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## Book Reviews

### Teaching against Islamophobia

JOE L. KINCHELOE, SHIRLEY R. STEINBERG &  
CHRISTOPHER D. STONEBANKS (Eds), 2010

New York: Peter Lang

336 pages, paperback, ISBN 978 1 4331 0336 0, US\$35.95

This book represents a committed and comprehensive attempt to remind those in society who define themselves as educators that embracing issues of social justice and equity implies taking sides in the Islamophobia debate. The editors rightfully view Islamophobia through the lens of racism. In the United Kingdom, this has led to the use of the term 'anti-Muslim racism' instead of Islamophobia. Though the editors claim in their foreword that the book is aimed at teachers, the contributions make it clear that it is intended for a much broader audience and that it has been especially written to make all of us (and non-Muslims primarily) reflect on our attitudes and misconceptions and to rethink many of our assumptions.

The 20 chapters in this book cover a wide range of topics, and it moves from more theoretical and socio-political discourse to a discussion of more practical issues.

In chapter 1, Kincheloe & Steinberg set the theoretical tone for the rest of the book. Their comment that 'learning from difference means that teachers are aware of the histories and struggles of colonized groups and oppressed peoples' (p. 4) signifies how the authors reject the very common approach in multicultural and intercultural education that avoids discussing historical injustices and controversial issues so as not to upset people. Their statement, which they build on in their further analysis, echoes Paul Gorski's challenge to 'decolonize' intercultural education when attempting to deal with education about diversity (Gorski, 2008). References to empathetic understanding, solidarity and valuing of differences help position their pedagogical approach. Very useful in this chapter is the deconstruction of the propagandistic arguments being used by, for instance, the Fordham Foundation to promote the West and especially the (Christian) United States as enlightened and majority Muslim nations as inherently inferior and a threat. Part 2 of the book is entitled 'Reading Islamophobia' and contains four chapters that look at public, media and political discourse.

Shirley Steinberg returns to the topic of media discourse. In this fifth chapter, she first examines 17 films where there is a significant presence of Arabs and/or Muslims. Her analysis shows that without exception, the overwhelming majority of Muslims/Arabs depicted in films – for most films the two are interchangeable categories – are viewed as barbaric, dangerous and uncivilized. Steinberg also deconstructs popular television programmes such as cable television's *Sleeper Cell* and *24* (she mentions that *24* is Dick Cheney's favourite programme). On the whole, Muslims are perceived as potential threats and especially as the 'enemy within'. Given their evil demeanour and the threat to the United States, they do not deserve the same rights as others in society. The author closes with the interesting observation that '[t]his Hollywood diet is not innocent: It is constructed on obsession, stereotype, fear, and, more importantly, on what sells' (p. 96).

Chapters 9, 10 and 13 examine a topic often forgotten in the discourse about Islam and Muslims in the United States – the relationship of the African American community to Islam. Preacher Moss, who refers to himself as an 'undercover Muslim', takes a somewhat tongue-in-cheek look at African American perspectives on Muslim identities. The more serious essence of his treatise is that 'African American Muslims are marginalized as African Americans and ignored as African American Muslims' (p. 163). Samaa Abdurraqib provides, in her chapter, highly insightful

information about the historical relationship of the African American community in the United States to Islam. Her main point is that Islam is not a foreign religion in the United States, as frequently claimed, but that it has long-established roots. This chapter will also especially interest educators wanting to examine the role of diverse movements within Islam in the struggle of African Americans for full civil rights.

In a chapter that is bound to lead to significant discussion and debate among educators of all stripes, Younes Mourchid examines the contested relationship between individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and traditional Islamic values. Mourchid builds his chapter on interviews with 20 persons who come from Muslim communities – most still identifying themselves as Muslim – and who are LGBT-identified. The author shows how such individuals, in often complex and contradictory ways, almost always struggle with their identity formation. Some tend to internalize homophobic attitudes, blaming themselves for causing friction in the family, for instance, while others might internalize Islamophobic attitudes, blaming Islam for rejecting this core part of their identity. The struggle to make homosexuality acceptable in Muslim communities faces many challenges and is an uphill struggle. According to the author, change will have to come from, especially, young Muslim LGBT individuals, who will need to confront the established powers within Muslim communities. Mourchid closes with a discussion of whether those who hold traditional religious attitudes and reject homosexuality can be labelled 'homophobic'. His answer might surprise some readers.

Part 4 brings us closest to the title of the book. Six chapters go more in depth into education issues. The chapters provide some very concrete suggestions for materials that can be used in classrooms at all levels to combat Islamophobia, while also examining these materials critically. The overall strength of these chapters lies in the presentation of these multiple resources, pointing to both their strengths and biases.

