

Education writes back: On the future/present of cultural studies of education

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I begin with an anecdote from my practice as a teacher educator. I teach a course in secondary social studies methods—these are preservice teachers who hope to teach history, civics, geography, or sociology in secondary education—with a mix of undergraduates and certification-only students in which each student does a 10 minutes mini-lesson on any topic of their choosing. They try out a variety of techniques and formats, in many ways trying to find their teacher voice. We stress in this course the role of social studies education in preparing citizens in a democracy and hold the position that the social sciences are only as important as we're able to apply what we learn to our contemporary context. Because of the time constraints, current events and controversial issues have consistently been popular and discussions have been lively. But... something interesting has happened the last two times I've taught the course.

My question is this: *what does it mean that in a room full of preservice social studies educators for almost two entire semesters, neither the War in Iraq nor War on Terror has even come up?*

This anecdote will be left hanging for the moment and returned to in the conclusion. To begin again—a little more formally—I offer three questions:

- 1) *what possibilities are opened up for research in social education by adopting this framework in social education research?*
- 2) *to what ends does the inclusion or omission of this framework lead (or, rather, what is at stake?)?*
- 3) *and, what possibilities does a return to education as a site of analysis hold for the field of cultural studies?*

Cultural Studies—a controversial and contested approach to the study of the social world—embraces a theoretical approach to the study of interactions between the lived experiences and interpretations of people and the social structures that act upon and encode meaning to those experiences (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992; Carlson & Dimitriadis, 2003). Four major themes of cultural studies (materialism, anti-essentialism, social constructivism, and radical

contextuality) provide a format for investigating the complexities of social education within contemporary and emerging social formations.

The insistence on a radical contextuality to the exploration of the creation of systems of political and cultural power forms the point of departure for a cultural studies approach. New directions for social research such as feminist citizenship (Shinew 2001), ethical citizenship (Houser & Kuzmic, 2001), and diverse calls for social justice (Ross 2001) would all benefit from the interdisciplinarity, materiality and anti-essentialism of a cultural studies interpretation. The project here applies a cultural studies approach to the study of education, theorizes the subsequent benefit to contemporary research in social studies education, and attempts to “write back”—to suggest a return to cultural studies’ attention to education as both a site for analytical work and another entrée into the broader political project of a cultural studies commitment.

Possibilities, Frameworks, and “what is at stake”:

A quick review of the research in social education suggests that currently the themes of multiculturalism, education for citizenship (particularly in a global context), and technology embedded within the curriculum hold particular prominence in the field. How these three strands weave together remains an interesting aspect to complex and multifaceted questions that cultural studies is particularly poised to address. This being the case, a “detour through theory” (see Grossberg, 1997) seems to be appropriate for a discussion of new directions for research in social education. This detour delineates a particular cultural studies approach that includes: 1) a description of the theoretical

underpinnings of cultural studies, specifically as originating in the Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies; 2) an exploration of how this theoretical frame has influenced my own research method; and 3) an offering of the spaces of possibility for continued intersection between cultural studies theoretical work and research in social education. In sum, this project seeks to seriously address Stuart Hall's charge that "theory is always a detour on the way to something more important" (cited in Grossberg 1997, p.346).

This detour through theory promises new ways in which to engage in the project of social education. This particular cultural studies approach insists on including in our analysis both the social construction of structural constraints and the material effects of those constraints in lived experience. Constructions, like whiteness for example, are precisely that—constructed, yet the material, tangible effects of these forces are laden with issues of power and privilege and play out in classrooms, playgrounds and neighborhoods every day. How people form identities and multiculturalisms in response to global structures of power remain to be seen. They are untidy, sliding signifiers that are taken up strategically by people in ways multitudinous and contradictory. Both the analysis of the ways in which people do this and the suggesting of ways in which to utilize such formations politically needs to precisely *be* the project of social education.

The intersections of citizenship, multiculturalism, and technology—again three major themes in social education research—do indeed sound familiar as one takes up a cultural studies approach. Questions emerge almost organically: how does information technology and its ability to connect and disconnect affect

issues of citizenship, sovereignty, identity? What does citizenship mean in a multicultural context? In an increasingly global context? What do we mean by culture and, perhaps most importantly, how does culture *mean* within all of this? All three of these issues play important roles in what many—however and however poorly defined—call globalization. Cultural studies, as an approach, would add identity, power, agency, and structure (perhaps even space and place) to the mix and a tangled knot of forces becomes the object of analysis. Furthermore, as noted above, cultural studies embraces an explicit political project in taking up its work; it seeks to intervene in the contemporary world. Kathy Hytten, an important scholar early in thinking through the connections of cultural studies and education in the US context points to this commitment as an ethics. She writes,

[C]ultural studies is an expressly left intellectual project that is political, interventionist, socially committed, ethically charged and critical. Its aims are both to interpret cultural phenomenon and to intervene in the world in transformative and empowering ways” (Hytten, 1998a, n.p.).

The acknowledgement that cultural studies as an approach is both intellectual and interventionist seems particularly relevant to the work of both teacher education and the study of educative spaces. Indeed, what we try to do in teacher education is to introduce those who would teach to both the realities of school and schooling in contemporary society but also to instill some degree of empowerment in the broader social world, a sense that they as effective teachers can do their work in schools in ways that contribute to a more progressive future.

Perhaps these two goals not only reflect a fundamental tension in the work of teacher education (i.e. how does one simultaneously work for the state and attempt to transform the state) but help explain some of the forbidden appeal of cultural studies; its own rejection of the dichotomous goals and willing embrace of the inherent contradictions often cuts too close to home. But to push the point further, Hytten (1998) suggests that cultural studies work includes an ethical imperative—one that should not be lost here and, writing from the position of education, writes back to cultural studies.

