

Class in Classrooms: The Challenges Public Librarians Face as Border Crossing Educators

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Abstract: In border crossing pedagogy, educators help students negotiate identity and cultural issues. Public librarians help special populations of patrons improve on class issues through education. This study explored the issues public librarians face when they teach and border cross across social classes.

The structure of capitalism affects schooling (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Social class leads to social capital access that affects student learning and life outcomes (Coleman, 1988). Uneven capital distribution across schools and communities creates savage inequalities (Kozol, 1992). Culturally biased educational content, materials, and processes favor students from higher class backgrounds (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Cultures of poverty hinder lower class children (Lewis, 1961).

Giroux (1992) suggests that teachers can make a difference by crossing between the borders of culture and identity that divide students. This means using pedagogy to create a classroom that becomes a border space where students can negotiate the meaning of their culture, identity, and the narratives that affect their lives. Teachers can communicate, act, and perform in a way that counters the inequalities in education caused by the extremes of neoliberalism, the attack on public spaces, and the biased consequences of a market mentality (Giroux, 1992, 1993).

The effect of social class on social capital and equality goes beyond the classroom (Coleman, 1988). Border crossing needs to be promoted by other cultural workers in society who educate outside the schools (Giroux, 1992). The library is an institution where students can learn beyond the classroom (Cabrera & Colosi, 2009), and public library educators have as their mission the need to help special populations of patrons who can be affected by issues of class, culture, and identity (Panz, 1989). The problem is that there is little work on how public librarians can be border crossers in terms of negotiating social class in the classrooms of their institutions in which they teach.

The purpose of study was to gain a better understanding of public librarians as border crossers and the library as a border space in order to add to the literature on public library instruction, class issues, and border crossing. These research questions were examined: How do librarian educators perceive border pedagogy? What are the challenges public librarians face as they shift from teaching students in one social class to another? What strategies can improve their practice?

Public librarians act as border crossers in terms of social class and often have to modulate their role to different audiences. First, this paper shows that the nature of special populations in the library is different than those in traditional classrooms and that the social class has been constructed differently in the library. Then, border crossing is suggested as a way to make the focus on special populations and social class issues work better. Finally, the paper outlines the results of a qualitative study on the way librarian educators face these issues in their courses. The

participating librarian educators used observation, journal writing, and interviews to explore the way they teach students of different social classes in three class sessions.

Border Crossing

Border crossing deals with the cultural work in spaces between high and popular culture, institutions and the street, and the private and the public. Neoliberalism spreads its ideology, power, and influence diminishing all things social, public, and collective. The performative nature of pedagogy can challenge the problems created by these conditions (Giroux, 2001). Social and cultural codes organize and divide people. Students and teachers have to fight master narratives that promote race and class inequality and other forms of injustice. These conflicts can transform or disfigure identities (Giroux, 1991). Divisions between people create borders between them (Giroux, 1992).

Existing borders can be challenged and redefined. Pedagogical conditions must be created to enable students to make border crossings (Giroux, 1992). Teachers can create a border space where these codes, divisions, narratives, and identities can be confronted, renegotiated, and transformed. Depending on the level of schooling, a teacher can help students explore the nature of these issues or even help them create a counter discourse (Giroux, 1991). Border crossing pedagogy can be considered part of a radical and critical pedagogical discourse that shares much with feminist, antiracist, and postmodern ideas (Jackson, 1997). Border crossing confronts a wide variety of issues including the cultural and social conflicts social class divisions create (Giroux, 1993). This study uses the border crossing perspective to perceive librarians as cultural workers who can teach people divided by social class ways to cross cultures and improve their social capital.

The Nature of Special Populations

Border crossing pedagogy is often discussed in terms of multicultural education, the traditional classroom, or the traditional primary, secondary, or college student in or outside the traditional school classroom. The idea of border crossing pedagogy is to help diverse populations of students cross the divisions and codes that keep them inside the border of their subjectivity (Giroux, 1992, 1993). The language and codes of library classrooms deal with special populations and not necessarily diverse or multicultural populations.

Services to special population groups are a part of library history. Special populations can be defined as groups of particular library users who have been targeted by the library because they are underserved or have not been served at all. A huge list of targeted groups for library service can be created. It depends on the context of the particular library in question and the community it serves to define what targeted group is a special population. The list in the past has included school children of various ages, parents and guardians of various types, senior citizens, the unemployed, the homeless, the homebound, and the economically, culturally, or linguistically disadvantaged to name a few (Panz, 1989). For library educators, the class can be a special population that the library deems needs to be served or a special population that has requested their service. School and library educators may disagree on who should be served.

