

REVIEW

RESENSIE

Rouse, John and Katz, Edward. 2003. *Unexpected Voices: Theory, Practice and Identity in the Writing Classroom*. Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc.

This book is an exchange of letters between two North American teachers of literacy in higher education, one based in the USA and the other in Cape Town, South Africa. Rouse, the senior partner in this correspondence, describes in the preface how the letters are a continuation of a conversation that began in New York when Katz was a student in his graduate course in sociolinguistics. For Rouse, the book

with its digressions and tentative suggestions, its improvisations on whatever interest is expressed by one writer or the other - is an enactment of its major theme: the value of narrative pedagogy. That is, a pedagogy which departs from the course of study as students find a direction or activity suggested by their own concerns or ongoing lives, so that afterward they have a story to tell of their experience together (pp. vii-ix).

In the years 1988-1991 I was a colleague of Katz at the University of the Western Cape in some of the incarnations of the English literacy course he describes in the letters. Since those years I have shifted the main focus of my work from direct engagement with students to working with academic staff across universities and technikons on curriculum and institutional transformation in the fields of Academic Development and lifelong learning.

From this broader perspective it seems to me that *Unexpected Voices* provocatively raises many issues of concern in the field of literacy studies. These concerns go well beyond the confines of first-year university courses such as those taught and described by Rouse and Katz. In its concern with issues of power and identity and the relationship between educational theory and practice, the fundamental question the book poses for all educators is: 'What sort of individual should we help bring into being?' (p. 80). The book explores this question in a way that prompts critical second glances at clichés like 'learner-centredness' and 'active learning'. The exploration, grounded in the experiences of Rouse and Katz as well as in poetic and scholarly literature, sparks a wide range of equally challenging questions. Some of these pertain to issues raised in current approaches to literacy development, approaches which draw in diverse ways on the work of writers like Bakhtin, Bernstein, Freire, Gee, Street, Vygotsky and the genre theorists.

For example, in a refreshing consideration of Vygotsky's influence on literacy teaching, Rouse suggests that

If the forms of thought have their origins in patterns of group activity that are subsequently internalised by the individual, as he suggests, then sure we need to consider what kinds of social interaction or group process we should develop in the

writing classroom, rather than simply pass on the forms of discourse as preserved in textbooks or dictated by the teacher's outline (p. 168).

A key point here is that knowledge acquisition or transmission is embedded in power relations and educators need to consider carefully how they may be reproducing, perpetuating or subverting these. We can apply this point and questions that may arise from it to the pedagogic relationship between Rouse and Katz as represented in the book (How is power operating in this relationship and why?) as well as to the ways in which their text brings pedagogic arguments to bear on the work of others in their profession (How legitimate is it for Rouse to brand one of Katz's colleagues as having a 'therapeutic personality' (p. 193) when elsewhere (p. 184) he wants to see individuals 'striving to unify their paradoxical, fragmentary selves ...?').

Rouse and Katz situate their reflections on various approaches to literacy development within broader discussions about cultural trends and their impact on the ways in which literacy is taught. Rouse draws on Rieff's *Triumph of the Therapeutic* in critiquing the narcissism that he sees in the work of some 'mystically' inclined New Age literacy teachers. His Bernsteinian reading of restricted and elaborated codes is aligned with Gellner's vision of 'the opposition between individualism and communalism as the central problem of our time' (p. xii). Rouse and Katz (and some of the colleagues whose views they depict in the book), present diverse ways in which literacy teachers may locate themselves in these trends and the issues they raise. Rouse notes in his preface that

the two correspondents have opposing views on a number of those issues, different answers to the questions they think important. And occasionally they do not even agree on what the question is. (p. viii).

Rouse later suggests that

it would not be healthy for a department to have a single philosophy of teaching, as if the truth were known at last for all time. Where a new way of life is developing, as in South Africa, there are many possibilities to be tried, and I've noticed that good writing is often produced in classrooms where methods are used that I, not comfortable with – so much depends on the character of the individual teacher (p. 168).

The dialogic format of *Unexpected Voices* calls for ways of reading that one does not usually encounter in an academic text. Rouse and Katz and their co-protagonists often inhabit these pages not as abstract 'authors' or 'citations' but as characters in a narrative – in settings, situations and inter-personal relationships artfully (and stylistically quite differently) evoked by the writers. Multiple lines of argument are threaded through themes that the writers return to again and gain, often from surprising angles. This means that the reader has to work harder than usual to think through implications of what the authors are saying in a given context.

One key argument the book makes is for a first-year literacy course in tertiary education that is not constrained by disciplinary content. Rouse suggests that such a course prompts the literacy teacher to ask:

What social experiences can we provide in the classroom that will develop a sensitivity to form in those who need it, and develop in others a concern with producing imaginative and interesting content? (p. 152).

This twofold question, argues Rouse, cannot be properly addressed in discipline-specific writing courses where ‘the emphasis would be on vocational training and restricted literacy, with language fragmented into mutually exclusive discourses’ and where young people ‘would be sequestered within the confines of a discipline and no longer have access to a classroom where independent thinking will be encouraged’(pp. 196-197). One task of proponents of discipline-specific courses is to provide convincing evidence to the contrary.

The forms of narrative pedagogy advocated by Rouse and Katz share a concern for developing the independent learner with the version of Outcomes-based Education (OBE) currently being advocated in South Africa. The commitment of Rouse to practicality (‘I want to get on with the doing, with the making of something’ [p.19]) and both writers’ valuing of improvisational and reflective skills are also evident in the South African OBE experiment (reading this narrative pedagogy for the specific and cross-field outcomes implied in it would be an interesting exercise). However, I have little doubt that Rouse and Katz would be horrified by OBE’s preoccupation with carefully structured learning programmes and its pre-defined outcomes and assessment criteria. Their horror would be an instance of the ‘feeling intellect’ that animates their passionate commitment to helping their learners to making something memorable out of their lives together.

I recommend this book to anyone with an interest in education and literacy development. The dissenting voices of Rouse and Katz remind us that we live in a changing world where we need to learn how to make room for the unexpected and to go with it when it appears (p. 209), even if that does not mean following in the footsteps of these authors who make no claim to knowing where they are going. The book offers much food for thought, and as Katz says when he signs off some of his letters, we need to ‘keep stirring the pot’.

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