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Cultural Studies Matters

As we write this introduction for the “Cultural Studies Matters” (Volume 2, Issue 1) special issue of *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, developments at our home campus at UCLA and events at the World Education Forum (WEF) in Caracas, Venezuela animate with particular poignancy cultural studies’ relevance and importance to academic scholarship. At present, UCLA’s academic community is struggling to maintain a culture of integrity and freedom of expression as a group of aspiring Karl-Rovians formalize the “Bruin Alumni Association,” (BAA) a non-profit organization whose project is to “expose UCLA’s most radical professors” (referred to as “The Dirty Thirty”) who they claim “are actively proselytizing their extreme views in the classroom” (<http://www.uclaprofs.com>). The BAA’s red-baiting activities include, among other things, offering to pay students for secretly taping and documenting class lectures and discussions. By virtue of these activities, the BAA undermines the university’s legacy of offering a space for critical debate and dialogue predicated on a culture of trust, openness and reflexivity. Moreover, their activities are indicative of a growing trend across the nation and the world to silence voices of critical inquiry, dissent and reflection. Initiated by reactionary neo-McCarthy segments in the academy, these trends are nourished by a culture of fear and terror which have marked the twenty-first century, a culture largely abstracted from the broader social relations that form it. Universal poverty, increased religious and capitalist fundamentalism, sexism and racism have generated a sense of otherness within global society that deepens antagonisms between and among various social groups. As U.S. society in general grows intolerant and fearful of those deemed different, millions of others around the globe experience the terror of fear on a much more drastic scale. Acts on behalf of the BAA in no way parallel brute militant acts of repression found in nations such as Colombia, S.A., where paramilitary death squads assassinate teacher union leaders every week for allegedly “proselytizing” to students, but they do caution us to a future which may ostensibly witness increased coercion and control of thought in the subjective formation of each global citizen.

Partly due to these reasons, tens of thousands of people convened in Caracas, Venezuela for the IV WEF whose theme was “*Otro Mundo es Posible*” (Another World is Possible). Brought together by their belief to “*promover y defender el derecho universal a la educación*” (promote and defend the universal right to education) an international consortium of practitioners, activists and scholars have committed their work in the twenty-first century to reaffirming each citizen’s inalienable right to public education, grounded in plurality of thought

and democratic participation, to secure every global citizen's creative development outside the commodity form of late capitalism. Cultural workers around the world view education's capacity to promote a "*cultura de paz*" (a culture of peace) as a constitutive and necessary feature to global society, one which can only be achieved by reassessing our ethics and practices to enable the full and free development of every citizen. At this historical juncture the field of cultural studies becomes increasingly relevant.

The relationship between culture, education and systems of information production and distribution is one that has received increased attention over the last several decades. Dating back to the Frankfurt school of political thought and the Birmingham school of cultural studies, a number of scholars and activists have struggled to strengthen our understandings of institutional and societal cultural formations in an era profoundly affected by the logic of global capital and imperialist warfare. Within these frameworks, culture ceases to be considered as an abstract or static unit of analysis. Rather, it is explored as a nexus of social interactions, beliefs, practices, norms and traditions that have a historically specific and socially constituted origin and progression. In the domain of cultural studies, investigations into human subjectivity as expressed through cultural formations have resulted in a wide disciplinary framework. This framework attempts to displace dominant conceptions of power, resistance, alienation and transformation to more fully address the ideological and hegemonic forces that shape our daily existence. For these reasons, *InterActions* has published this special issue on cultural studies, the result of a graduate student-led conference at Teachers College, Columbia University entitled, "Cultural Studies Matters."

The Cultural Studies Matters conference, held in April of 2005, was the result of a graduate student initiative promoting the importance of interdisciplinary work in cultural studies for the study of education and youth, and advocating for an institutional space for cultural studies students at Teachers College, Columbia University. As in most education schools, Teachers College graduate students committed to cultural studies found themselves with no institutional "home" or unified curricular program and felt that a major national conference would go a long way toward creating momentum for change both within the college and the field of education as a whole. Thus, Teachers College Students for a Cultural Studies Initiative (TCSCSI), a group of students in different departments, came together to raise awareness of the significance of cultural studies work for education. They subsequently joined with Professor John Broughton, postdoctoral students and educational practitioners to put together the inaugural Teachers College conference exploring the connections between cultural studies, education and the study of youth.

The goal of the organizers was to not only showcase the vast range of cultural studies work conducted by graduate students but also to highlight the

numerous ways in which cultural studies challenges traditional or disciplinary assumptions in education. TCSCSI contended that, given its growing impact on educational research, theory, and practice, cultural studies deserves institutional support and legitimacy in schools of education. To that end, they sent out an international call for graduate students to submit papers, which explore the many intersections between cultural studies, education and/or the study of youth. Through graduate student panels, workshops, and keynote presentations from some of the leading intellectuals and practitioners in the country, the Cultural Studies Matters conference illuminated the many ways cultural studies work challenges the conventional boundaries of educational research and practice. It made a compelling case for the institutional legitimacy and applicability of cultural studies in departments of education. While the conference stressed the relationship between cultural studies and education, participants engaged education broadly, to include an analysis of media and film, both of which speak directly to the disciplinary scope of information and library studies (LIS). In addition, the intersection of cultural studies, education, and pedagogical strategies address some of the concerns of an evolving, critically-oriented tradition in LIS.

One example of such a trans-disciplinary shift in LIS can be found in Wayne Wiegand's (1999) call to redress the "tunnel visions and blind spots" (p.1) that plague discourses and studies of American librarianship. In response to Wiegand's critique, a special issue of *Library Quarterly* (Volume 73, Number 1) was published in January 2003, with various authors addressing critical theoretical interventions into library and information studies (LIS). One article in particular, Marie and Gary Radford's (2003) "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian," addresses the importance of cultural studies to LIS. As they argue, a cultural studies approach gives an opportunity to see media images of librarians from new vantage points, and can help transform stereotypical descriptions of the profession.

