

The Theoretical Foundations of Cultural Studies in Education

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There is one certainty upon which most theorists and researchers in cultural studies can agree: that there is no means of defining exactly what is cultural studies. Some of cultural studies best-known practitioners, including Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, and Angela McRobbie, have insisted that to lock cultural studies into an academic field or to classify it according to a single theory would undermine its most prominent characteristic, which is its interdisciplinary nature.¹ Similar to the “crisis” in 1980s anthropology that coincided with the “writing culture” school of ethnography, cultural studies has introduced to theory and research new ways of thinking about the philosophical foundations of the social sciences and the politics of academic work, but has remained a mysterious and fringe discipline in the philosophy, sociology, and history of education.²

In this essay, I define cultural studies according to six theoretical orientations. These include: (1) its interdisciplinary nature, (2) its challenges to hierarchies in culture, (3) its criticisms of ethnographic fixations on sites, (4) its manner of linking cultural, historical and economic analyses, (5) its emphasis on concepts, and (6) its distaste for behavioral models of the world. I end by examining cultural studies as a political project in education that has shaped understandings of pedagogy, and note its contributions to the field of education as it developed as a reaction against both stagnation in research and “business as usual” politics that created severe inequalities in the world.

TWO COMPETING IMAGES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

In academic books and in the popular press, cultural studies has been perceived in two distinct ways. By its detractors it is viewed as a trendy, off-beat, and hyper-intellectual academic fad whose practitioners are obsessed with colonization, media and literary representations, Gramscian hegemony, and connections between popular culture and social production and reproduction, all of which are examined in a cliquish language (of “posts-” and “-isms”) that only those “in the know” can understand. These criticisms have become commonplace to the extent that in recent years they have entered into the mainstream press. Walter Kendrick, for example, writing for the *New York Times* Book Review, claimed about a new book by Marianna Torgovnick, a cultural studies professor:

Everybody knows that for centuries Western culture has colonized, oppressed and exploited the rest of the world. Professors of what’s called cultural studies...never tire of rediscovering, and deploring, this fact. Marianna Torgovnick’s *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* looks at first like just one more trendy academic study mantled in comfortable self-righteousness.³

Though Kendrick partly praised Torgovnick’s book, he continued his review by criticizing the hyper-intellectual language of cultural studies and its “approved

cultural studies fashion” of lumping literature with non-canonical works and media. Torgovnick’s book was praised to the extent that it veered away from all this. Like other new academic fields — American Studies in the 1950s, for example cultural studies — which is often associated with postmodernism and studies of popular culture, is criticized for disrupting traditional methods of research and for speaking in academic terms about topics that have been marked as nonacademic.

However, by its defenders cultural studies is seen as a cutting-edge, radical sociology. What began in the 1950s as a project to better understand adult literacy, class divisions, and youth subcultures has moved to more internationalist analyses of feminism, racism, globalization, popular culture, and identity politics. Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, Henry Giroux, and John Fiske understand that the world is entering an era that will be partly dominated by mass media, evolving notions and realities surrounding class, gender, and race, the entertainment and advertising industries, corporate transnationalism, greater world travel, and computer technology, and believe that cultural studies is a means of studying such weighty phenomena.⁴ In this way, cultural studies is seen as a newer and better form of sociology that has managed to keep abreast of rapid world changes. As a result, cultural studies has in some sense “exploded” on the academic scene. Stratton and Ang, for example, described cultural studies as an inevitable and much needed “boom” that may change the face of university programs and conferences:

As we approach the end of the century, cultural studies has become one of the most lively and widely-discussed intellectual fields in the international academic world. University programmes, conferences and publications in cultural studies are proliferating massively, suggesting a clear and indisputable boom.⁵

But cultural studies is neither trendy and hyper-intellectual as its detractors maintain, nor cutting-edge and radical as its supporters sometimes claim. The next section is meant to show that cultural studies’ claims are actually rather moderate — not trendy, not radical. Ultimately, cultural studies continues a history of important work in education that began with studies of adult literacy in the 1940s, was transformed in the 1970s by Paul Willis, and continues today in the philosophy, sociology and history of education.