Social Class

Social class is constructed differently in American schools arguably creating a structure where students from different social classes are segregated, given different sets of opportunities, and given different expectations (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Many factors in school can make the social class of students visible and easier to track and regiment (Coleman, 1988). Libraries do not exclusively serve a specific set of students in a structured compulsory or college level schooling regimen. Libraries serve the patron that contact the institution and they can be of all

ages, classes, races, and other characteristics. Library educators however can attract patrons to certain classes that can be a function of social class. Poor patrons for example maybe attracted to a resume writing class because they are unemployed and the culture of poverty has kept them from learning this skill elsewhere. Because different classes attract different patrons, the librarian educator may deal with a population of people in one social class in one class and a different social class group in another.

Border Crossing and Public Librarians

Giroux (1993) notes how the economic system and forms of conservatism support race riots, a dangerous form of deregulation, and the promotion of private market competition in schools subjugating students to the inequity of the market. Educators can help author a sense of critical agency in their students and work with the community. Some teachers can border cross in an almost unconscious act (Giroux, 1993). Border crossing educators for example can be found in two year colleges as they move from one culture of discipline or profession such as English to another (Madden, 1999). Most teachers however have to be taught border crossing and need a historical understanding of conditions in order to act strategically to better lives (Giroux, 1993).

Schools for example can promote assimilationist codes to immigrant youth promoting an American national identity. Through other forms of literacy, texts, and social life students can learn another identity and cross borders (Lam, 2004). The library is one of the many places where learning across borders can occur beyond the school (Card-Gretencord et al., 2009). Libraries are a learning commons and a place of active research. Students think through content with a freedom there that the regimentation and scheduling of school classrooms can limit. Librarians can inform a curriculum allowing students to explore metacognition, make distinctions, understand systems and relationships, and explore perspectives (Cabrera & Colosi, 2009). No rallying cry however exists for librarian educators to become border crossers even though their institutions can attract students in and outside of schools. Border crossing improves the socio-economic agency of special populations.

Methodology

A qualitative fieldwork study using participant observation, interviews, and investigative journals was conducted to gain meaningful understanding of the subject arguably using case study elements to develop descriptive themes. Data was organized in relation to border crossing and social class ideas. Questions were developed from the literature on border crossing, social capital, and the data collected. As part of a supervised fieldwork program for library science students done in the summer of 2009, the researcher served as a participant observer at the main branch of a major public library system in south Florida. The library is in an urban downtown area and serves a diverse community. The researcher was able to observe and participate in various events, take notes, and interview staffers at the library. The researcher prepared and participated in several classes conducted at the library that targeted special populations that varied across social classes. For this study, the researcher used the data collected from three classes to interview the two librarian educators who taught these classes and explore the topic of social class. They were asked the main research questions: How do librarian educators perceive border pedagogy? What are the challenges public librarians face as they shift from teaching students in one social class to another? What strategies can improve their practice?

Further questions and themes for the interview sessions were developed by comparing and contrasting the notes taken, the journals written, and the observations of the participant researcher and the two librarian educators. The challenges for librarian educators in relation to class were summarized from these findings and solutions using border crossing were discussed.

The nature of the fieldwork made the participant researcher arguably serve as a third librarian educator in a sense.

The main librarian educators were Jorge Granada, a Hispanic male, and Jaycee Ebony, an African American female. Both were middle class. The researcher was a working class Hispanic male. The researcher and the librarian educators all had graduate level education and teaching experience but only the librarian educators had several years of experience at a public library. Because of privacy and other professional issues at the institution, patrons could not be directly queried by the researcher about their social class or other matters pertaining to their background. The collective social class of the classroom population of each class was determined by the librarians due to their familiarity with the patrons, inferred through the gatekeeping mechanisms that allowed participants to attend a class, estimated through observation, and in some cases ascertained from the self labeling of participants. The library uses detailed statistics about who historically attends these classes that also helped in determining class characteristics.

The first class was a resume and job search class with 10 students who were mostly minority males over 25. Students were categorized as lower class in part because many of the students were unemployed and homeless. The second class focused on database searches and was attended by about 10 African American, Hispanic, and Anglo professional women determined to be middle class in part because the course was limited to certain county employees. The final class was a presentation on the services of the Urban Affairs library department requested by several members of a foreign consulate. The professional and political status of this population of mostly Hispanic males and females was upper class in nature.

