TRANSGRESSIONS - CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

The Need for *Revision*

Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century

David P. Owen, Jr.

SensePublishers

THE NEED FOR *REVISION*

TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

This book series is dedicated to the radical love and actions of Paulo Freire, Jesus "Pato" Gomez, and Joe L. Kincheloe.

TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some "touchy-feely" educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving.

Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* seeks to produce – literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.

The Need for *Revision*

Curriculum, Literature, and the 21st Century

By

David P. Owen, Jr.

SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM / BOSTON / TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-94-6091-658-8 (paperback)
ISBN 978-94-6091-659-5 (hardback)
ISBN 978-94-6091-660-1 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858, 3001 AW Rotterdam, The Netherlands
www.sensepublishers.com

This book has been reviewed by independent peer reviewers, who recommended publication.

Printed on acid-free paper

For Courtney, just like everything else.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Everything I've ever done can be attributed in large part to a loving God and the continued support of my Owen, Hancock, and Garner family, as well as good friends far and near, new and old. They have all continued to encourage me in my work despite the time and energy it would take from our relationships and my duties to them. Over the past few years, I have been reminded in a thousand little ways, and some big ones, how important those relationships are to me.

I would especially like to thank John A. Weaver, as great a mentor as anyone is likely to find, who was instrumental in my efforts to complete this book in too many ways to list, and whose insight and encouragement always push me to do my best work. I would also like to acknowledge Daniel E. Chapman, Mary Aswell Doll, Marla Morris, and William M. Reynolds for their guidance and wisdom throughout the formation of this text. Finally, I would like to thank all of the people with whom I have had the conversations over the last few years that helped me put these ideas into words: Hanna Beall, Charlotte Eisel, Teresa Ferguson, Pete Fuller, Jason Harwell, Barry Krakovsky, Drew Lawson, Monica Radcliff, Shelley Stahl, Melanie Watson, and all of my colleagues in the English department.

CHAPTER 1

FOR | WORD

When people find out that I teach high school literature, the most common thing they say is, "Why would you want to do that? I couldn't do what you do." They don't mean, of course, that they are impressed with my job—they just think it's hard, and probably not worth the trouble. Well, I certainly think it *is* worth the trouble, and will spend the rest of this work talking about why. But as for the difficulty of teaching high school literature today: no kidding. People don't read the texts we assign much, essays seem to get a little worse all the time (certainly the mechanics do), and students will usually confess that they don't take class seriously unless we happen to study something they like. It is hard, and I can hardly do it, either.

In fact, the difficulty of teaching the word today has dire ramifications for all teachers and researchers in and of public education, and particularly for the field of curriculum studies. For one, whatever the content of the subject matter, we all still do most of our teaching and research work with words, lots of them, and publish those words in scholarly books and journals, precisely when the world around us is reading these kinds of things less and less. Can we really help determine whose knowledge matters most, or what should be passed from one generation to the next, if no one reads our work, or knows what we are talking about—let alone why we are talking about it? Here I am, after all, *writing* page after page about and for people who will, very likely, never *read* them. In fact, the people I want to talk to most don't read much of anything anymore, let alone works of curriculum theory. The problem is that many people today, particularly young people (roughly in their early 30's and younger), are used to—literally and metaphorically—"changing the channel" whenever they lose interest in whatever is before them, just about wherever they go, ever since the technological gadget explosion of the mid-90's. They don't necessarily hate books; they just have a lot of options, and we have little time to hook them (ever seen a restless teenager with a remote control?). This is true whether the "text" before them is a television channel, an iPod track, a radio station, a Web site, *or whatever we are trying to teach them at school*. It is also true that some of these "channel-changers" are *teachers* now, not just students. What to do, then? Quit writing books? Quit hoping that people read them?