FOUNDATIONS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural studies is a vast field with a rich history. This history includes the writings of the Frankfurt school, the literary work of Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson in England, the cultural critique of Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, and others at the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, developments in neo-Marxism and cultural studies, and work that brings to cultural studies feminist and postmodern emphases.⁶ Given this vast history and these multiple forms, there is disagreement among scholars in cultural studies about the point and purposes of the field. Those who approach cultural studies from a critical feminist perspective may be at odds with those who have a structuralist orientation. Marxists argue with postmodernists as well as post-Marxists. I will bypass this hair-splitting and describe six basic characteristics of cultural studies. Each is a theoretical orientation — a way of seeing the world — and each has shaped an aspect of how research in education and cultural studies is conducted.

THE INTERDISCIPLINES OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Those working in cultural studies come from diverse academic fields, but there remain common interests, themes, and topics in cultural studies. McRobbie rightly saw four major themes in the field: race, state, and nation; sexuality and representation; education and ethnography; and postcoloniality and postmodernism.⁷

To do work in these areas, people such as McRobbie remain committed to over-riding (or grand) theories, but also work in the spaces between theories, especially those undergirding semiotic, structural (Marxist), feminist, and postmodern orientations. Doing eclectic work is not a matter of theoretical chaos or “showing off,” but points to a means of gaining a fuller picture of the world by seeing topics of research from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. Here, the notion of “standpoint theory” developed by Sandra Harding — that all knowledge of the world is partial and shaped by one’s own “standpoint” or perspective — extends to research and the researcher.⁸

While individual researchers and theorists may, and perhaps should, remain committed to their over-riding theoretical orientations, they are expected to employ different theories when needed as a way of understanding a topic from different angles, from perspectives that could be at various times feminist, structuralist, postmodernist, and semiotic, and to explore other fields such as anthropology, education, geography, literary studies, and communication for insights that could be used in one’s own. Cultural studies, then, is concerned with fuller and more accurate understandings of the world than can be gained when one works within a single discipline and theoretical paradigm.

AESTHETIC HIERARCHIES

Cultural studies does not just bring new ideas and theories to research methodology, it also introduces new topics of study. By giving serious academic attention to Hollywood movies, television, and teen magazines, cultural studies challenge hierarchies of art, entertainment, and education and bring to the forefront popular culture as a topic of study.⁹ It valorizes popular culture by recognizing that people take their pleasures, education, and enjoyment seriously, and that much could be understood about class, race and gender, representation, exploitation, capitalism and consumerism, by looking carefully at the forces behind popular culture.

In cultural studies, popular culture is described in three primary ways. First, as the movies, books, videos, magazines and other objects that are a product of businesses that produce popular culture. It is also described as popular activities or events. Weddings, proms, and graduations are all a part of our popular culture. Finally, popular culture is described as places where consumerism, culture, entertainment, education, and leisure come together sometimes under one roof. In this latter case, Stacy Warren, for example, saw popular culture in various “landscapes of leisure,” in Disneyworld, in fairs, in some malls, or wherever “theme park experiences” are produced.¹⁰

According to Warren and others in cultural studies, ideas about class distinctions, behavior, exploitation, and social change are understood anew if seen in relation to people’s ways of seeking out their pleasures, entertainment, and forms of

education, much of which occurs through our popular culture. Since the founding of the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *Cultural Studies*, and the *American Quarterly* in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural studies has challenged the traditions of some academic fields that have ignored people's everyday and popular activities.

FIXATIONS ON SITES

Given its attachment to the dispersive qualities of popular culture, cultural studies undermines sociological, and especially ethnographic, fixations on specific places, sites, and fields. In order to give attention to different aspects of popular culture — its effects on people, its associations with industry and consumerism, its international nature, its attachment to social class, gender, and race, its place as individual popular resistance — those in cultural studies work beyond fixed localities and attempt to bring global perspectives to their work.¹¹

According to Gilroy, missed in analyses that fix too much attention on specific places are the translations of culture that occur due to connections between the local and the global.¹² These connections may include associations between individual classrooms and national education policy, or in more anthropological terms, a particular South American village and an international petroleum company. Traditionally, researchers have concentrated on one or the other: either a local analysis of life in a specific location or a more structural or global look at the social and economic forces bearing down on the world at large. Grossberg, for example, wrote that too much attention was given to the “fruitless opposition between the global and the local,” and not enough to the importance of combining them.

