The validity of any assumption may always be questioned, often by considering whether there is evidence to support or challenge it, or by checking whether the assumption is logically consistent with associated claims being made about the social world.

The term *ideology* implies a system of beliefs, attitudes and opinions about some aspect of the social world based on particular assumptions. An ideology guides action to realise particular interests or goals. This action may entail preventing others from realising their interests. The 'educational philosophy' espoused by many teachers and lecturers is an ideology comprising their system of beliefs, attitudes and opinions about education, as in the view that 'education is about developing a lifelong love of learning'. It will be intrinsically value-laden, because any view of the purposes, content and methods of education, and of the ideal balance of control between the different groups involved, entails considerations about what should and should not be done that reach beyond facts. As we illustrated above, people may disagree over the values governing their view of what makes for good education.

The notion of an ideology is sometimes employed neutrally, referring to any system of beliefs whether true or false. But it is sometimes used more critically to imply a false or distorted set of beliefs, belying a partisan interest or goal that is not being made fully explicit. Marxists suggest that the content of people's ideology is at least partly determined by economic conditions, and in a capitalist society this ideology reflects their position of advantage or disadvantage within a hierarchy of social classes. The educational philosophy that 'the purpose of formal education is to provide the skilled and compliant workforce necessary for our nation's economic competitiveness in a global economy' may be interpreted critically as protecting employers' position of advantage, insofar as members of today's and tomorrow's workforce come to accept this ideology and are deflected from acting to better their economic position in respect of employers. In your critical reading, it is important first to identify where writers' claims about the social world reflect their ideology, and then to question the assumptions and values that underlie the ideology itself.

Two dimensions of variation among knowledge claims...

Arguments assert conclusions about what does, should, or should not happen in relation to some aspect of the social world. These conclusions are drawn from one or more *claims to knowledge*, assertions that something is, or normatively should be, true. Such claims to knowledge are supported, in turn, by some form of evidence that warrants the conclusion being drawn. Knowledge claims are made with varying degrees of certainty, but note that it is a separate issue whether the degree of certainty is justified. The academic literature is not short of examples of highly speculative claims to knowledge of the social world made with enormous confidence that they are certain truths. Yet no knowledge of the social world can ever be beyond all doubt, as we discussed above. It is always appropriate for you critically to ask whether there is sufficient evidence to support the degree of certainty with which a claim is made.

Uncertainty whether claims are true is often made explicit when writers state that claims are tentative or cautious. A formal means of signalling tentativeness is through *hypotheses*. A hypothesis is a claim consisting of a proposition or statement that something is the case, but which is as yet unproven. An enquiry into an aspect of the social world might begin with a hypothesis whose validity is then tested to check whether evidence supports it or not. Alternatively an enquiry may produce hypotheses as outcomes, amounting to speculations that could be tested in future. However, many hypotheses in the study of the social world are so general that they are not amenable to straightforward testing. How, for example, could the hypothesis be convincingly tested that ‘learning how to learn is a more effective preparation for adult life than learning lots of facts’? What would count as sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that the hypothesis was disproved or supported?

Claims are also made with varying degrees of *generalisation* from the context of practice or experience from which they were derived to the range of other contexts to which they are supposed to apply. For example, a claim about the effectiveness of progressive education might be made solely in relation to British primary schools, or alternatively in relation to all schools and other educational arrangements anywhere. Frequently, sweeping generalisations are not explicit about the range of contexts to which a claim applies. The extent of the claim is implied rather than stated, as in the assertion that ‘learning how to learn is a more effective preparation for adult life than learning lots of facts’. Implicitly, this claim is asserted to have universal applicability – to all children everywhere, past, present or future. But note that generalisations are, in themselves, just assertions that something is known, not proof that it is known. Anyone can make generalisations – we have just done exactly that at the beginning of this sentence! It is another matter whether there is sufficient evidence that whatever is claimed really does apply to all the contexts to which the claim is explicitly or implicitly asserted to apply. So you may always, appropriately, ask the critical question whether there is sufficient evidence to support the degree of generalisation in the claim being made.

The broader the generalisation that some claim has *applicability* to a wider range of contexts, the more difficult it is to demonstrate that there is sufficient evidence from all these diverse contexts to support the claim. But general-