As an illustration of this problem in curriculum studies and public education, I offer an image from William F. Pinar's (2007) *Intellectual Advancement Through Disciplinarity*, in which Pinar argues that we need more scholars working specifically on the history and current state of the field of curriculum studies. I think he is right, but I also think we need another kind of scholar as well. Pinar says in his introduction that "disciplinary conversation is hardly held in a sound-proof room," and that "the sounds of events from outside the field … influence

what we say to each other and to schoolteachers" (p. xiv). I absolutely agree, but I find those outside "sounds" particularly intriguing, and I think we need to do more than hear muffled traces and rumors of what is going on outside that metaphorical room; in short, I'm worried that if we are not careful, when we want to emerge from the room of our disciplinary studies, we will find the doors locked and the lights off, so to speak. I'm worried that the young students and teachers we want to help will change the channel on us.

To prevent such a thing from happening, I propose a kind of *liminal scholar*, one who works in the windows and doorways of the academy, now at the conference table or library, now in the hallways, now in the open air of the world "outside the field," lest those spaces-between where the inside and outside commingle become instead impermeable walls. I, for one, have never felt quite at home in either place; I often wish the world were a little more academic and the academy a little more worldly, and I am sure there are others like me. So, rather than force ourselves into places we do not fit, I propose that some of us make a home of our homelessness, and serve as conduits for the open transit of ideas across academy thresholds. Perhaps if we do this work well enough, we can convince the academy (and the public school) to open its doors a little more and young people to "put down the clicker" every now and then, or at least hand it over and let us do the clicking. These *liminal scholars* will need to do what I call the work of *revision*; they will need to constantly see how what's going on inside affects what's going on outside, and vice versa, and *revise* public education to suit the new circumstances.

I would like to begin my own version of this work with why I think we in public education today need our *vision* checked, as it were, when it comes to the place of the humanities and literature in our curriculum, and use as a springboard for that discussion a book by Mary Aswell Doll. The introduction to Doll's (2000) *Like Letters in Running Water: A Mythopoetics of Curriculum* serves as a sort of defense of the study of the humanities, particularly the works she calls "fiction," or written texts united by their use and exploration of the imagination. She finds fault with what she perceives as the humanities' relegation to the role of "stepsister in the academy" (p. xi); she decries the attitude that devalues the study of these arts simply because they might not "fatten the pocketbook" (p. xi); and she laments the sad fact that even when her students admit that they have learned from a literary engagement, they do so reluctantly and immediately discount the discovery, assuming it to be accidental, or inconsequential, or at least unconnected with the words on the page. Doll insists that adventures in language are not "'mere' exercises" (p. xi), that reading literature is not an "'only' experience" (p. xi); indeed, she says that "the engagement with fiction (prose, drama, poetry, myth, fairy tale, dream) can be a learning experience of the first order" (p. xi). And she promises us that the aim of her book is to rectify this misunderstanding of the value of fiction to the curriculum.

Doll argues that many of the virtues and benefits specific to fiction are overlooked or mis-quantified by its detractors, perhaps because while in fiction "one learns about living," it is also true that "the learning is subtle" (p. xi). First

and foremost, she seems to trumpet as its defining characteristic that fiction can "revivify" (p. xi) our ailing imaginations, keeping us from completely falling prey to an increasingly literal, glaringly available world. In addition, as our imaginations are stirred by exposure to fiction, so are our societies and consciences shaken by it. We are poked, and prodded, and disturbed by fiction until we must reconsider and possibly reform our views of the world around us and the people with which we must share it; as she says, "when stories are told, one sees differently" (p. xi). And, interestingly, fiction accomplishes these things despite, and possibly because of, the fact that the world it describes is inherently false, and the characters it saves and destroys, kills and breathes life into, are *not* us. And as for us, Doll finds that fiction helps us know ourselves better, too, tapping "that which courses through the inner person," helping us to "grasp more coherently the world within as well as without" (p. xii). Fiction, paradoxically, is the "lie that pedagogy needs in order to uncover the truths that make us human" (p. xii).

