Comics as a Medium for Inquiry: Urban Students (Re-)Designing Critical Social Worlds

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Abstract
Literacy scholars have argued that curricular remediation marginalizes the dynamic meaning-making practices of urban youth and ignores contemporary definitions of literacy as multimodal, socially situated, and tied to people's identities as members of cultural communities. For this reason, it is imperative that school-based literacy research unsettle status quos by foregrounding the sophisticated practices that urban students enact as a result, and in spite of, the marginalization they manage in educational settings. A hopeful site for honoring the knowledge of urban students is the nexus of alternative learning spaces that have taken on increased significance in youths' lives. Many of these spaces focus on young people's engagements with new literacies, multimodalities, the arts, and popular media, taking the stance that students' interests are inherently intellectual. The Cabrini Comics Inquiry Community (CCIC), located in a K-8 Catholic school in South Philadelphia, is one such space. The CCIC was the site of a practitioner research study from February 2012 to June 2014. For parts of three school years, students met weekly to read, write, design, and discuss graphic novels. As a practitioner researcher, the author extended pedagogic invitations for students to engage with the comics medium, and employed ethnographic tools to study learning outcomes. By examining how a group of urban students 1.) co-constructed the space of an afterschool inquiry community and 2.) mobilized the comics medium to (per)form cultural identities and engage in critical inquiries, this dissertation contributes to theories of critical multimodal/multicultural literacy education. The author surfaces ways in which students used the affordances of the comics medium to 1.) contest the silencing of race in their school, 2.) re-narrate themselves and their cultural backgrounds through resource orientations, and 3.) complicate gender discourses. (The verbal-visual form of comics has particular affordances for students to engage in acts of conscientious disruption outside the traditional literacy curriculum.) In all, this dissertation presents an argument for honoring urban students' literate and cultural knowledge through their critical multimodal engagements. Through a blend of practitioner research and ethnographic tools, this work endeavors to challenge generalizations made about urban students and their literate lives.

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Includes bibliographical references and index ISBN 0-691-03470-2 (cloth : alk. paper) ISBN 0-691-03471-0 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Social sciences—Methodology. 2. Social sciences—Research. The first-rate social scientist does not regard a research design as a blueprint for a mechanical process of data-gathering and evaluation. To the contrary, the scholar must have the flexibility of mind to overturn old ways of looking at the world, to ask new questions, to revise research designs appropriately, and then to collect more data of a different type than originally intended.