

RESISTING IMITATIVE HABITS: “LOOKING UP” TO URBAN SCHOOLS

Rebecca Skulnick

Abstract:

From the perspective of a teacher educator at a suburban college, the author uses rhetorical theory to explore why her students might resist engaging with urban communities. The author argues that if a student teacher's identity is based on her experience as a student in a suburban school and not a student in an urban school, s/he forms ideas about what it means to be urban based on his status as not urban. If s/he never recognizes her own false reading of urban schools, s/he becomes engaged in imitation without critical reflection, which, according to rhetorical scholarship, leads to bigotry. If students “read” the term “urban schools,” as connoting only a negative schooling experience, they are obviously undermining urban schools based on their own limited experiences. The author suggests that by creating a learning community in which students are asked to critically engage with assumptions/interpretations, question their own habitual readings of these assumptions, and then act on an informed platform, teacher educators will help all students and pre-service student teachers become agents of change rather than vehicles of systemic replication.

Introduction

Teacher education programs are currently responsible not only for teaching students about how to teach, how to think about education, the history of education, but also how to act as critical members of a public school faculty, as teacher researchers and innovators of education reform. As a teacher educator at a suburban liberal arts college devoted to urban education, I, like many of my colleagues, must help students understand that urban settings are not in need of “saving” any more than suburban settings. It is the system of public schooling, rather than the disenfranchised populace who often find themselves within the urban system, that needs to be critically evaluated. The only way to teach future teachers how to critically evaluate school systems, is to resist these students’ impulse to read “urban” as “failing”—we teach students’ to “read” urban through a critical, rather than habitual, lens.

The impetus for this paper began when I was teaching in a suburban public school. In the fall of 1998, ten popular athlete seniors wore white tank tops to West high school¹, an 800-student school located in a wealthy Midwest suburb, with “wife beater” written in marker on the chest. I had never heard of the name “wife beater” being associated with white tank tops and asked my seniors why these students decided to write this mantra on their chest. The answer, “a wife-beater is a kind of tank top. They just want to show off their muscles and decided that today would be wife beater day—you know, they dress like this every Wednesday but they decided that today, they’d make it official.” “But a wife beater is someone who commits domestic violence,” I responded.

As a teacher, I was concerned with protecting the students who might sit beside them and live in homes in which a wife-beater is not a tank top but a father. I could not understand how these students could ignore the signifying value of the term “wife beater” and instead focus on style, a tight white tank top over eighteen year old muscles. Two hours later one of my students stopped me in the hallway and explained that these athletes were all on the football team and they often wore white tank tops in order to assert their solidarity. After reflection, I realized that these students could not possibly identify “wife beater” with domestic violence rather than sporty strength because that would jeopardize the validity of their life world: the ideology that the school is only as good as its football team and that this team represents strength and popularity. By refusing to see the “wife beater” tank top as a signifier, a term that has multiple meanings, I was not able to engage in a critical conversation with my students. When human beings do not read signs as interpretive, a discursive framework toward understanding is impeded.

Resisting Imitation

Currently, I teach in a suburban liberal arts college and direct an urban education program for students who, mainly, come from areas similar to West. When I was a teacher at West, I was faced with the obligation to teach students what it means to say “wife beater.” My job is to engage students in conversations and inquiry projects that cause them to question their instinctual interpretations of what is “urban” and how to make choices about their future careers based on these interpretations. For pre-service student teaching, imitation is most clearly articulated when analyzing where these students choose to teach. Research has shown that most teachers work in schools near where they grew up or went to college (Boyde, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). These locations are disproportionately suburban or small towns. Therefore, while teenagers imitate each other without critically examining this imitation, pre-service student teachers choose to replicate their experiences rather than seek new experiences. They choose to imitate their former life styles and choices.

When I ask my student teachers why they want to teach in their hometown school district they do not report that it is because they had a positive learning experience. Rather, they report that they want to live the same lifestyle of their parents. These students are not concerned with their former schools' test scores, the teacher's potential to inform curricula, or a schools' particular success according to any other standard. The students cling to the community from which they were raised without questioning whether or not they would be happier in a different community or whether they could live within this community and, perhaps, teach in another. While imitation can help to secure a sense of culture and place, it can also provoke a degenerative understanding of self and other. It is when imitative readings become habits that students (and teachers) lose their critical lens and these habits are repeated.

