Critical realism and academic writing: why theory matters for practice

25 January 2024, 4:00 pm–5:00 pm

Speaker: Julia Molinari; Chair: Jackie Tuck

These are Julia's answers to questions from the seminar that were not answered due to time constraints. Answers are brief and were redacted after the seminar.

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Questions from the Chair

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Jackie Tuck
One area I'd like to pick up on is the importance of knowledge, and particularly of knowledge of the deep underlying structural mechanisms which explain why things are as they are e.g. why some texts are valued as academic writing and others are not. In the context of EAP particularly you've emphasised the role of scholarship in identifying the 'levers of change'. I'd like to explore whose knowledge is the focus of CR. Is it the knowledge of practitioners who can then make decisions e.g. about what pedagogies are most likely to be emancipatory for students? Where then does the knowledge of student writers themselves fit in this picture? Is there a role for a more Freirean pedagogy whereby the student becomes the teacher and the teacher the learner? Can the deep underlying knowledge of structures come from the everyday scholarship of students as well as from the 'serious' scholar?

Julia Molinari
I'm drawn to Critical Realism (CR) as a way to *approach* knowledge rather than to make an evaluative claim about what or whose knowledge is more or less valuable. However, because CR ultimately posits that if we understood the structures, mechanisms, and powers that *explain* Manifest/Actual reality (ie the reality that exists even though we may not individually experience it, such as poverty or racism and the many ways to write academically), then we would most likely choose knowledge that advances the 'good'. We would make that choice in virtue of knowing what options are open to us at the subjective level (because we know what is possible (Manifest) and why it is possible (Real).

So, for example, if both practitioners and students knew that it's possible for a comic to be academic and why (as I discuss in [my book](#)), then at least they could have those conversations in class. CR is emancipatory in the sense that knowledge of reality across all 3 strata (the deep structural level, the manifest level, and the experiential level) emancipates us. I don't know enough to draw parallels between CR metatheory and Freirean pedagogy, I don't think I'd be comparing like-for-like. What I see Freire and CR having in common, though, is a commitment to social justice and human emancipation or flourishing.

Jackie Tuck
CR is quite extensively used in social science applied fields such as Education, with its layers from micropedagogies and individual identities to large scale institutional, national and international legal and policy structures. So it makes sense that CR might prove helpful in the context of an international and national educational industry/market and pedagogic domain such as EAP. However, it seems to be less in use in Applied Linguistics outside Language Teaching or EAP. Why do you think this is? Does CR point to a particular theory or theories of language? And in CR, is language 'real' or not? At what level or levels of the stratified model does language operate?

Julia Molinari
Norman Fairclough is the applied linguist most associated with CR because of his work on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which focuses on semiotics and hermeneutics to explain how texts make meaning: Roy Bhaskar refers to Fairclough in a chapter on 'Ethics and Language' in *Enlightened*

Common Sense. In this chapter, Bhaskar explicitly claims that language can be classified ontologically across the 3 strata as follows:

- Discourse is at the level of the REAL
- Texts are at the level of the ACTUAL
- Interpretations are at the level of the EMPIRICAL

I've not read Fairclough on CR but I'm guessing my application of CR is related in the sense that I come to the conclusion in my book that it's not the language itself that is academic but an ecology of signs (signifiers, signifieds, and referents) that enable academicness to emerge from a text. I've not systematically mapped this onto the above classification. I'm currently involved in conversations with Applied Linguists like Karin Zotzmann and Jeremie Bouchard who are looking to bring Applied Linguistics and CR in conversation so your questions are really relevant. Watch this space …

Jackie Tuck
For me, in Academic Literacies, criticality is less about defining a desired end point of social transformation and more about being clear about the starting point, which is a world shaped by power and rife with inequality and oppression. Could you explore more for us what you understand by the 'critical' in CR and what differences, if any, you see between a CR notion of criticality and definitions of the critical in other sociological paradigms which have been drawn on in applied linguistics, ethnographies of communication and literacies research and practice?

Julia Molinari
The 'critical' in 'Critical Realism' is a fairly technical term. It refers to the ability of agents to change reality by exerting their judgemental rationality (an informed disposition to establishing which theories or actions are better than others). In fact, Roy Bhaskar's original scientific theory was called 'Transcendental Naturalism' (see Andrew Collier's *Introduction to Critical Realism* for an explanation of this), whereby the 'transcendental' refers to causal powers that affect reality. The social theory of CR posits that locating causes and powers affords critical intervention, ie a better chance of being able to transform reality for the better.

Jackie Tuck
You make a strong case for interdisciplinarity as part of the process of CR analysis. One aspect about CR that you've mentioned and which I find attractive (and resonant with my view of academic literacies) is its process of bringing different lenses and theories to bear on a problem, and its drive towards interdisciplinarity. This is how I understand the concept of the transfactual which you mention in your chapter of Ding and Evans. This seems to me to be very pertinent for our times – since the complex social problems we face are inherently disciplinary – yet the conditions of knowledge production in the contemporary academy tend to make interdisciplinarity more difficult to achieve.