I imagine many of Doll's observations and arguments strike a chord with those who have devoted their lives to letters (and curriculum studies). Patrick Slattery and Kevin Daigle, for instance, find that "literature is one of the important sources for our curriculum theorizing, particularly … as literature might help us envision curriculum as a place of turmoil that is capable of nourishing our being in the midst of the frustration, violence, despair, and anguish of modern schooling" (1994, p. 438). Unfortunately, as many of us are all too aware, Doll is right that the humanities do seem to suffer dismissal in academia. For example, the alumni publications sent to me invariably find the work of those in the science and business departments far sexier than the work of those in the literary or visual arts, and I do confess to small twinges of inexplicable defensiveness when I tell new people what I do for a living. I even distinctly remember the worried faces of our dearest friends when my wife and I explained our plans for graduate school, in English and Art Education no less, immediately after getting married. And I see evidence every day of the increasing dismissal of Doll's "fiction" from education, entertainment, and all over the working world—people simply don't have to actually *read* as much as they did before, in the traditional sense at least, and so they don't, even in their free time (also disappearing).

Doll also recognizes "literalism as the problem of our culture" (p. xiii). The world is far too available, she says, and both the gore and the glory have been laid bare for anyone who wants to see them. But this is not so much a root problem as it is a symptom of our culture's great, unchecked proliferation of images and information, and to begin a discussion of our information age in "the old days" (*way* before computers) makes this relationship clear. Before the printing press and many other revolutionary scientific, technological, social, and political changes, the world's great texts were held by few hands. Anyone who wanted to know about God had to go see the man who had His Word and could read it to him. Anyone who wanted to know the law had to ask the men who wrote it and the king who enforced it, and either of those might decide to change it on the spot. This world required an immense amount of trust and rigid social structure and created immense power in the hands of those who *knew*, and the history books are full of

the abuses and manipulations that power allowed. But as the world became gradually more literate, individual, and equal—sometimes pushing the technology, and sometimes pushed by the technology—it could be experienced, formed, changed and changed again by a far greater number of people. We often called this "progress."

But a funny thing happened on the way to personal autonomy: the information eventually outran people's ability to understand it and use it, and this is increasingly the case today. In our affair with availability (a positive at first) and our lust for more answers faster, we forgot some fundamental things about ourselves and our lives. We forgot that though the truth (little *t*, at least) about things is now much easier to get to on our own than it used to be, having 50 voices speak it does not make it more true, or clearer—in fact, the opposite is often the case. An example of this problem is readily available to any surfer of the Internet; as I often half-jokingly warn my students, any one of them could be an expert on nuclear physics tomorrow. All it would take is a nice-looking Web site.

And, also quite obviously, we forgot that we are not all nuclear physicists. In fact, we are not really experts on very much—maybe one or two things, if we are hard workers or highly educated or both. Most of us still need somebody to fix our cars, the world seems to contain more lawyers every day, and millions of people weekly still go ask somebody else to explain God to them. Not only are we back where we started in many ways, but we are in danger of moving into an age of post-literacy, where all information is available and no one knows anything. In summary, we forgot that we often still need, and want, people to tell us what *is* and what *isn't*. Before the literacy revolution, power rested with those who had the few texts; now our new masters are those who can *filter* through the many texts, making determinations about what matters most, to whom we should listen, what is the most helpful/harmful for us, and how these discoveries ought to be expressed and shared with the rest of us.

After the initial discouragement caused by such an observation, we can see that there is still hope for us in curriculum studies—especially in literature and the humanities—to become these *filters*, learn to recognize other *filters*, and help our students to learn *filtering* skills themselves, even if the way to make that hope real has been pushed to the very brink of complete dismissal as a subject for study. Some of that dismissal, though, is understandable, and humanities classrooms everywhere need to blow off the dust a little, and could use a little fresh air from open windows. Doll (2000) is certainly right that we still need to study fiction, that it retains an important role in our education even in our much-changed, 21st-century world; however, the humanities classes in which we study fiction, particularly our literature classes, would also do well to expand their study of the word to include the various, mostly digital forms it has taken in that 21st-century world. It is true that sacred texts, constitutions, and political manifestos still rule the day, but they have been joined by (relative) newcomers like advertising, popular music, film, television, hypertext, and the nearly innumerable children of communication technology. All are written, even if the writing is an unfamiliar kind; all are texts; all can be studied wherever texts are. What's more, everything

that can be studied—inside the humanities and out—must be studied through language, even if the dialects vary; *24* and *twenty-four* are equally useless without an understanding of language and the signifier-signified relationship. In short, the *world* is still run by the *word*. And the word is ours. And if we teach our students anything at all, it should be the word's peaks and valleys, its powers and weaknesses, its beauties and its terrors, because to fail to teach the humanities is to fail to teach.