Results

Research question results show public librarians acting as boundary crossers in social class terms and often having to modulate their role to different audiences. Librarians perceived border pedagogy as an innate part of their practice and saw various work related challenges and many possible improvement strategies. Discussion yielded further insights and themes. Reactions to the research questions revealed the complexity of library instruction. When asked how librarian educators perceived border pedagogy, Jaycee and Jorge instantly grasped how it applied to their work. The librarians saw themselves as professionals trying to uplift their patrons and translate ideas across the cultural differences of their students. The discussion centered on getting patrons employed or maintaining their employment so that they could rise above poverty. The librarians saw a need to have people in the upper levels of society understand what the library was doing for the community. The researcher cited specific examples of how the librarians seemed to cross borders and the librarians concurred with these interpretations. Jaycee for example would use role play to discuss how different people across the social spectrum would write a resume in order to give lower class students options and cultural understanding. The researcher showed a lower class patron how the higher class looked at resumes not as individual documents but part of a larger self marketing scheme. Jorge used research tools to show students of all classes how to critically analyze information as active learners.

Questioning the challenges public librarians face as they shift from teaching students in one social class to another brought out many issues. Preparation and presentation time was limited. Support for some classes was uncertain. Jaycee worried lack of funding would end the resume writing class. Jorge worried about keeping upper class patrons interested in requesting more classes since exposure to the library made it possible that they could support the library in other ways.

Themes of protocol, status, performance, and pedagogy emerged revealing how the librarian educators had to modulate their roles as border crossers to different audiences. Protocol affected communication and recognition. Jorge for example spent time understanding the proper way to address a member of a foreign consulate. The researcher had to be told how not to recognize a person when it came to lower class students. “You can not tell a homeless person he is homeless.” The researcher was told to avoid embarrassing patrons. With the middle class county employees, it was a matter of simply learning their names and the department they worked in. The perceived status of the librarian changed from population to population. The higher class students expressed awe over the work of the library and the librarian educators. The middle class were awed by the work of the library but had to understand who was a librarian. In the lower class classroom, a patron asked the librarian to quiet down. Jaycee took it as disrespect although her perspective could be biased by previous bad experiences with the same patron.

The performance of the library educators differed across the different classes in terms of preparation and presentation. Upper class students were put in a special private office and Jorge dressed up for the occasion. Middle class students were taught in a more modest area of the library. Lower class students were taught in a common area of the library where security and other patrons could easily keep an eye on them. For Jorge, the presentation to the higher class foreign diplomats was an important border crossing moment because this exchange with a foreign culture could not only affect how these patrons looked at their home country libraries but also their support for cultural exchange programs at Jorge’s library. In preparing for classes, Jaycee explained how much all the materials had to fit with the codes of the organization from graphics to language to content. Part of preparation was the marketing of classes to certain groups especially county employees. Jorge noted that this was done in a certain way so as to not upset other departments or groups in the county. Jaycee played devil’s advocate debating the politics of marketing because many groups and departments are in communities divided by class and race.

The nature of pedagogy changed with social class. The higher the social class, the more dialogical the teaching was. The lower the social class, the more didactic and simple the teaching approach was. Classes for the poor emphasized the practical. This was partly due to how certain special population groups can request service. Jorge was not completely sure what the higher class diplomats wanted and more importantly what they did not know they wanted. For Jaycee and Jorge, dealing with the middle class county employees was easier in the sense that the work of their department guided what they could offer them. With lower class patrons, the needs were obvious and backed by library research. It was a matter of conveying information.

Strategies to improve practice centered on the language and codes of the library environment. As part of community outreach work, Jorge, Jaycee, and the researcher had a historic and political understanding of their institution and surroundings, but the nature of instruction did not lend itself to the more radical nature of border crossing pedagogy. A resume writing class could improve agency and political understanding but it did not lead to a questioning of neoliberalism or other larger concepts for example. Learning communities, library administration, and library science programs could better promote border crossing to all librarians so they in turn can better promote it to patrons.

Conclusions and Implications

Libraries are alternative border spaces. Librarians are compelling border crossers. More education on this pedagogy is needed for all librarians to deal with the codes, divisions, and other challenges of their institutions. Limitations and delimitations of the study suggest that

further research is needed. Further research could reveal how effective librarians are at crossing other borders. The library focused on was unique. Work should be done in other kinds of libraries. This study was mostly qualitative, observation, and interview based with a small group of educators. Further studies need to use other methods, approaches, and focus on a larger pool of subjects. Future research should focus more on the patron/student and not just educators. For this particular study, it can be concluded that the librarians had practiced border crossing in various ways but the context, support from their institution, how the librarians were perceived, and their educational background posed challenges for them. The implication is that border crossing across social class has to be a more explicit, promoted, and collective phenomenon.

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