While Radford and Radford offer a starting point for incorporating cultural studies into LIS, the task remains to expand their notion of a "cultural studies approach" to the wider context of information studies. Beyond transforming media images of librarianship, a cultural studies framework opens the domain of information studies to new areas of critical information and media literacy. Far from embracing a "neutral," value-free or apolitical understanding of "information," a critical cultural studies framework addresses social and economic inequities in the discipline. It moves us toward a conception of information studies predicated on the basic tenets of social justice, on examining the production of information within a broader political sphere, and on building alternative forms of media as tools for social change.

A glimpse of this more expansive vision of information studies can be seen in Douglas Kellner's commentary entitled, "Cultural Studies, Media Spectacle, and Election 2004" and Mary Caton-Rosser and Jennifer McGinley's

article entitled “Alternative Media and the Learning Culture of Civil Society: Outreach and Teach Strategies.” Kellner dutifully elaborates upon the trans-disciplinary nature of cultural studies as a means for rupturing hegemonic cultural expression as found within the mass media. Centering his analysis upon the right-wing manipulation of the 2004 U.S. presidential elections, Kellner argues that democracy can only be actuated through the thriving mechanisms of alternative media that are able to express dissension free of coercion. In addition, Caton-Rosser and McGinley offer a framework for understanding alternative media as a vital information source for grassroots politics and mobilization. Focusing upon the pedagogical role that alternative media has in promoting critical media literacy within civil society they explore the ways in which alternative media - through the examples of *Free Speech TV* and *Indymedia* - provide opportunities for meaningful democracy, whereby expression and dissension can be freely articulated as an important counter to the mass media.

In keeping with the goals of *InterActions*, this issue also continues in the unique, critical cross-fertilization of our two disciplines, education and information studies. Within this particular issue, for example, vital intersections between pedagogy and information studies are explored. For instance, the visions of Caton-Rosser and McGinley and Kellner incorporate pedagogy as an essential tool in information and media literacy. In addition, many of the other pieces, addressing issues as diverse as Adorno and his relevance to educational strategies today, critical indigenous pedagogy, and restorative justice, all focus to a large degree on defining and expanding the pedagogical concepts of literacy and in formulating understandings of the social world. These pedagogical explorations help create an environment where the two disciplines of education and information studies can enhance each other.

We begin this exploration with Claire Deal’s article entitled “Learning with Conviction: Service Learning, Social Documentary, and Transformative Research” in which she discusses the transformational impact that documentary holds for learning outcomes within service learning projects. In retelling her class’ work at the Piedmont Regional Jail in Farmville, Virginia, Deal argues that meaningfully constructed service learning projects not only invigorate student learning, but assure that students become engaged scholars committed to community. Moreover, visual mediums can become important contexts in which expressions of these connections are communicated.

We follow this with Tiffany S. Lee’s “‘I Came Here to Learn How to be a Leader’”: An Intersection of Critical Pedagogy and Indigenous Education.” Lee introduces us to the Tribal Resource Institute in Business, Engineering, and Science (TRIBES) program operated out of the University of New Mexico. Among its stated goals, TRIBES seeks to advance an indigenous educational philosophy intended to foster Native students’ sense of self-worth and commitment to their Native identities. Through a unique form of critical

pedagogy, Lee explores the manner in which TRIBES seeks to enrich a Native sense of self, students' sense of purpose, life goals and commitment to their Native communities.

In "From Aesthetics to Pedagogy and Back: Rethinking the Works of Theodor Adorno," Tyson Lewis maps the philosophy of Adorno in order to build important connections between his work in the area of aesthetics and that of educational reform and pedagogy. Towards this end, Lewis argues that Adorno's liberatory project favors pedagogy as a formidable force against tyranny and fascism. Education, therefore, becomes a space by which to explore contradictions in knowledge that operate to perpetuate the violence of capitalism. Rhonda Hammer continues this discussion by looking at the implicit and explicit pedagogical possibilities produced through critical media studies in her piece, "Teaching Critical Literacies: Theory, Praxis, and Empowerment." Hammer shares her thoughts on the transgressive and liberatory possibilities that critical media literacy provides through her classroom activities. Critical literacy, according to Hammer, seeks not only to build capacities for criticality, but also to make obvious the production process itself. Hammer provides us with examples of her own students' media creations as evidence of the liberatory possibilities inherent within critical teaching and learning.

In an environment of neo-liberalism, empire, over-consumption, and techno-capitalism, the intersection of information studies, cultural studies, and diverse pedagogical strategies is more important than ever. Grassroots, progressive movements, whether facilitated by alternative media, critical media and information literacy skills, and progressive pedagogical strategies, have the potential to offer resistance and alternatives to this dominant framework. However, it remains crucial that we begin to formulate these intersections and spaces for critical interventions. We present this issue in the hope that we have begun this process of dialogue and cross-fertilization. We leave it to you, our readers, to continue this conversation.

As we see within this volume, cultural expression is not neutral, immutable, or unassailable, but rather operates as a mediated space whereby power is expressed through form and action. In keeping with this theme, each of the articles represented within this volume explores the dialectical nature of the cultural form, arguing that there are pedagogical moments within the beautiful, the mundane, and the nonsensical. Learning and literacy come not from a blank stare at the canvas, the vacuity of the television set, or the seeming remoteness of a photograph, but rather through open conflict with the senses and a capacity towards an alternative, critical rendering of the cultural space therein.

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