

Cultural Studies in Education: What's The Point?

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In his essay, Ronnie Casella undertakes a daunting task — defining cultural studies of education. In so doing, he joins a number of other scholars who have attempted to make sense of the current proliferation of cultural studies work in the academy, a few of whom, like Casella, deal specifically with the educational realm.¹ Casella's work is a valuable addition, most notably in its clarity, accessibility, and tight focus. He offers us six useful themes for understanding and characterizing cultural studies of education work and thoughtfully describes some implications for its practice. We are provided with a well-developed image of how many cultural studies practitioners interpret the world and of the varied types of work in which they engage. Casella's ability to cogently describe cultural studies in education is especially commendable in light of the often opaque, dense, and jargon-laden ways in which it is written about by its proponents.

In its overall effect, Casella's interpretation of cultural studies is consistent with the Americanized version of the tradition, where the focus of work is largely interpretive and playful. As he suggests, cultural studies in this vein is neither trendy nor hyper-intellectual, neither cutting edge nor radical, but rather, it moderately builds upon and continues a long line of work done in philosophy, sociology, and history of education. Yet there is a different read of the cultural studies tradition that Casella alludes to but does not develop, one that emerges more directly from its Birmingham roots. In this parallel, and sometimes competing trajectory, the aims of cultural studies work are much more far-reaching than Casella describes. In this tradition, cultural studies is an expressly left intellectual project that is political, interventionist, socially committed, ethically charged and critical. Its aims are both to interpret cultural phenomenon and to intervene in the world in transformative and empowering ways. Consistent with this view, Grossberg, Treichler, and Nelson claim that "its practitioners see cultural studies not simply as a chronicle of cultural change but as an intervention in it, and see themselves not simply as scholars providing an account but as politically engaged participants."² This vision of cultural studies can serve as a useful complement to the groundwork laid by Casella. Moreover, it can help to forward the agenda for education he suggests, namely countering the stagnation in educational research that often serves to reproduce social inequities.

Increasingly scholars in the field are noting a rift between the British cultural studies tradition and the way in which cultural studies has been taken up in America. As Casella suggests, cultural studies began as a progressive political project. Its aims were to better understand, so as to positively transform, social conditions for historically marginalized and oppressed people, most notably those in the working class. These aims were supported by an underlying commitment to disempowered populations and by a belief that academic work could and should have tangible and meaningful real world impacts. Grossberg captures this central theme of traditional

cultural studies, offering “that cultural studies is politically driven, that it is committed to producing knowledge that both helps people understand that the world is changeable and that offers some direction for how to change it.”³ Yet, many fear that the political and interventionist focus of cultural studies is often lost in its American versions. Instead, people claim to be doing cultural studies whenever they engage in interdisciplinary work, experiment with new methods for studying culture, and write about popular cultural artifacts like television shows, music lyrics, and movies. “At it’s worst,” Nelson claims, “anyone who analyzes popular culture in any way whatsoever...can claim to be doing cultural studies.”⁴

From the perspective of more critically minded cultural studies advocates, the problem with many Americanized versions of cultural studies (I realize that this dichotomy I am drawing is overly simplistic) is that it is unclear what the point is. To what end should we interpret, study, and engage culture? Why should we look to popular culture, challenge hierarchies, and reject behavioral models of the world? Historically, one of the unique features of cultural studies as a field is the way in which its supporters seem to answer this question. They argue that what is particularly distinctive about cultural studies work is the fact that it is not merely interpretive, but also critical and normative. It is a social project which aims at uncovering, challenging, and altering conditions and situations that result in oppression, exploitation, and marginalization. While it is debatable how successfully these aims have been realized in practice, what unifies critically minded cultural studies scholars is their sense that what is most important about the cultural studies tradition is that it “is not one of value-free scholarship but political commitment.”⁵