Too much of contemporary discussion about cultural studies is trapped in the fruitless opposition between the global and the local. The former tends to see cultural studies as “traveling theory” and consequently often to fetishize and reify theory. The latter tends to emphasize local exigencies and political demands, often with the result of substituting “political necessity” for theoretical work. It underestimates the values of the line linking the various sites of cultural studies. Both positions fail to take seriously Stuart Hall’s admonition that “theory is always a [necessary] detour on the way to something more important” (1991, p. 42). If the relation between the global and the local is itself an articulated one, with each existing in and constituting the other, cultural studies needs to map the line connecting them.¹³

By bringing a global perspective to work that also focuses on localities, scholars in cultural studies undermine ethnographers’ fixations on sites on street corners, particular agencies, classrooms, and villages. No longer does it suffice to explain the workings and structures of particular places at particular times. Rather, researchers are urged to theorize their findings, or to place their local findings in a context that reveals the historical, cultural, and economic connections between the immediate and the more far-flung activities of the world.

CULTURE/HISTORY/ECONOMY

Researchers and theorists in cultural studies highlight the importance of historical and ethnographic methods of studying the world. What is obtained from such an intersection are both the perspectives of individuals and the over-riding economic structures through which individuals act.¹⁴ Subsequently, while those in cultural studies may at times prioritize individual agency, most also see the place of structure in the world — how patterns and industries in society shape and sometimes

constrain individual agency. Cultural studies recognizes the importance of examining the behaviors of individuals in relation to their environments and patterns of being in a manner reminiscent of some branches of critical theory:

Classic social reproduction theory operated exclusively at the level of systemic analysis, hence reducing agents to passive, interpellated “subjects.” In contrast, purely interpretative hermeneutic, and humanistic sociologies have focused on the social action of individuals and groups at the expense of an analysis of systemic contradictions. The methodological consequences of linking systemic contradictions and social-action analysis in critical theories have been two-fold: attention to the agency-structure dialectic in analyzing processes of social and cultural reproduction, and a turn to historically specific (though often explicitly comparative) and ethnographic investigations.¹⁵

In the philosophy of social science, cultural studies takes as its point of departure the space between individual agency and structural reproduction. New work in cultural studies is geared to social analyses that incorporate a cultural and economic dimension to studies and neither offers individual agency nor political economy a monopoly status.¹⁶ Class as well as gender and race, history, individual agency, structural patterns and restraints, and the meanings that people make of the world are explored.

CONCEPTS

With certain feelings and aesthetic tastes, people make daily decisions about their lives, futures, and means of relating to the world and to other people around them. Hence, theorists and researchers in cultural studies have called for greater attention to how people use and conceive of certain notions, such as “judgment,” “pleasure,” “sexuality,” and “fascination.” McRobbie wrote: “cultural studies needs to think about how ideas like difference, subjectivity and other even more troublesome concepts — fascination, for example — need to be fleshed out and explored within the landscape of everyday social relations.”¹⁷

In studies of dance, dress, and the 1980 and 1990s panic around “morality,” McRobbie viewed concepts such as “values,” “beauty,” “sexuality,” as they were taken up in people’s everyday activities and relationships. In cultural studies, curiosity, pleasure, desire, judgment, and prejudice are seen as defining concepts that partly account for people’s understandings of the world and their relationships with each other. The world, then, is mediated through our yearnings and wants, and decisions are made not only for “rational” reasons or because of power and politics, but also for reasons associated with our curiosities, fears, and desires.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

In giving attention to individual agency especially in the areas of people’s determination to seek pleasure, to enjoy, to be educated, and to make judgments cultural studies challenges behavioral models of society, whereby people are seen reacting instinctively and transparently to the world. In the area of popular culture, individuals are recognized for their assertive participation in society. Notions that people passively take in popular culture are challenged in favor for discussions that account for individuals’ activities and meaning-making skills in producing a popular culture that is positive, a means of expression and, at times, a manner of political resistance.

Theoretically, this aspect of cultural studies views the world in the context of language where competing discourses (of morality, of welfare reform, of multiculturalism, of the exotic) are at war in the press, in political posturing and presentations, in magazines, film, music, books, and in classrooms, sometimes making concerted attempts to sway public opinions and policies. These claims travel under the guise of “commonsense knowledges.” They are discursive knowledges or myths that arise out of public and popular rhetoric. According to Hall, they are the “articulation of language on real situations....discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real situations and conditions.”¹⁸ Hall noted, while the dog in the television program can bark it can not bite; what is viewed on the television is not, for example, violence; rather messages about violence. In research, then, room is made for studies of how people read or make sense of these messages. Structural interpretations are combined with emphases that highlight people’s power to make meaning of the world, to make positive change, and to sometimes overcome structural constraints.

