



Acts of Knowing: Critical Pedagogy in, Against and Beyond the University

Cowden, Stephen; and Singh, Gurnam
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Book Review

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critically reflective teaching

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Readers who believe there ought to be profound differences between universities and businesses will rejoice in reading these probing and rousing responses to the commodification of education, theorized here as one result of “the global dominance of neoliberalism”(5). The voices in this collection, primarily scholars in the United Kingdom, turn to critical pedagogy, broadly defined, as the best resource for unmasking and dethroning the dehumanization of this ethos. While Paulo Freire’s thought undergirds the collection, these scholars draw on a wide array of critical theorists to address many intertwined issues regarding the inherently political nature of education and its transformative and justice building potential.

After a short introduction which traces the broad outlines of its critical approach, the collection divides into two parts. Part One, “Perspectives on the Crisis in Education,” includes four essays by U.K. scholars and Part Two, “Dialogues on Critical Pedagogy and Popular Education,” consists of edited transcripts of six interviews, originally podcasts funded by the U.K. Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Sociology, Anthropology, and Politics. Each interview, conducted by one of the editors of the volume, is with an educator who has been shaped by and employs critical pedagogy.

The outstanding first two essays, co-authored by the editors, explore issues of student debt and consumerist pedagogies. Each of these essays offer careful, convincing, and devastating analysis of ways by which what is “sold” as beneficial to students (for example, student loans, use of student evaluations) often works against their best interests.

The third essay draws cogent connections between critical pedagogy and radical democracy,

concluding with an emphasis that, while critique is necessary, it is limited by remaining within the frame of the oppressive structures it opposes. Insights of critique must be used to build new structures, new ways of relating and forging solidarities for change. In the fourth essay, the author reflects on student response to her critical pedagogy in a Master's level class.

In Part Two, the six interviews are conducted with professors of social work, sociology, community education, information management, education, and aboriginal studies. As editor Singh explains, the decision to include interviews is intended to present critical dialogue as process. In addition, after each interview there are helpful lists of references and suggested readings.

In one interview, Freire's Catholic heritage is acknowledged and the interviewer refers to his own unspecified "tradition" (presumably Sikh), but without the development which would have been fascinating to read. Religious studies teachers may be disappointed that, aside from this glancing reference and aspects of the interview on indigenous knowing, there are no attempts to integrate religious or spiritual concerns with the ethical contours of critical pedagogy. Unfortunately, numerous typographical errors also are evident throughout the book, including occasional omission of an important word (such as "not"). But for those committed to higher education as a social good, this collection will be provocative and inspiring.

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