Cultural Transformations [Book Review by G. Muhammad]

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During the past few years, I have had the opportunity to travel around the country to speak to teachers about culture and the importance of understanding the cultural identities of themselves and of their students. This knowledge then serves as the impetus for engaging young people in culturally responsive learning (Gay, 2010). In my talks, I discuss how cultural intersections of students’ histories, identities, and literacies help to shape transformative learning. Several times, teachers (often unintentionally) become fixed on static notions of culture, focusing on students’ racial or gendered backgrounds alone. Moreover, this focus, based on race or gender, is typically assumed solely based on youth external appearance. Such views fail to account for the dynamic understandings of culture and instead describe culture as unmoving, unchanged, gridlocked or something one can quickly recognize by the eye.

Teachers have also shared their thoughts with me about how culture is difficult to define because it can be so inclusive of “everything,” and they subsequently feel tension with how to incorporate all of students’ cultures into their daily lesson plans. Yet, thinking in this way still positions culture as something one can “insert” in a lesson plan instead of viewing it as a vibrant construct that has the capacity to move, change, and become shaped with social literacy practices. The book Cultural Transformations: Youth and Pedagogies of Possibility explores culture as being complex and transformative, that is shaped and (re) shaped in social learning in and outside of schools. Editor Korina Jocson explains that the “trans” in “transformation” means culture is both formed and can “transform itself, people, and cultural products” (p. 2) in pedagogy.

Cultural Transformations is organized into 10 chapters highlighting artistic cultural projects across different educational contexts in schools and within broader communities. Jocson and the other contributing authors’ works collectively stress community projects that intersect culture and pedagogy in the lives of youth ages 12–24 years old. The individual chapters present community and school-based work where culture is molded from social, cultural, political, and historical influences of the environment. Each chapter underscores the ideal of literacy collaboratives, which are spaces created to advance literacy development (reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and performing) of a group of youth working together with adults (Muhammad, 2012; Tatum, 2009). Brett asserts that this type of collaboration is reciprocal and is socially driven with the capacity to transcend “individual privileges, where separate expectations are replaced with equality and collective self-interest” (p. 51). The collaborative projects in the book also provide space for young people to challenge dominant forms of culture, reimagine cultural forms, and create awareness toward social issues affecting their lives.

Each project is theorized within a pedagogy of possibility framework where teaching and learning practices help youth to think, feel, and become different. A pedagogy of promise pushes students to become self-empowered, self-disciplined, and self-determined as opposed to receiving these attributes from others, which implies a hegemonic or hierarchical form of learning. This theory calls for educators to question how can we utilize students’ cultural resources to advance their academic, career, and personal trajectories.
Unique in each of the chapters is the need for young people to use literate practices to bring light to pressing issues in their lives and engage others in the fold. Cultural transformations were enacted in (re)mixing, (re)writing, and (re)imagining texts and educative spaces against dominant frames and practices that have not served them well. In Chapter 1, Jocson and Jacobs-Fantauzzi combine print (poetry) and non-print (video) and discuss the construction of a video poem. Engaging in the pedagogical practice of “remixing,” which means to “appropriate, borrow, and blend cultural texts to create new (or newer) texts,” they recontextualized a poem and documented a visual interpretation of it, layering multiple texts. In the remixed text, the video of the socially conscious poem, “Barely Audible,” was created (originally written by Chinaka Hodge). Similarly in Chapter 2, Joseph and Cook discuss the Life Is Living project and discuss the role of arts in cultural transformation. Life Is Living layers art, sports, community, and hip hop to develop what they call a “creative ecosystem” or fusion of artistic representations from the community. Authors of both chapters illustrate that transformative work must not only be collaborative but also multidisciplinary.

Chapters 3 and 4 capture the importance of youth writing and (re)writing representations of themselves amongst dominant discourses that serve to marginalize their voices. In Chapter 3, Winn shares dialogue with three adolescent girls who discuss the process of writing, staging, rehearsing, and performing plays that are indicative of their lives. Similarly, in Chapter 4, Bass and Halverson discuss an autobiographic digital media project, which served as a self-exploration and self-representation for Chris, a black male in a freshman college course. Both projects privileged identity meaning making embedded in acts of literacy.

Chapters 5–10 help readers to (re)imagine educative spaces and purposes of education. In Chapter 5, Patel and Gurn et al. (re)imagine the professional internship for youth by discussing how they are positioned in society and how they engage in critical dialogue related to professional experiences to push back on this positioning. Nasir, Holman, deRoyston, and Ross explore pedagogies of race in Chapter 6 and share strategies to help Black males navigate race in schools. They help us to (re)imagine how classrooms can offer affordances to not only engage in traditional sanctioned learning but also help young people understand racialized stereotypes and biases. Lee and Lopez (in Chapter 7) also argue for creating and (re)imagining transformative spaces for Native Americans. This involves teaching them about their histories and cultural identities so they can have the tools to protect their mental culture.

Brockenbrough and Boatwright in Chapter 8 share experiences of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) youth. They express the need for safe spaces inclusive of transgender youth of color and strategies for creating supportive environments within different areas of the community. Chapters 9 and 10 share findings from research conducted with Cuban and Australian youth. In Chapter 9, Román and Gomez discuss reggaeton and hip hop as cultural resources of Cuban students to self-express and self-assert their views. In Chapter 10, Brader and Luke help us to reimagine assessments and ways to engage students through the digital arts. This work pushes us to think about what is valued in education and how to use the cultural capital of students to reconceive their learning and ways to assess their progress.

Shirley Brice Heath, in her afterword, explains that learners in each of the cultural projects were not targets or outsiders participating in someone else’s curriculum. Nor were they referred to as unmotivated, at-risk, disadvantaged, or other dehumanizing labels that are often projected upon youth in schools and communities. They were instead inclusive of the learning and active participants in the construction of ideas and knowledge. The young people and adults in the projects were equally teachers and pupils, which set a foundation for meaningful learning to occur.

The importance of this collective work is timely as many art-based programs are being removed while privileging of test scores to shape policy and curriculum is being promoted. This encourages the question—What is the true purpose of education?—particularly literacy education. Is the purpose merely to examine test scores to draw wider and ill-informed conclusions? Or is the purpose grounded in helping young adults make sense of their complex histories and identities? The authors in the reviewed text underscore their projects with a discussion of the importance of local and wider histories of youth and how this plays a crucial role in their education. When space is created and cultivated for our young people to understand knowledge related to who they are, while engaging in multimodal forms of literacy, the possibilities of learning becomes boundless. Because of this text, I was particularly moved to ask:
1. When will more arts be integrated into interdisciplinary learning in schools?

2. What is the role of text in approaches like remixing, rewriting, and reimagining that can penetrate our pedagogical practices?

3. How will teachers take the theoretical and practical ideas from the different cultural projects presented in this volume and transform the learning experiences and assessments in their own classrooms?

These questions imply that the real gap in education is not necessarily the difference in test scores between students of certain ethnicities, but it is the gap between what actually happens in our classrooms and our students’ histories, cultural identities, and literacies. In other words, we do not have struggling students; oftentimes we have struggling systems, struggling curricula, and struggling instructional practices that fail to advance students’ thinking and engagement. A pedagogy of possibility approach charges educators to (re)conceptualize literacy education and its role in the lives of youth to honor the cultural capital that they bring to educative settings. As Jocson postulated, thinking about pedagogy in this way conveys a struggle over “different realities, over tensions, and modes of expression, and over versions of self” (p. 7). Yet, we must see this “struggle” as an opportunity, not a setback. It is an opportunity to become different and renewed and to change and be changed in education.

References