Can you say a bit more about how CR promotes an interdisciplinary approach to academic writing and its development?

Julia Molinari
The basic idea is: CR is premised on reality being stratified according to our individual experiences (the EMPIRICAL), the manifest (what is ACTUAL regardless of our experiences), and the deep structures, mechanisms, powers (the REAL) that explain reality at the 2 other levels. What this commits us to, ontologically, is that reality is not exhausted by any one of these levels. They are all real but in different ways. To make sense of the way we experience reality at our individual subjective level and to stand any chance of changing it, we need to know about what is possible at the ACTUAL level and about the deeper reality that makes our experiences possible. So, for example, to explain why practitioners may feel stressed, we might need to look beyond a single cause such as 'they don't do enough yoga' (think of how many 'free yoga' classes we get offered via our institutional emails!).

On a CR account, the most likely explanation for this widespread anxiety probably lies elsewhere, eg in a capitalist model of university governance that relies on precarity, exploitation, and so on. This is an interdisciplinary explanation of 'stress in the workplace'. The 'transfactuals' are indeed those variables that don't normally make it into explanatory accounts of why things are the way they are.

Questions from attendees

Hua (Guest) 04:39 PM

Could you please provide an example of how we can apply critical realism to an EAP lesson, so that students of different disciplines can transfer the knowledge learned to their future disciplinary studies? Thank you!

Julia Molinari:

This is a huge and highly relevant question. You may find some initial answers and thoughts in here: https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/monograph-detail?docid=b-9781350243958&pdfid=9781350243958.ch-5.pdf&tocid=b-9781350243958-chapter5

Overall, I would say that CR is a way of thinking about reality. It asks us to think about what knowledge we need to intervene criticality (ie change) on reality in the interests of social justice and human emancipation. So, for example, a practical question in relation to EAP might involve asking:

1. who is harmed and benefitted by what and how I write?
2. who is included in and excluded from my references?
3. what/whose forms of academic writing should we teach, given their diversity?

Katia Dowdle 04:46 PM

Thank you very much. Very interesting! Have you tried to disseminate and discuss these ideas with university subject lecturers and module leaders who set assessments, rubrics and marking criteria in their subject modules? If yes, I wonder what their thoughts were?

Julia Molinari

yes, and since I am one of those 'subject lecturers', I make sure my teachings include, or at least refer to, a range of texts that count as academic. Change can start in our everyday micro-decisions, in the language we choose to describe things, in curriculum meetings, in our choice of classroom discourse. For example, instead of describing academic writing as 'objective' or 'formal' or 'linear' it could be described as 'recursive', in keeping with multimodal research. But change also happens by knowing how things work and why, eg that other theses formats exist.

I explain this in https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/what-makes-writing-academic-9781350243927/, especially Chapters 3 and 5

Stephen Lewin (Guest) 04:48 PM

Do you see the move to AI-proofing of courses or development of different genres of assessment as something that may trigger a change in what is accepted as an academic text (or what is "privileged over other forms") Really fantastic presentation by the way and thankyou.

Julia Molinari

Thank you, Stephen! Yes, I think that if we – practitioners-curriculum leaders-students - had non-hierarchal forums where we could listen and learn from each and design our assessments from a position of knowledge (ie of knowing what exists at the MANIFEST level and what makes that existence possible, knowing also, for example, that ungrading is an option), we stand a greater chance of intervening 'critically' (see my answer to Jackie above) on our realities. Re. AI, one hypothesis I have come across in the literatures is that we may be moving away from thinking of texts as having 'authors', in the traditional sense, towards texts having 'curators' or 'editors'. For example, you could prompt the LLM for a response, refine that prompt, curate the response, triangulate it with knowledge from other sources, and then discuss your 'curated' text in a viva.

A-K Reck (Guest) 04:52 PM

Could you perhaps clarify in what sense you/critical realists use the term "corrigible" and also in what way(s) the corrigibility of both reality and the empirical should matter for the practice of academic writing?

Julia Molinari

By 'corrigible', CR means that knowledge is transitive, it can change - the idea is that humans should be humble about what they think they know. In practice, this means letting go of some beliefs, such as paragraphs needing specific structures or academic writing being 'objective'.

Irina Kyulanova (Guest) 04:54 PM

Thank you very much for your fascinating talk! I have a couple of questions.
1. What does Critical Realism mean by Reality - sounds like it is mostly social reality, rather than physical reality? Would it cover the construction of knowledge in all disciplines (eg theoretical physics and theology)?
2. Following up on Katia Dowdle's question, EAP teaching at universities usually has a supportive role, helping students conform to disciplinary expectations which are determined / reproduced by other experts. To what extent do you think EAP practitioners have power to challenge norms or expand the scope of what counts as academic writing?