Difference

When students must consider the possibility of difference, of a reading different than their own, they become suspect of this reading. Habermas (1984) suggests that such suspicion protects the students' valuation of their life-world. Even so, if teacher-educators are to help suburban students see their professional choices as multifaceted rather than pre-determined, we must introduce them to "difference." As explained by Derrida (1974), "without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Difference produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible" (143). Students need to know that they belong to any given culture in order to have a sense of identity. All cultures, whether they be based on location (the suburbs) or interest groups (football) are based on shared experiences. When individuals within cultures see the differences between themselves and the others within the culture, the base question, what makes us a bound culture, is called into question. In order to maintain their sense of shared identity, students might refuse to listen to alternative readings, that wife-beater could signify spousal abuse, in fear that if they are not a part of the culture from which they form their identity, they do not belong.

As stated earlier, my student teachers enter into suburban teaching without critically examining why they chose such a path. Similarly, many of my students have no developed sense as to why they want to teach. A majority are interested in teaching not in order to change the world but in order to live secure lifestyles like those of their parents and replicate the community from which they were born. After holding more than sixty interviews with student teachers from a suburban liberal arts college, all but one asked to student teach in the same exact schooling environment from which they experienced; at my school, this translates into choosing a suburban teaching experience.

If my pre-service student teachers were to truly ask themselves, why they aren't interested in urban schooling, they would first have to contend with how they are defining their own identity and how this identity shapes their decision to teach in suburban communities. If a student teacher's identity is based on her experience as a student in a suburban school and not a student in an urban school, s/he forms ideas about what it means to be urban based on his status as not urban. If s/he never recognizes her own false reading of urban schools, s/he becomes engaged in imitation without critical reflection, which, according to rhetorical scholarship, leads to bigotry: "the habitual practice of identification-by-negation. Whenever you claim that you are what you are not, you say little about your Self except what can be inferred from your attitude toward people you do not like" (McGee, 1998, p. 165).

The replication of bigotry of suburban communities to their urban neighbors is reinforced when suburban students never are exposed to their urban neighbors. Feiman-Nemser (2001) shares such a concern in her seminal essay on teacher preparation and remarks that "(u)nless teacher educators engage prospective teachers in a critical examination of their entering beliefs in light of compelling alternatives and help them develop powerful images of good and strong professional commitments, these entering beliefs will continue to shape their ideas and practices" (p. 1017). If students constantly "read" the term "urban schools," a signifier, as connoting only a negative schooling experience, the signified concept taken from the term, they are obviously undermining urban schools based on their own limited experiences.

Cixous (1976) warns her reader to beware of social categories that ignore the individuality of human beings: "Beware, my friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of a signified! Beware of diagnoses that would reduce your generative powers" (p. 892). When student teachers mistake urban experience as an inherently different space than the one they inhabit, they lose the power to choose whether or not to teach in urban spaces. Thus, a critical debate in both education and rhetoric is how to resist habitual thinking and teach the kind of critical thinking that can lead to informed interpretive practices that resist apathy and indifference.

Routine and Critical Habits

"*Routine habits*," as Dewey (1944) explains, "are habits that possess us instead of our possessing them, are habits which put an end to plasticity . . . only an environment which secures the full use of intelligence in the process of forming habits can counteract this tendency" (p. 49). *Critical habits* are thought of as *active habits of mind*.

Habits take the form both of habituation, or a general and persistent balance of organic activities with the surroundings, and of active capacities to readjust activity to meet new conditions. The former furnishes the background of growth; the latter constitute growing. Active habits involve thought, invention, and initiative in applying capacities to new aims. They are opposed to routine which marks an arrest of growth. (p. 52-53)

Active habits allow for a human being to read signs as negotiable and therefore gives the reader more freedom to act within identity categories as well as understand oneself with and against such categories.

