

arguing the case for a pedagogically-sound inclusion of religious education in today's schools.

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Castells, M., Flecha, R., Freire, P., Giroux, H.A., Macedo, D. & Willis, P. (Eds.). (1999). *Critical education in the new information age*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 169 pp. (softcover).

“Some might argue that critical pedagogy is already dead and can only rehearse the aesthetics of its disappearance,” suggest Peter McLaren (1999, p. 20), in the introductory essay in *Critical Education in the Information Age*. This hints at the challenge which the book poses: how should we reposition critical pedagogy in graduate courses again, given this current collection of seven essays? The collection suggests to me that critical pedagogy continues to offer vital critique in its own way, but continues to suffer from fundamental flaws which might block its return to its former prominence.

Three of the book’s essays are by central figures in critical pedagogy. Each provides a valuable sampler of the author’s broader work. Paulo Freire, now deceased, calls for vigilance in protecting public schools from government interference or abandonment, in a spirit more reminiscent of Horace Mann than Che Guevara. Henry Giroux attends to how “border youth” (p. 104) need reformed curricula to address their identity issues in a postmodern world. Both pieces, however, engage readers’ minds, not their souls. By contrast, Peter McLaren breathes fire, calling for a pursuit of “a contraband pedagogy, a profane pedagogy and educational brigandism for the next century” (p. 33).

Unfortunately, two other essays are valuable only as examples of the limitations of critical pedagogy as a genre. Critical pedagogy has yet to recognize that not all critical theory is educational.

Manuel Castells makes no mention of learning or schools in his theorizing about the informational society. Paul Willis is explicitly condescending when addressing school-related matters: after expressly dismissing schools as irrelevant to emancipatory causes in his first sentence, he turns his back on issues of social reproduction in schools. When Willis returns to “the education/training map” in his final paragraph (p. 167), it is only to tell us to incorporate his theory into our pedagogy. Readers of critical pedagogy deserve more assistance to perceive relevance to their educational concerns.

Another problem with both essays is also a virtual tradition with critical pedagogy. Too much writing in the genre operates in a verbal plane that impedes increased participation by the majority of its potential readership. Willis demonstrates two strategies for making his ideas only selectively accessible. First is the privileging of relatively remote theory such as Marx’s particularly idiosyncratic use of “hieroglyphic” (p. 142). Even more frustrating is Willis’s use of jargon and/or dense prose – for example:

Although modernism as textual formalism preserved in institutes functions to reproduce social and cultural divisions and to make cultural elites socially unconnected, thus widening the gulf between mental and manual labor, popular practices function sensuously from the manualist side to break down that division. (p. 160)

Such density pushes away too many educators from invitations to broaden and hone their critical perspective.

Fortunately, the essay by Ramon Flecha invites readers to participate with its ideas. Flecha describes how everyday practices in schools and curriculum structure have “become a factor in the process of social dualization, in selection of the fittest” (p. 66), causing and being caused by “the new inequalities of the information society” (p. 76). This piece could serve as a first example of critical pedagogy for educators new to the genre.

Donaldo Macedo’s essay is much less comfortable to read. Macedo begins on a theoretical level, revealing the narrowness and political subtext of E.D. Hirsch’s cultural-literacy curriculum. Next Macedo juxtaposes specific statements from Hirsch’s content recommendations for America history beside original-source

historical accounts, making the sanitized and imbalanced nature of the recommended curriculum brutally apparent. Macedo's bitter and accusatory style (the first goal of cultural literacy is "obedience imposed through lies," p. 119) is hard to take on a first reading. So are his graphic accounts of America genocide through the centuries. Despite this venom, or perhaps in part because of it, the essay could well become a classic piece for curriculum theory classes, exemplifying the contesting of prescribed curriculum.

A more curious phenomenon within this collection is the positioning of postmodern discourse. Three of the authors each chose to interrupt their line of argument to characterize and criticize postmodern discourse as if it were a singular genre (McLaren, pp. 21-26; Flecha, p. 71; Willis, p. 166). Manuel Castells, for example, dismisses alternative theories that fail to be "specific, comprehensive, and rigorous enough to provide an interpretive framework" (p. 38). Yet after 20 pages, he concludes that the forces of his explication are "largely uncontrollable" and at best create "the conditions for the unpredictability of human actions ... in an unseen, uncharted space" (p. 59). Henry Giroux credits postmodern discourse as a diverse endeavor (pp. 98-102, 112), before suggesting that it needs to become "more political" (p. 110). Such criticism of other closely aligned perspectives seems more territorial than dialectic.

Does it mean anything, that critical theorists have taken postmodernism as an enemy target, rather than an ally? As a cautionary analogy, I would point to the recent history of Canada's Progressive Conservative Party. During the last two elections, the traditional party abandoned their role as critics of the party most likely to win, to engage in a rearguard critique of a new opposition party whose policies were similar to theirs. In those elections, the party saw their profile even in opposition virtually evaporate. The analogy suggests that writers of critical pedagogy might need to take seriously the quote from McLaren which opened this review. If critical theorists choose to quibble about how best to challenge the dominant and dominating agenda instead of engaging with the task, the genre risks rehearsing 'the aesthetics of its disappearance,' not laying the foundation for its resurrection.

How should *Critical Education in the Information Age* be used? The diverse essays represent the current possibilities and

limitations of critical pedagogy well. However, that diversity may dismay unsupported readers who are unfamiliar with critical pedagogy.

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