The ethical point is that academic work is not simply a commodity for other intellectuals, but should help individuals to better understand their lives and conditions so that they can then work towards positively altering them. (p.253)

The suggestion here is that work on school and schooling, particularly as education is increasingly a site of the social and economic policies of neoliberalism, holds great promise for cultural studies work. Schools, as we all know, are fundamental sites for both reproduction of and resistance to social forces on the lives of young people. But, of course, herein lies the rub as we can run the risk of pursuing academic work both in terms of personal research and curriculum in our courses that effectively ignores the needs of our students or of society writ large. This often too comes down to the job we do of communicating the intentions of our efforts and applying that work to a broader political project.

As an exemplar of the kind of cultural studies work that I think importantly touches on contemporary education, I offer Larry Grossberg's (2005) *Caught in the Crossfire: Kids, Politics, and America's Future* as a cultural studies text that

deals with issues central to the concerns of social educators. It might also be notable to state that this book seems to be getting little to no attention in education circles in the United States. Grossberg contends that the present moment in the United States can be characterized as the “struggle for a new modernity,” an “American Modernity” with very material global impact. The end of the Cold War, the rise of Information Technology, and specific machinations of a new conservatism have all coalesced to create conditions for this struggle. Grossberg contends that the lived experience for kids under this context plays out in particularly grim ways and the relationship with our children in this new modernity helps to explain larger cultural forces at work.

Identity, and its relation to politics (and therefore citizenship) holds a central place in Grossberg’s argument. It is the conflicts between these different senses of political self that come to set the stage for the struggle. He states, “the current struggles over modernity are fueled by the gap between universal abstract citizenship and a particularistic community of local identity and by an identification of equality with the recognition of difference” (Grossberg, 2005, p.294). Using an in-depth analysis of competing and often contradictory media representations and public policy, *Caught in the Crossfire* suggests that identity and citizenship in a multicultural Information Age are in contention. What they might mean are precisely part of the “field of struggle” that characterizes American and global culture.

The first part of Grossberg’s text comes close to overwhelming the reader with evidence that speaks to the changing status of children in our contemporary

culture. Images of wild youth, kids out of control, and the increase in a desire for surveillance and systems of accountability permeate the conventional wisdom about young people in America. These representations, however, all work on the public consciousness in spite of a large amount of evidence that the “state of youth” is, in many ways, better than its ever been (i.e. literacy is up, violence is down). His thesis is that this struggle for modernity involves a series of forces working in concert to our relationship with the future and its most tangible manifestation, children. To be precise, the switch from labor based capital to finance capital, the changing form and function of the nation-state, the increase in intensity of the deterritorialization/reterritorialization of global markets, and a changing sense of both individual subjectivity and collective identity have served to put one certainty of liberal modernity in question, the future.

As long as one believes in the relation of the present and the future, there is always an escape route. There is always a way to get from here to someplace else. And as long as there is an escape route, there is always a possibility of a community defined in opposition to the present. The struggle to make a new modernity seems to be undermining even the possibility of imagining other futures connected to the present and of appealing to the imaginative power of the future. (Grossberg, 2005, p.307)

We are back to our framing questions for this essay but, frighteningly, this cultural studies analysis not only offers possibilities for researchers in social education, it points to the larger struggle that puts *possibility itself* in question.

Part of what I wish to do is extend that point of “possibility” even further as an example of the way in which education scholars might write back.

Grossberg’s expertise and distinguished scholarship revolves around youth and youth culture, central to a study of education. However, without a background as

a classroom teacher and without deeper understandings of the cultures of schools the analysis, like all good analyses I might add, points to new questions and areas of inquiry. Not centering on schools opens up the possibility for education scholars to write back within a cultural studies frame in hopes of extending our understanding and ultimately finding where we might ethically intervene.

Returning to my opening anecdote regarding the War in Iraq, I would point to the usefulness of extending Grossberg's analysis to preservice teachers. The university students today, with of course some exceptions, coming into teacher education programs have particular identity-positions that have come into being through interaction with this larger, mediated social context. Cultural Studies analysis offers new ways to think through that context as we strive to prepare the teachers of tomorrow but, in addition, this work serves to illuminate aspects of that larger context in which a project like public education must operate. Thinking through "the political economy of culture" (Kellner, n.d.) points to the ways in which meaning is made, cultural texts are produced and distributed, and opens the door to productive critique.

Concluding Thoughts:

Ending with the hope of Larry Grossberg and offering that it is one that is shared by critical scholars in the field of education as well:

I hope this book will contribute to the conversation through which we might find again the possibility of imagining alternative futures, and through which we might choose a less destructive direction for the undiscovered possibilities of kids' present and future lives. (Grossberg, 2005, p.12)

The undiscovered possibilities for children are precisely what is at stake in the current struggles over the role of education in civil society—precisely why education must write back. I offer here that not only does a critical cultural studies approach offer new possibilities for scholarship in education but that education itself holds particular promise as a site of analysis of cultural studies scholars. Insisting upon close attention to the materiality of education policy—the lived experience of schools—and approaching the work through a radical contextuality that seeks to place all ideological and cultural forces in context, a cultural studies approach to education takes up both the political project of imagining new possibilities as well as understanding school and schooling as much more than simple, bounded systems. In the tradition of the Education Group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the future/present of cultural studies of education should be precisely to continue of the conversation that takes seriously the cultural production of meaning around issues of education, the ethical commitments of academic analysis, and the hope for new, undiscovered possibilities.

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