As teacher-educators we look to Dewey who advises that we must view this imitation not as an “explanation of itself” but instead as a “way of understanding” an event which may enable the imitators to learn how to participate in activities (p. 36). Dewey inspires the hope that if the student relies on imitation in order to learn how to participate in experiences, when provided with different experiences, students will shift the way they think about schooling. The student does not ask herself whether she is similar to other teachers in other schools or other students from urban areas but because she never had to experience these “other” spaces. When pre-service student teachers are given the opportunity to learn and study in urban spaces, they become open to the idea of teaching and living in these spaces because the notion of difference is complicated: the college students see teachers and students who are similar to them, either in race or class or interest in particular activities such as sports or poetry, and yet still different. Identities become individualized rather than based on hometown location. Suburban college students enter urban classroom spaces and see the possibility of entering these spaces when they see these spaces as not so different.

Disrupting a student’s notion of what is different and what is similar requires a student to shift her interpretive lens. This can only happen with explicit intention embedded in a teacher education curriculum. Imitation will replicate itself and turn into habit unless an experience allows students to shift perspective and resist their previous conceptions about what it means to come from a particular neighborhood and what it means to be similar to people in “other” neighborhoods. This shifting of perspectives allows students the agency to resist previous misconceptions and make concerted and conscious choices about their futures in education. The question then becomes, how can teachers and scholars help adolescents morph routine habits into critical habits? In order to re-appropriate habits as growth inspiring, rather than routine, it is important not only to locate the agency in imitative behaviors, as I suggest, but how one might enhance a subject’s critical lens so that s/he would be less willing to engage in routine habits of mind.

Liberatory Pedagogy

A classroom can only become what Greene calls liberatory when both the implicit and explicit curriculum addresses subjective interpretive practices. In the case of the suburban pre-service student teacher, a curriculum must ask students to first examine how they came to understand themselves as “suburban” students and future teachers and then question what it means to be an “urban” student or teacher.

Our teacher education curriculum focuses its first introductory course on the suburban middle school experience. In the Fall 2006 semester, students considered how suburban middle level identities are shaped during fifteen hours of site visitations, and daily reflective essays. For example, students were asked to categorize middle school students’ lunchroom configurations according to social class, standards of beauty, or any other categorization technique that they believed were useful. Then, students shared their reflections with peers and question each others’ interpretations. Finally, we discussed how they choose categories of middle level students, how those categories were informed by popular culture, and what these categories say about the student population. As students interrogated what it means to be suburban, they interrogated their own choice to remain “in the suburbs.”

While a process of self reflection, either in the explicit or implicit curriculum might encourage critical awareness, it will not succeed if in reflecting, students must destroy their own life worlds. As Habermas (1984) explains, part of the reason why we are not able to completely understand each other’s world views is because doing so would mean having to reconsider our own forms of life which are “*incommensurable in their value*” (p. 59). Therefore, if students define themselves as suburban and see the middle school suburban students as materialistic, they might be reticent to either maintain their own identity as suburban or see these students as materialistic—both cannot be true. Therefore, these pre-service student teachers must understand how materialism is inherent to American culture and not necessarily always a negative personality characteristic. In addition, choosing to wear different types of clothing helps middle level students try on different identities at a time when their choices are limited. Before asking my suburban students to see urban students as both similar and different to themselves, I must ask my suburban students to see how they are similar and different to each other.

The effort to teach critical interpretive practices in education is similar to the effort to read rhetorically. In both cases, one could develop regulatory and objective ways of determining what a text “means” or how it should be read more systematically. We could, for example, make a chart of the class’ individual students, differentiating each other according to sports, Greek life, grades, class, race, and gender. However, neither a critic nor an adolescent can prescribe a plan of critical thinking without fully understanding a person’s subject position and context. Even such a chart would diminish individual students’ subjectivities. To understand a text, a sign, or a person, as having an internal history is to deconstruct, and teach students how to deconstruct, each other and themselves. Therefore, a necessary step in both education and rhetoric is the move toward empathic readings of cultural signs.