If ever a book was overdue, it is this edited volume of very diverse contributions that deal with a phenomenon that I would describe as the first real obsession of the twenty-first century: the unease of Western societies with Islam and Muslims. Unease is perhaps too mild a term for the mud-slinging, accusations, fears and sheer paranoia that seems to have taken hold of large swaths of the public and media across North America and Europe. The vitriolic attacks on everything Muslim have been unleashed from both the right and the left side of the political spectrum. Living in Europe, I was pleased to see a primarily American book provide a North American perspective – both US and Canadian – on the issue of Islamophobia, while also bringing in European issues in a few key places. In that sense, the book truly has an international character.

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## Teaching Critical Thinking: practical wisdom

bell hooks, 2009

London: Routledge

198 pages, paperback, ISBN 978 0 415 96820 1, £17.99

It always used to sound naive and a little oxymoronic to me to 'teach thinking' – to 'teach critical thinking' even more so. Why oxymoronic? Because 'to think' is an emancipatory practice, it is exercising one's freedom, while 'to be taught' means the very opposite. Why naive? Being a teacher for over 10 years and an academic lecturer for seven has brought me many lessons, but maybe the best (although the hardest) was the lesson of knowing my limitations in influencing young people, in changing the way they think, the way they act – simply, the lesson of me not being God. bell hooks is well aware of the fact that thinking is a hard task, that it is neither nice nor simple (p. 8). It

does not stop her from believing she can teach students critical thinking – rather, that she can give lessons to teachers and lecturers on how to do the same. I wish I was so optimistic.

Freire's concept of 'education for freedom' or 'education for critical consciousness' (Freire, 2008, 2009) is somewhat different. The very word 'for' makes the difference here. As teachers, we have the responsibility to create opportunities *for* students *for* independent thinking. We have the joy of supporting them while they ask questions, go deeper in their reflections, and search for the truths behind the surfaces. Maybe not so often, but still, we have the privilege of watching them perform courageous acts based on their critical reflection that bring them to some form of resistance. That is the ground where I agree with hooks – being a teacher is an amazing profession. Unfortunately, I still do not believe I can teach someone to think, or that the author has taught me how to do so. The reader is introduced to at least one more naive concept in the book – the belief that 'writing and reading paragraphs together acknowledges the power of each student's voice' (p. 20) – which does not appeal so much to me.

I am a great fan of hooks' writings. *Feminist Theory* (hooks, 1984) gave me many reasons to re-evaluate my beliefs – for example, the commonly shared one that 'work will liberate woman' (1984, pp. 96-97). The rethinking of the value of work, including housework (1984, pp. 102-103), proposed by hooks was, indeed, interesting, showing how the ideas of the first (white) feminist thinkers were determined by class. The book that opens hooks' educational trilogy, *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994), really inspired me as an academic teacher. I read it almost in one night, having that great feeling that someone expressed my deepest thoughts, anxieties, even angers. I loved the diverse style of the book – sometimes taking the form of essays, sometimes dialogues, bringing lots of autobiographical examples, and sharing her experience and emotions. The part on Freire and the way hooks struggled with some of his (not so feminist) writings and still stayed his follower was really moving, but also provided a great example of performing critical thinking itself: an individual sharing many of Freire's values, loving his style and respecting him as a person is not scared to question some of his ideas and still not abandon his theory as a whole, finding her own way in his emancipatory pedagogy, truly practising freedom of thought. In *Teaching Critical Thinking*, hooks obviously refers to her great teacher, Freire, in the citation at the opening – introducing the value of questioning that leads to actions and change.

Unfortunately, the recently released third book of that education trilogy was not so inspiring to me. I would like to come back to the style and rhetoric of the book. It is not diverse, like the first volume; the texts are not essays but 'teachings'. Coming from Catholic Poland, the word 'teaching' suggests to me one famous author of 'teachings' in human history. I am not suggesting hooks is putting on Jesus's shoes (if he ever wore a pair), but I cannot escape the impression that she has that prophetic and 'only true' style that one knows from another book. How far it leaves critical thinking behind does not need to be stated. Reading the volume, I kept asking myself, 'Who is the audience?', although the author provides the answer on one of the first pages – they are teachers and students who have placed issues and concerns before the author, and to whom she is now giving commentaries (p. 5). So, although in previous writings hooks stresses the importance of writing texts that are accessible to people of all backgrounds, the readers of those educational books are mostly educated people: students and university staff. If so, readers of *Power and Education* should be among them. Strangely, I have the feeling that might not be the case. It is not the fact that the style is not critical, or that there are not many citations or bibliographical notes, rather it is the depth of the discourse. Using well-known concepts from critical social theory, hooks does not mention Marx or any other Frankfurt School thinkers. From the field of educational sciences, Freire is cited six times, but none of the many other relevant contemporary writers. It seems a bit unfair, as they appreciate hooks' work. For example, Jaramillo & McLaren express their gratitude to her and to the way she contributes to critical pedagogy: 'hooks' writings remind us that critical pedagogy is ultimately a dialectical practice prompted by the concrete realities that inform the specificity of human experience' (Jaramillo & McLaren, 2009, p. 19). It also deprives the book of the value of the polemic voice in the educational discourses that are present in many contemporary critical social science environments (for example, within the Discourse, Power, Resistance [DPR] group that founded this journal).