In several places in Casella’s essay, he alludes to this more radical agenda for cultural studies. Yet this theme does not seem to be explored enough, particularly if one of the overriding goals he sees for the field is to attack the severe inequities that exist in society. Addressing two areas in particular would help to support his otherwise useful theoretical orientations: its focus on power and its aim at ameliorative social change. Casella touches on issues of power, without naming them as such, in his section on culture/history/economy. Describing this theoretical orientation, he does a good job of articulating the balance cultural studies practitioners seek between looking at both individual agency and at the ways in which that agency is constrained by repressive social structures. Here his argument would be strengthened by more elaboration on power as a key construct, particularly as many cultural studies advocates call for the study of culture “as a set of activities which is lived and developed within asymmetrical relations of power.”⁶ Casella writes that as part of the new work coming out in cultural studies, class, race, gender, history, individual agency, structural patterns, and the meanings people make of the world are explored, yet he is less clear on to what end. In its more critical tradition, the ends are more explicit: uncover operations of power, challenge disempowering structures and relations, provide resources for resistance, and intervene in order to bring about a more equitable and just future. McLaren and Giroux make this point lucidly, arguing that “the world of concrete social relations and the unequal distribution of power and privilege that inform them are not simply texts to be analyzed but formations that must be resisted, ruptured, and transformed.”⁷

Consistently, in this more critical vein, cultural studies advocates see academic work as having clear activist dimensions. Its practitioners aim at linking theory to practice, largely so as to point directions toward, and to help bring about, more just practices. Casella highlights this link when he characterizes cultural studies as “a manner of interpreting the world in a way that is intellectual, but also grounded in the everyday realities and discourses of our time.” As part of the larger project of articulating the meaning and relevance of cultural studies for education, he could even explore the implications of this link further. This is especially necessary if cultural studies work is to support the progressive social projects alluded to throughout Casella’s essay: reducing tracking, challenging biases in schools, rethinking the consumption of textbooks, resisting the moves towards privatization in education, bringing about more equitable school funding, and developing more collaborative learning structures.

In the end, this is not to suggest that the more critical tradition in cultural studies is necessarily superior to a more analytic and interpretive one, or without faults. Clearly it suffers from similar problems that mark other critical projects in education (for example, critical pedagogy), namely a tendency to be too deterministic and reductionistic, as well as even arrogant in the presumption that its practitioners actually know the right way to make the world a better place for all people. Yet more attention to the “progressive political” aspect of cultural studies seems necessary, not only to convince people that a cultural studies frame is a useful one for education, but also to better address perhaps its fundamental point: to challenge research stagnation and mindless reproduction of the status quo in order to transform the severely inequitable conditions that currently exist in the world. Casella’s essay points us in this direction, while at the same time carefully giving us frames for understanding what cultural studies work is all about. In developing this topic further, considering and incorporating the more critical read on the cultural studies tradition would serve as a useful complement to understanding what cultural studies work is all about and why we in education need to care about it.

1. See, for example, John Storey, ed., *What is Cultural Studies: A Reader*, (London: Arnold, 1996) and Kathy Hyttén, “Cultural Studies of Education: Mapping the Terrain,” *Educational Foundations* 11, no. 4 (1997): 39-60.

2. Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg, “Cultural Studies: An Introduction” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 5.

3. Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing it all Back Home: Essays in Cultural Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 264.

4. Cary Nelson, “Always Already Cultural Studies: Academic Conferences and a Manifesto” in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Arnold, 1996), 274.

5. Alan O’Connor, “The Problem of American Cultural Studies” in Storey, *What is Cultural Studies?* (London: Arnold, 1996), 187.

6. Henry Giroux, David Shumway, Paul Smith, and James Sosnoski, “The Need for Cultural Studies: Resisting Intellectuals and Oppositional Public Spheres.” Available: <<http://english-www.hss.cmu.edu/theory/Need.html>>

7. Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, “Writing from the Margins: Geographies of Identity, Pedagogy, and Power” in *Revolutionary Multiculturalism: Pedagogies of Dissent for the New Millenium*, Peter McLaren (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), 39.