Through inter-subjectivity and empathy, imitation can lead to students becoming agents of change in their own lives. A later course in the sequence of undergraduate student education courses at my college focuses on identity and diversity within urban schools. It was during this course that students wrote case studies of after-school student organizations and engaged in honest discussions with urban students committed to activism. The students in this course were first asked to fully understand how they engage in activism on campus—explicitly or implicitly—how their decision to be a part of a Greek organization, a sports team, or a particular dorm, was a political decision. They then choose to conduct field work at an after-school organization in which they had previous interest such as religious organizations, school movements devoted to peace education, young mothers’ groups, and gay-straight alliances. By connecting their interests to interests of students in urban neighborhoods, my suburban students noticed that urban students have similar needs and interests to suburban students and that, unlike the suburban schools that are located within the immediate neighborhood of our liberal arts college, urban areas have spaces in which students can engage in such interests. Thus, my pre-service student teachers engaged in a relationship with their urban neighbors based on empathy, respect, and admiration.

Students in the class truly learned Geertz’ (1973) theory that “understanding a people’s culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity...It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity (p. 14). The moment students experienced empathy and respect, they also encountered “liberatory pedagogy” and saw the possibility of teaching or working with real, rather than imagined, urban populations. In addition, our exercise mandated that students interact with live organizations rather than read about urban experiences from text books. Noddings (2002) explains the significance of truly caring for “different” subjects when she references Charles Silberman on the German University and the rise of Nazism: “intellectual development does not ensure against moral perversity” (p. 11). She calls for students to be immersed in centers of care, beginning with modeling the care a teacher can have for his students.

Not only, as Noddings suggested, must teachers care with and for our students, we must teach our students how to care with and for each other. Reciprocity must extend beyond the teacher as the “carer” and the student as the “cared for.” If imitation is to turn into critical practices, students must not only see hierarchies of difference as political and informed by perception, but they also must have something legitimate to take from the assumed “lower” ring of the hierarchical structure. Suburban students must look up to their urban neighbors.

Conclusion

This essay is a call to study and teach about schooling with an understanding of the power of rhetoric and education; with an understanding that “discernment lies in the particulars and the perception” (Nussbaum, 1991, p. 73). Pre-service student teachers and students within the current public school system must learn how to understand “the other” as similar to and different from themselves. In the case of West High School, where I began my teaching, I had to see my students as similar to and different from myself. Such an understanding would have required that I respect, even if I do not agree with, the culture of West which states that football players are model images of masculinity. It was my responsibility to question how such models of masculinity would write “wife beaters” on themselves. Because I saw these football players as ignorant and imitative, I was not able to completely engage with these “others” and saw my efforts to teach them one of the knower teaching the ignorant. I was never able to engage these students in a conversation about domestic violence. Instead, they proceeded in silence.

What I learned from this situation is that students have reasons for interpreting texts and in order for me to truly call these readings into question I must engage students in conversations based on mutual respect and empathy. When we are empathetic to each other’s position, we might shift our own readings, stop labeling the “other” as so different than ourselves, and act with purpose. At West, it was just as impossible for me to see the term “wife beater” as a term for a tank top as it was for them to see my disgust as anything other than a misunderstanding.

Through this situation I learned that it is an imperative for me to understand why students want to continue teaching in the suburban schools before I try to teach them not to “otherize” urban schools. When my suburban pre-service student teachers do think about urban schools as “other,” my students give themselves permission to create a space between themselves and these

school systems as well as permission to ignore the benefits and needs inherent in any particular school system. Creating any learning community in which students are asked to critically engage with assumptions/interpretations, question their own habitual readings of these assumptions, and then act on an informed platform, will help all students and pre-service student teachers engage more fully with the world around them and become agents of change rather than vehicles of systemic replication.

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1. Pseudonyms have been used for names of schools.

REBECCA SKULNICK

An Assistant Professor at Ursinus College, Rebecca Skulnick holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies and American Studies from Indiana University. In addition to teaching lower and upper level courses in the Education Department at Ursinus College, Skulnick works with secondary education students to prepare them to teach in Philadelphia's charter and comprehensive schools as the director of the college's Philadelphia student teaching experience. Dr. Skulnick's research interests are informed by her former students, new teachers and currently focuses on how urban school reform and policies affect students' and teachers' schooling experiences. By involving new teachers in her research, Skulnick also supports new teachers' interest and involvement in academic research. She may be reached at rskulnick@ursinus.edu.

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