hooks often brings her personal experience into her narratives. However, it should be stressed that this does not make her ideas less critical – in this post-positive period in social and educational

sciences, we all appreciate that everything is autobiographical, so we recognize that this actually is a great strength of her writings. Unfortunately, the style of telling those stories does matter. If in *Belonging* (hooks, 2009) the reader is almost drawn into the landscapes of Kentucky as painted for him/her by hooks, and sentences like, '[i]f one has chosen to live mindfully, then choosing a place to die is as vital as choosing where and how to live' (hooks, 2009, p. 6), remain in the reader's reflections for a long time, this same reader may be disappointed to find that *Teaching Critical Thinking* lacks those kinds of treasures of thought. The most interesting chapter of the book (chapter 24) is also autobiographical – hooks shares her experience of writing books for children. Here, the reader can find truly inspiring ideas on how 'thinking outside the box' can be provoked and examined from an early age. In *Happy to Be Nappy* (hooks, 1999), hooks uses one of the concepts introduced by Toni Morrison in black literature – exercising the power of naming (Toni Morrison uses it again in her recent book *A Mercy* [Morrison, 2008] when one of the characters, Sorrow, changes her name after giving birth).

In the context of her children's book, hooks' statement '[w]ithin imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, black girls and all black people are daily bombarded with negative representations of our bodies, ourselves that are intended to socialize us to internalize racial self-hatred' (pp. 142-143) proves to be probably the most powerful in the whole volume. Its power can be appreciated by contrasting it with the work of another black woman, Carolivia Herron, whose *Nappy Hair* (Herron, 1998) was published just before *Happy to be Nappy*. *Nappy Hair* is full of negative comments, with the main character feeling ashamed about her hair, whereas hooks uses *Happy to be Nappy* as a tool for rebuilding positive self-esteem in little black girls, a powerful start for shaping one's identity. Looking at children's literature as a source of/tool for transformation and decolonization is an interesting proposal.

There once was a famous polemic between Habermas and Gadamer on the value of hermeneutics versus critical theory. The old philosopher expressed his concerns that a critic of ideology overestimates the power of reflection and human reason. Looking under the surface, revealing the interests of those who have power often leads to the assumption that authors are in possession of freedom from any ideology. That is a really dangerous state because it enthronizes its own values and ideals as absolute (Gadamer, 1972, p. 315).

Sharing most of the author's values and agreeing with many ideas expressed in the book, I remain resistant to 'giving teachings'. The fact of being a teacher means to me a responsibility of questioning my own beliefs and ideas as an everyday practice of critical thinking.

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**Cultural-historical Perspectives on Teacher Education and Development: learning teaching**

VIV ELLIS, ANNE EDWARDS & PETER SMAGORINSKY (Eds), 2010

London: Routledge

258 pages, paperback, ISBN 978 0 415 49759 6, £25.99

As noted on the back cover, this book is the only one available that examines teacher education and learning using theories inspired by the work of Vygotsky. That, in and of itself, makes the publication of this work significant. However, there is much more to be said about the important contribution that the editors, Ellis, Edwards and Smagorinsky, and the authors have made. Rather than outlining and summarizing the contents of each chapter – chapter 1, as the introduction, already provides this information in a clear and concise way – I focus my review on discussing two ways in which this book is significant, though there are undoubtedly more.

*As a Model of Exemplary Cultural-historical Research*

The editors and authors of this book take seriously the importance of socially situating their research, often conducted at the micro level, by examining it in relation to political, economic and historical features of the contexts within which they work at the macro level. In addition, they critically analyze teacher education and school practices as constructed, rather than as ‘naturally occurring’, and therefore position social practices as potentially transformable by and transformative for participants.

