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Classroom as Community: Shooting for Excellence and Intercultural Discourse

A Review by Will Broussard



Mahiri, Jabari. *Shooting for Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1998. ISBN: 0814144632

Community literacy programs should always provide individuals with opportunities to develop literacies, and they should also empower them in ways that are meaningful to them rather than in ways pre-determined solely by program designers. Community literacy programs are critical because they often serve as counterpoints to traditional classrooms for individuals from underserved populations who far too often feel as if their classroom experiences are disconnected from their lives. In *Subtractive Schooling*, Angela Valenzuela notes that too often students from underserved populations are the victims of unsympathetic curricula which divest them of cultural capital, like native language proficiencies (11). In other words, community literacy program designers and classroom teachers should consider the worldviews, knowledge bases, and cultural affinities of students with whom they work because the integration of these characteristics into literacy activities can prove quite beneficial.

In “Community Literacy: Can Writing Make a Difference?” Linda Flower, Wayne Peck, and Lorraine Higgins define “intercultural discourse” as “literate practices and ways of talking not defined by any single social group . . . [to] build more productive working relations” (1). Intercultural discourse for Jabari Mahiri becomes a means by which the experiences and knowledge bases of students from underserved populations can directly inform his literacy pedagogies in community literacy settings as well as in traditional language arts classrooms. In *Shooting for Excellence*—part ethnography of Bay Area school youth, part curricular manifesto—Mahiri develops an intercultural discourse-based pedagogy that provides a model for community literacy which can be integrated into the traditional language arts classroom.

Working with classroom teachers as curriculum designer and co-teacher in Bay Area highschool language arts classrooms and drawing from his experiences as ethnographer

and community-literacy practitioner, Mahiri builds upon the linguistic proficiencies and literacy experiences that students already possess to “motivate [their] literacy learning” (13). He encourages us to follow our students’ lead in determining the nature of their literacy curriculum as we develop a “mutable” literacy pedagogy that he believes will be characteristic of schools as student bodies become more diverse (19). Mahiri provides his students, and by extension academics, with a hopeful narrative about how students from underserved populations, when given the resources, the respect, and the reinforcement they deserve, can demonstrate a desire to become lifelong learners and set goals for their own education—in and out of the school system—through self-determination and critical consciousness.

He earns the *ethos* of an organic, community-based educational activist by positioning himself as a “counter-hegemonic” educator who believes that students’ acquisition of literacy is a key component of their ability to resist cultural forms of dominance that educational anthropologists like John Ogbu believe are inherent within institutional structures (like schools) (3). Additionally, Mahiri draws from bell hooks, who advocates “engaged pedagogy” as a means by which educators aid students in self-actualization while authentically engaging them (3–4). Through participation in the classrooms Mahiri helps design, his students discover intercultural discourse in action, thus engaging in both socially and academically meaningful practices. In doing so, Mahiri defines a culturally responsive literacy pedagogy for teachers and students that draws from their experiences via dialogue and allows them to claim a unique ownership of their educational experiences (much like Paulo Friere’s conscientization concept).

Mahiri argues that dutiful observation of students in diverse settings can inform us about their language proficiencies and the ways they use language both outside and inside the schools. Through his observations he discovers that students are quite adept at using vernacular language, particularly in venues they do not associate with schooling. This is what he noticed when he volunteered as an assistant basketball coach for urban youth in Chicago (26). He finds it fascinating that educators ignore or are unaware of such proficiencies, and he attributes to this lack of awareness the frustrating lack of success of teachers who share with their students ethnic but not cultural identities (1–2). He notes that the African American students he works with are often frustrated because they are actively discouraged from using their “native tongues” at school because of how others might view them—even though a preponderance of evidence in popular culture suggests that African American vernacular English, in particular, has become a widely accepted form of American discourse.

In 2003’s “Black Youth Violence has a Bad Rap,” Mahiri analyzed short selections of student writing about growing up on the streets in order to help them see that their literacies and their culture were not independent of one another. In doing so, Mahiri helped urban, middle school-aged students in San Francisco, whom he observed in multiple settings, discover the literary value of their own writing as well as how to envision their lives as texts—texts over which they possess creative license to control, alter, or transform their properties. In *Shooting for Excellence*, Mahiri revisits this approach by integrating readings, discussions, and analyses of rap music. He analyzes rap because of his students’ propensity to incorporate African American “modes and styles of expression, . . . vocabulary [and] grammar” in their everyday speech (114–15). After working with students and co-teaching two classrooms that focus on hip-hop music in the curriculum, Mahiri claims that his students began to “understand, explore, and make connections . . . in ways that mirrored strategies that we

as educators would want to see employed in rigorous explication” (116). In his classroom activities, Mahiri blends discussions of African literary and rhetorical theory, African American sociolinguistics, and narrative writing in ways that are accessible to his students and exemplary for educators undertaking similar tasks.

In his work with students at a Bay Area high school, Mahiri noticed that attentiveness to the environments students lived and learned in had led him to reject traditional standards-based literacy instruction in favor of a learner-centered approach. Such a move is necessary to avoid what Angela Valenzuela refers to as “subtractive schooling,” a term she uses to describe how students resist participation in school—particularly when schooling is viewed as a white, middle-class, acculturating force—because schools literally subtract resources (or capital) from their students by discouraging the development of important relationships to their communities and denigrating their ethnicities and cultures (Valenzuela 6, 27). Mahiri recounts how a classroom conversation about ethnicity and ethnocentrism demonstrated the way his students began to embrace the traditional classroom seminar. As a white student in the class attempts to convince Latino and African American students that they are just like him—“American”—the students re-educate the white student in a way that textbooks rarely accomplish (98). They reject his assumption and offer up alternate takes on race and class bias that effectively mirror Mahiri’s rejection of textbooks, which present “highly selective views of social reality” (55), noting that when textbooks and fellow students attempt to define them as Americans, they find it insulting and even offensive (98). This passage fully depicts the product of Mahiri’s culturally invested pedagogy: engaged students who are empowered to bring their lives into the classroom and take their classroom experiences and make meaning out of them in their lives outside of school.

In *Shooting for Excellence* we are exposed to approaches to multicultural pedagogy that are useful to us as we theorize about and engage in community literacy and imagine how community literacy theory can influence traditional classroom writing pedagogy. Any of us who work with urban youth of color in community-literacy settings will benefit from learning about intercultural discourse because intercultural discourse gives students the potential to determine the many benefits of literacy in their lives by “challenging them to look within themselves and grow” (105). This book will also be of use to those of us who spend our time in both traditional classrooms and community-literacy programs because it envisions intercultural discourse as a pedagogy that frees those with whom we work to aspire to become literate in the classroom and beyond it. Perhaps most compelling is Mahiri’s vision of “Bay View High,” a fictionalized school in which he imagines the future of traditional classrooms infused with community literacy pedagogies, as the classroom becomes an extension of the community, and intercultural discourse the shared language.

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