In general, then, cultural studies can be characterized in six ways: according to its interdisciplinary nature; its challenges to hierarchies in culture; its criticisms of ethnographic fixations on sites; its manner of linking cultural, historical, and economic analyses; its emphasis on concepts; and its distaste for behavioral models of the world. While I have reduced cultural studies to these six characteristics, I have also attempted to present it as “good sociology.” It is not as trendy and not as radical as some may think. It is a manner of interpreting the world in a way that is intellectual, but also grounded in the everyday realities and discourses of our time. It is a means of research that is nearly always concerned with broader understandings of the world than are gained by theoretical and methodological myopia.

CULTURAL STUDIES OF EDUCATION

Educational researchers who incorporate work done in cultural studies in their research methods and data analysis are most often ethnographers, or at the very least, qualitative researchers. But to account for a complex and nuanced examination of education, ethnographic fixations on “sites” such as a school have been taken up by researchers with additional emphases on the more dispersive “places” where education occurs, in our movie theaters, for example, or through computers and videos, or in popular educational endeavors such as museum-going and educational travel.¹⁹ As I noted, cultural studies of education challenges hierarchies in culture and education as well as educational research by bringing to the field of education studies of popular culture.²⁰ In this way, cultural studies attempts to study education as an everyday activity and “concept” that has been taken up, in various ways, in the public, non-profit, and corporate spheres.²¹ Education is schooling, it is many forms of “educational programming.” It is also an individual, private, and public, class-based pursuit tied inevitably to judgments, aesthetic tastes, and public policy. In these areas, educational researchers will continue, I believe, to focus on the educational implications of media, documentary films, educational videos, magazines, computers, and travel. Work will focus on how educational purposes and pedagogies are understood in connection with people’s personal approaches to and

decisions about their educations, as well as to the public funding, rhetoric, and policies that surround the individual and everyday decisions that people make about what they want to learn, where they want to learn it, who they want to teach it, and how they want it paid for.²²

Ultimately, cultural studies requires that educators, theorists, and researchers be conscious of the need to see education through lenses that account for how structural aspects of schooling intersect with individuals' abilities to make change. Cultural studies brings to schooling a focus on school culture in addition to historical and economic analyses of education. It brings to "postmodern education" reminders of historical context and structural and economic determinants involved in the production and reproduction of social inequalities, seen, for example, in the distribution and consumption of textbooks.²³ Studies by Paul Willis, Douglas Foley, and Sari Biklen, for example, recognized the will of people to make positive change and to resist power asserted from above.²⁴ But further, people working in cultural studies need to be visible public workers, whose creative and intellectual energies inform their reading and writing, as well as their teaching and advocacy work. Ultimately, the rhetoric of school choice, the economics of education, the attacks on public schooling and media images behind school violence, need to come together under one analytical roof and meet the movements of students, parents, educators, administrators, and the researchers themselves, as they make decisions and judgments about the world that are always partly philosophically, economically, culturally, and historically driven.

Cultural studies began as a progressive, political project in education that was a reaction against both stagnation in research and "business as usual" politics that created severe social inequalities in the world. Often cultural studies of education is seen as something that comes from outside — a foreign discipline that some individuals are trying to incorporate into an established field. But the field of education has always been open to other disciplines. At the same time, education has always been central to cultural studies. Ultimately, cultural studies continues a history of work that began with adult education and continues today in the philosophy, sociology, and history of education.