Though inherent in Vygotsky’s theory, the fundamental link between macro-level ideologies and micro-level practices has often been decentred or forgotten by researchers, rather than taken as dialectically constitutive. Chapter 6, by Hjørne et al, is an excellent example of the necessity and merit of maintaining this link. Moving from the historical development of formal schooling to the Swedish context and the current move to promote pupil health and well-being in schools, the authors link the macro level and micro level through discursive resources, including metaphors of health, categories of problems, speech genres for reporting, describing and explaining problems, and the social language of participants in a pupil–health team meeting. Their results highlight the powerful way that well-intentioned educational policy can be implemented by well-meaning school personnel with debilitating effects for children: a contradiction that may go unnoticed when the relationship between macro and micro level is not centred.

This sort of thoughtful contextualization occurs in different ways across many of the chapters, including chapter 14 by Max, chapter 4 by McNicholl & Childs, and chapter 12 by Liu & Fisher. Here, there is recognition by the authors that teacher education is a social practice that is enacted through unique institutional histories in different nations; that it has incorporated different perspectives about the nature of learning and knowledge, the nature of reality, and the role of schooling at different times and in different places; and that pedagogical and curricular decision making is simultaneously a political and an economic act with consequences for the identity work of teachers and students.

*As a Model of Heterogeneity, Overlap and Contestation in Cultural-historical Research*

Theorists have used a number of different labels for Vygotsky’s integration of social, cultural and historical aspects of human development to signify, in part, the application of Vygotsky’s ideas in times and places far removed from his life in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. To clarify their position, the editors of this volume make note of several heterogeneous perspectives that draw upon Vygotsky’s work in chapter 1 – sociocultural, cultural-historical, and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) – and, in so doing, provide a forum for potential similarities and differences to be identified and discussed. Though other labels have been used to identify research originating from Vygotsky’s theoretical and/or methodological principles, the editors have provided a clear

framework for the chapters in this book, and also for readers who are exposed to the increasing stream of publications founded on Vygotsky's work.

The editors' approach is helpful for two additional reasons. First, their approach reminds readers that there is no 'one' or 'final' reading of Vygotsky's work; there are many readings and they vary in ways that make some of them rather incommensurate. Researchers must work with an incomplete set of theoretical and methodological ideas truncated by Vygotsky's early death, and translations, sometimes multiple, of his idiosyncratic and rushed prose. The work of researchers is often through interpretation – clarifying, elaborating and extending interpretations of his theoretically rich ideas. Second, although researchers have the latitude offered by operating within a web of ideas, we as authors still must do the work of ensuring that our readers know how we are positioned alongside the definitions and principles that shape our theoretical interpretations and research commitments. Differences in definitions, principles and commitments make a difference.

Chapter 2, by Smagorinsky, and the afterword, by Wardekker, wrestle with some of the divergent theoretical and methodological ideas that are part of Vygotsky's legacy. Smagorinsky raises the potentially thorny issue of whether a theoretical approach should be chosen on the basis of its context of use. This is a significant concern not simply because different theoretical frameworks yield different research outcomes generally, but also because different contextual features lend themselves to particular readings of Vygotsky's work and have, therefore, always already privileged some approaches over others. In the afterword, Wardekker draws together the chapters of this book, and also reminds readers that dominant definitions of learning are normative, contextual and contested: they reflect the dominant assumptions of participants in learning contexts and the political, economic and historical context, the hegemonic common sense. Definitions of learning cannot be separated from the categories of people 'we' hope learners will become, and the moral and ethical qualities that surface as a function of those categories. Definitions of learning also cannot be separated from the people, practices and discourses through which power works to define the dominant 'we': who is included and excluded, why, and under what conditions.

### *Closing Thoughts*

This edited volume includes diverse perspectives, international scholars with divergent backgrounds, and a range of research questions and concerns. The chapters are consistently strong and well framed by chapter 1 and the afterword. As a whole, it presents innovative ideas and provokes the reader with thoughtful reminders. It is an important contribution to the field of teacher education, and it extends the field of sociocultural research in vitally important ways.

In closing, I note chapter 5 by Edwards. She asks readers to consider the purpose of education and, further: 'What kind of teacher education for what kinds of teachers?' (p. 73). Given the increasing relation between education and government to meet the aims of national policy in the United States – a relation that is growing stronger globally – inclusive debate around the purposes of education is urgently needed. The historic debates on the purposes of education that took place early in the twentieth century in the United States must be revisited, troubled, recontextualized and even, perhaps, abandoned. It is time to ask: How might researchers building on Vygotsky's work recast these historic perspectives on education for the twenty-first century? What is required to foster new dialogue around educational possibilities, as well as new dialogue regarding the teacher education that is necessary to bring these new possibilities to life?

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