However, though putting more emphasis on the humanities in the curriculum, and particularly the literature classes in which Doll's (2000) "fictions" are so readily available, are perhaps the most important educational tasks we can undertake today, actually doing so in this particular time and place is, and will be, difficult. Our students today, for a variety of reasons, are just not in much mental shape right now for the kind of thinking the humanities and literature require. In "Journeying: A Meditation on Leaving Home and Coming Home" (1994/1999), David G. Smith seems to be worried that our young people today are under attack, living in a culture full of "lying, duplicity and misrepresentation" (p. 3) they are little equipped to resist or change. To this dire pronouncement I would add that our students today might not even be able to *recognize* they are under attack, let alone what kind of attack it is or how to resist it, and for this we, their educators, must share much of the blame. Even if we do not harm children ourselves in schools as much as Alan A. Block says we do in *I'm Only Bleeding: Education as the Practice of Violence Against Children* (1997), if our policies make them less equipped to defend themselves, we are complicit in their injuries.

As evidence of the current educational state of our students, I offer an illustration from my own classroom. Every year, just before we begin to discuss the special language, techniques, and general quirks of poetry, I like to lay all the cards on the table, so to speak, as is my style. I just come out and ask, in the manner common to my classroom, why everyone hates poetry, or finds it boring, or thinks it is "un-cool," etc., and I use an old article from *Newsweek* announcing the death of poetry as a way to spark open discussion. Once we have registered our complaints, cleared up some misconceptions, and generally talked about what makes art "important," if anything, each student writes an essay weighing in on the debate in a more organized manner, determining individually poetry's vitality and diagnosing its various illnesses in a media-saturated, broadband America. Reading those sixty-odd essays is rough, and not just for my aesthetic interests; the vast majority of my students each year focus their critical vitriol not on poetry's tendency toward language tricks, forced rhyme and rigid structures, or flowers-and-feelings sentimentality, but rather on the thinking it requires. They say poetry takes patience, time, and analytical effort to appreciate, and they just do not have those things in great supply. It makes them think, and they do not want to.

So why do students not want to think? And where are we in all of this? It is interesting that in D. G. Smith's (1994/1999) fear for our students' futures, he locates their only chance for salvation in luck, divinity, or genetics—not in curriculum or in teachers, even though he is one. This may be because Smith *is* a teacher, and knows that teaching today involves plenty of measuring, assessing,

numbering, analyzing, and inculcating of students, but not much saving or protecting them, except from each other, of course. In fact, teachers may have become just one more of the many hands who cannot wait to get at students, to write on their "blank slates" (Littleford, 1982/1999, p. 118), molding them and shaping them like so much clay, a guild of selfish Pygmalion's producing a nation of Galatea's, but maybe without the love. It is bad enough that children are a demographic brainwashed with brand loyalty of all kinds through media before they know what brands are, but public education's "buying in" to the powerful forces like standardization, censorship, and consumer culture that hold sway in our schools today has all but sealed their fate, barring as D. G. Smith (1994/1999) implies some sort of divine intervention.

The effects of standardization and censorship in our schools, which seem superficially like efforts towards equality and strong moral fiber, can actually severely handicap our students, if we are not careful, even if it is not by design. The more we work to make assessments, methods, and materials the same (and safe), the more our students end up with an increasingly narrow worldview and set of skills. Sure, we can technically teach in whatever way we feel is appropriate for our students, but if the test is the same for everyone at the end, so will the teaching likely be. What we are currently offering our students in schools is, as Block (1988/1999) puts it, a curriculum and a world in which people may *read*, but not *write*. To Block, writing is "the construction of reality" (p. 178), what it takes "to be alive" (p. 177), but we have largely constructed that reality for young people already, having dramatically reduced their curriculum, career, behavior, and lifestyle options without their input and often without their knowing it. All that is left for them right now is reading, or "observing someone else's reality," and it is no wonder that we see so much of the "boredom, frustration, and alienation" (1988/1999, p. 178) in our students that Block says is the inevitable result—and no wonder that they do not like poetry, which asks them to use writing muscles they have not flexed much in a long time.