1. The interdisciplinary nature and theoretical eclecticism of cultural studies has been taken up by Lawrence Grossberg, "History, Politics, and Postmodernism: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen," *Ibid.*; and Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

2. For an introduction to the first discussion of what Dean McCannell called the "writing culture" school of anthropology, see James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

3. Walter Kendrick, "The Way to Ecstasy," *New York Times*, 25 May 1997, Book Review, 19.

4. Topics in cultural studies are diverse. In education, see Sari Knopp Biklen, *School Work: Gender and the Cultural Construction of Teaching* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1995); Elizabeth Ellsworth, "I Pledge Allegiance: The Politics of Reading and Using Educational Films," in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, ed. Cameron McCarthy and William Crichtlow (New York: Routledge, 1993); Douglas Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); and Henry Giroux, *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). The foundations of cultural studies are discussed in Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds," in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*; ed. Stuart Hall. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture Globalization and the World-System*, ed. A.D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991); Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*; and John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
5. Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, "On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies: 'British' Cultural Studies in an 'International' Frame," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, 361.
6. For a lucid account of the history and contributions of cultural studies, see Kathy Hytten, "Cultural Studies of Education: Mapping the Terrain," *Educational Foundations* 11, no. 4 (1997): 39-60.
7. Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, 181.
8. Sandra Harding introduced the concept of "standpoint theory" focusing on feminist epistemology in connection to science and knowledge in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).
9. For a brief history of popular culture in academia, and for some practical examples of curriculum outlines that focus on popular culture, see Mark Gordon and Jack Nachbar, *Currents of Warm Life: Popular Culture in American Higher Education* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1980).
10. Warren is a geographer whose understanding of popular culture is the most interesting, I believe, and the least popular in the field of education. Stacy Warren, "This Heaven Gives Me Migraines: The Problems and Promise of Landscapes of Leisure" in *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. James Duncan and David Ley (New York: Routledge, 1993), 174.
11. For discussions concerning popular culture in relation to global and local analyses, see for example, Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage, 1995); John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*; and Henry Louis Gates, "Planet Rap: Notes on the Globalization of Culture," in *Field Work: Sites in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Marjorie Garber, R.L. Walkowitz, and P.B. Franklin (New York: Routledge, 1996).
12. Gilroy's example pertains to studying Africans in Africa and African-Americans in the United States, but nothing that draws a connection between the two. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London: Verso, 1993); see also, Ann Game, *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).
13. Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies and/in New Worlds," 90.
14. For a discussion of this issue in connection with, first, symbolic interactionism, and then civil society, see Norman Denzin, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies: The Politics of Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); and George Yúdice, "Cultural Studies and Civil Society," in *Reading the Shape of the World: Toward an International Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Richard Dienst (BOULDER: Westview Press, 1996).
15. R.A. Morrow and C.A. Torres, *Social Theory and Education: A Critique of Theories of Social Reproduction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 343.
16. For more about the intersection between individual agency and political economy, see Richard Dienst, "The Futures Market: Global Economics and Cultural Studies," in Schwarz and Dienst, *Reading the Shape of the World* and John Gabriel, *Racism, Culture, Markets* (London: Routledge, 1994), especially the conclusion.
17. McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, 185.
18. Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1980) 131.
19. For an interesting discussion of Walt Disney Enterprise's attempts to enter the field of education with a reconstructed nineteenth century town called *Celebration*, a tour of which is meant to be educative, see Tom Vanderbilt, "Mickey Goes to Town(s)," in *The Nation* (28 Aug. 28/4 Sept. 1995).

20. For discussions of media knowledge and film pedagogy see, Elizabeth Ellsworth and M.H. Whatley, *The Ideology of Images in Educational Media: Hidden Curriculums in the Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990); Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, "Introduction, Media Hegemony: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Representation," in *Media Knowledge*, ed. James Schwoch, Mimi White and Susan Reilly (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996). With increased use of computers by greater numbers of people, computer literacy and computer knowledge will be increasingly significant for people's lives; see, for example, David J. Gunkel and Ann Hetzel Gunkel, "Virtual Geographies: The New Worlds of Cyberspace," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14 (1997): 123-37.
21. Conrad P. Pritscher, "Creating New Concepts to Clarify What is Worthy of the Name 'Education,'" *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 8, no. 2, (1988): 61-75.
22. Images of youth are also subject to changes in educational policy. For a discussion of how educational policy constructs youth, especially those labeled "at-risk," and affects their choices about education, see Nancy Lesko, "Past, Present, and Future Conceptions of Adolescence," in *Educational Theory* 46, no.4 (1996):453-72.
23. Michael Apple is noted for his economic and cultural work around the politics, distribution, and production of knowledges associated with textbooks and other public forums where commonsense, or "official" knowledge is produced. Michael Apple, *Official Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
24. With *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), Paul Willis has been recognized as one of the first to challenge prevailing Marxist determinism in education. Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture* and Biklen, *School Work*.