Julia Molinari

Thank you, Irina!
1. For CR, reality is stratified. To put it bluntly, what we think we know is not the be-all-and-end-all. CR accommodates subjective/empirical (socio-constructivism/relativism) & foundational reality (positivism/objectivity). Tom Fryer explains this simply [here](). The disciplines would sit in the subjective stratum (the EMPIRICAL). This is because each discipline is *just one* way of knowing and is relative to our methods, values, circumstances.
2. In my book, and following [Ding and Bruce](), I encourage practitioners to engage in scholarship (of Teaching and Learning and research more broadly) so they become knowledgeable about other ways of doing things, including the deeper structural reality of economics and politics. This goes hand in hand with shaping pedagogy, so getting involved in curriculum design, for example. A CR lens has allowed me to articulate that no individual can do anything alone but knowing what others are doing, what values underpin our practices, getting involved in committees, groups, etc. knowing how things work out there, is where I see the power.

Anonymous Attendee 05:01 PM

Thank you for your talk. It seems that the EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) is a good substitute for the dissertation. It also allows for a variety of texts (not just writing). I wonder if you endorse such an approach? thanks!

Julia Molinari

I absolutely do! I'm a huge fan of the EPQ. I tried to encourage my son to take it alongside his A-Levels a few years ago and was disappointed to learn from the school that it was considered a 'back-up option', just in case A-Levels didn't work out. Personally, I did a European Baccalaureate at 18, which is probably why I endorse a broad curriculum with lots of history and philosophy. So yes, I think my CR approach is compatible with a curriculum that is multidisciplinary, multimodal, research-based, where writers have autonomy to choose their topic, research it, and 'compose' it as text.

Onur Ozmen (Guest) 05:04 PM

@Irina Kyulanova: critical realists mean every thing by reality. More precisely, everything that is potentially causally efficacious is real. So illusions are mistakes are also real, because they cause things in the world. Reality includes both the social and natural realms, and our knowledge of it, so the construction of knowledge would be a part of reality. So ontology encompasses epistemology in that way. I hope this helps.

Irina Kyulanova (Guest) 05:07 PM

Thank you very much @Onur Ozmen, this definitely clarifies things!

Julia Molinari

Thank you, Onur, for explaining this 😊

Dimitar Angelov (01:00:17):

Thank you, Julia, for this inspiring talk. It is so refreshing to talk about hope and the possibility for change at the present moment. Do you see the advent of AI in HE as a force for good or as yet another opportunity for existing power structures to reassert themselves?

Julia Molinari

Thank you, Dimitar! AI, or LLMs and GenAI to be more specific, are profit-driven not knowledge or pedagogy-driven. They were created and imposed on education by business men not by educationalists. As educationalists, we need to deal with them, as we deal with all social phenomena (government cuts, job insecurities, the ubiquity of google and surveillance capitalism, etc.). From a CR perspective, they are part of the structural landscape (the REAL) so they will have effects on the manifest genres (the ACTUAL). At our individual levels (the EMPIRICAL), we need to engage as we would with anything we may not like by understanding it, by putting ourselves in a position of knowledge. That position involves knowing what AI is, how it works, who it benefits and harms, etc. I've been delighted and surprised by how many of the students I speak to don't care about it and don't use it. They find it more of a nuisance than an aid because they have so much editing and fact-checking to do afterwards. But then there are things it does which I think are fine, like generating an outline/mindmap that can get us started on writing. Personally, it's not helped me with much, so far. Socially/collectively, I think it risks perpetuating the usual 2-tier systems whereby some will have the resources to turn it into competitive advantage and some will not, and those who unleashed it on us will make obscene amounts of money from it. It's also environmentally harmful, as is capitalism, so all this needs to be part of educational discourse, not simply 'how do we use it to teach'.

Evangelia (Eva) Tsimpoukli 01:06:55

To the best of my understanding, I think that what this theory strongly puts forward/indicates is that social problems would not be ongoing if people, beginning with scholars-teachers, thought along the Critical Realism theory lines and spread the word on that to educate people. In line with that, it is deeply rooted in the Greek philosophy that praxis cannot exist without ideas/thinking first. And the language choices we make to communicate that is what affects life and living.

Julia Molinari

Yes, Evangelia, I think you're right. My book, especially chapter 1 and chapter 4 explains how I link theory and practice. Overall, I stand with Maggie Maclure: theory lets us see beyond 'the bleedin' obvious' (see slides), which is why it 'offends'.

Rob Playfair   01:19:44

It would be great to have a follow up session comparing CR with other theories related to EAP, e.g., Ac Lits or SFL

Julia Molinari

Agreed. I'd love to do this for AcLits, which is where I found intellectual (critical and emotional) sanctuary when I first started teaching EAP. AcLits is honest about its values and ideologies, and basically cares about writers. As I tried to explain in my talk, CR has given me a more systematic way of articulating that we all have ideologies and values and that these can be regulated, refined, corrected in light of what is possible (MANIFEST) and what makes things possible (REAL).