However, all is certainly not lost, and teaching the humanities and literature are no less important to the curriculum because they are difficult. In fact, it is important that we remember that these recently neglected subjects carry within them already the tools for their revival, or resurrection, depending on how dire the particular case may be. These studies of the word do teach us to *read* the world, but they can also teach us to *write* it, to use Block's (1988/1999) language, and they offer each of us a place to ask the most important questions and explore the most influential ideas in our lives—and as such, they offer curriculum studies theorists a valuable foothold in the everyday life of public education. And though our students are not used to thinking much, or at least thinking hard about hard things, that does not mean that they *cannot* think, if given a chance. And such thinking is certainly good for them, and good for us, too. The world will be theirs one day—soon—and I, for one, want them to have carefully considered it. So, in short, we have come to a place where we who work in curriculum studies can find in public education studies of literature and the humanities in general a position to begin the work our vocation needs—the work of *revision*. I will begin, as we all should, with myself.

* * *

I didn't want to call this section a *foreword* for a number of reasons. First of all, that's the part of the book I usually skip when I'm reading, since it is often full of words from one of the author's author friends about why the book is good or important; I already agree, since I bought it, and so I skip the foreword. I'm also not completely comfortable with its "prefatory comments" meaning, or "words before the main words," because I want to go ahead and get to what I have to say. I do, though, think I ought to explain what I'm about and why I think that way before I just jump right in, but *foreword* always sounded too extra, too added-on.

Secondly, while I do like the positive connotations (at least the auditory ones) of *forward*, the word is just too linear, too promising of the modernist idea of "progress," as if simply putting one foot in front of the other is necessarily a good thing. What if we should slow down or stop sometimes, let alone double back, or skip, or dance? Doesn't the direction, or the goal, matter as well? Are there really any straight lines to anywhere anyway? *Forward* sounds nice at first, makes us think of getting out of ruts or overcoming obstacles, but it's just too simple to be very useful in such a complex world (or a book about that complex world).

So, *for|word* it is. It's not in the dictionary, but if Beyonce can get *bootylicious* included, maybe there's hope. In any case, the term seems perfect for what I'm about here. I get the positive auditory connotations of *forward* and the prefatory connotations of *foreword*, but with *for|word* it's also clear that I'm aiming at something different, and that my focus will be on, and in defense of, words and what they can do and mean. I am writing *for word*. To sum up a book in a sentence, I think curriculum as it is practiced in high school education needs *revision*, I think literature class is the place to start that *revision*, and I think that literature class itself needs to be *revised* so that such work might take place there. And yes, the italics mean that I'm not just talking about mechanical tune-ups of essays. My argument—addressed to anyone like me who works with or is interested in secondary public education and wants to know what else it can do—is much bigger, and wants to include everything it can: 21st-century America will still need literature class, but literature class will need a good strong dose of 21st-century America as well, and we will need *liminal scholars* of curriculum studies to keep this relationship a healthy one. This relationship will be complex, full of *feedback* loops and iterations that at first seem to belong more to a math or science class. However, this kind of work, these new ways of looking at the world inspired by mathematicians like Benoit Mandlebrot (1983), are also new ways of doing what reading and writing teachers have tried to teach all along: the need for *revision*. And I hope the *for|word* is a good indication of my intention to both argue for *revision* and also practice some of what I preach.

Revision, of course, is not a new term (appropriately, given what it means); it is both old and new, the kind of work interested in looking at old things in new ways and new things in old ways, a fact not lost scholars like James Hillman. Hillman's (1975) *Re-Visioning Psychology* is both "old-fashioned and radically novel" (p. ix) because it looks backward to its roots and forward to its future in order to see what