

On the Importance of Being Queasy

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In “A Queasy Scholar Confronts Cultural Studies in the United States,” Jaylyne Hutchinson eloquently states the dilemmas faced by the continually emerging field of cultural studies. In short, as conceptualized, cultural studies is about activist and socially transformative work, yet as practiced, it increasingly does not have that effect. Instead, it often remains insular, academic, and largely irrelevant. I share many of Hutchinson’s concerns, and there is no doubt that they should make those of us who “practice” cultural studies uneasy. We should be especially uneasy, as she notes, if we fool ourselves into thinking and believing we are engaging in social justice work when there is no evidence at all to show that our work has this kind of impact. Overall, I appreciate very much the concise and engaging manner in which Hutchinson articulates her understanding of, and concerns about, cultural studies. I want to frame my response to her thoughtful essay in terms of three exploratory issues/questions which I think can complement, and also begin to address, some of the concerns she raises.

First, I worry about the tendency to set up too strong a distinction between academic and activist work. I wonder if seemingly esoteric work can also have socially transformative impacts that may not be immediately apparent. I think for example of the educational reformers who have borrowed from the ideas of Paulo Freire, or critical pedagogy, at least some of whom must have been first exposed to this body of work in university settings. Second, and related to the first, how might practicing cultural studies within education provide us with unique opportunities to see, in hooks’ view, the classroom as a space for radical possibility?¹ Third, I question whether queasiness is necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps rather than trying to alleviate this queasiness, we should embrace it, recognizing that it is only when we are at least a bit uneasy that we regularly reflect on our practices, and work to continually improve them.

One of the underlying concerns that faces those of us who aim to engage in the kind of critical, political, and interventionist work called for in cultural studies is that we are never doing enough, or alternatively, our energies could be better spent outside of the academy working with grassroots organizations and/or more directly with oppressed people. This is surely a legitimate concern, and one that I do not take lightly as I sit in my spacious house, in front of the computer, while not far from where I live, people are suffering: the homeless, the hungry, the chronically unemployed or underemployed, the migrant workers crowded into barely livable shacks. Yet I am also leery of discounting or diminishing the potential value of academic work, particularly as I see research, writing, and teaching all as forms of activism. While there are surely institutional constraints we face in trying to do social justice work, particularly in terms of the type of activities that get valued in the academy, the power of our positions also affords us various opportunities to make a difference in the world that are important complements to more grassroots

work. For example, we can engage in activist research (for example, participatory action research, critical ethnography), write and speak to multiple and varied audiences (for example, in academic presses as well as trade journals, newspapers, and magazines), and teach so as to encourage (and even require) our students to engage in service forms of learning. This is not to say that we academics do any of these well but to remind us of the actual potential of these activities. What I think is most important is that we do not set up too firm a dichotomy between academic work and community activism. Rather than positioning it as either we do one, or the other, it seems more useful for those of us who practice a cultural studies approach to teaching and learning to think in terms of developing work that satisfies the demands of both callings, while at the same time also working to dismantle some of the institutional barriers to activist work. This means we academics must take seriously, as I think Hutchinson does, the necessity of developing our work beyond the ivory tower and recognize the importance of seeing theory as a way to “reorient” practice.²

Like Hutchinson, I am also concerned that the “American university is dangerous to the intent of cultural studies” in that it structurally helps to create the dichotomy between activism and intellectualism. This seems especially the case in how cultural studies is practiced in the liberal arts disciplines (for example, English, sociology, and communications), where it sometimes seems that the goal is to limit access through developing an abstract and rarefied cultural studies language and where work intended to be about social change becomes little more than “a commodity for academic journals and conferences.”³ Unfortunately, this is where the bulk of work done in cultural studies seems to occur. Yet I think those of us within education departments are in a unique position to interrupt the institutionalization of an abstract and overly theoretical “discipline” of cultural studies. This is because our audiences, both in terms of our research and our teaching, are typically already practitioners engaged in social change efforts. Namely, they are teachers, administrators, and pre-service teachers. In these roles, they impact the lives and development of virtually all the children in the country. If we in the academy can help these practitioners to see the world differently, and to develop critical habits of recognizing and engaging injustice, then they can bring these ideas into their own classrooms. As always already a practice-oriented field, cultural studies within colleges of education can lead the way in developing practices that are both theoretically sophisticated and socially transformative.

Among the more promising ways that we can begin to dismantle the common barriers between theory and practice are to engage in collaborative research with community activists, including teachers undertaking school improvement efforts, and to place practical implications at the forefront of our pedagogical efforts. While I agree with Hutchinson that collaborative community projects are not often valued in the academy, the more we engage in them, the more legitimacy they can gain. In terms of the potential impact of our teaching, I want to more firmly hold on to a view of the classroom as a place for possibility, particularly when I know most of my students are in classrooms of their own, or soon will be. One way to actualize possibilities is to foreground issues of educational practice and consequences even

while we talk about more theoretical topics. This means asking students always to consider the practical value of what we read and discuss in the university classroom. In my own experience, this has led to new and/or refined behaviors among my practicing teachers. Witness, for example, a social studies teacher destabilizing the canon and introducing a more radical read on the production of historical knowledge and challenging his students to think about the world differently, or an English teacher who has her students relate classic works of literature to contemporary song lyrics to help them to make real meaning of their own learning, or an elementary school teacher who moves away from a food, fairs and festivals approach to multiculturalism and teaches instead about codes and cultures of power.

While I realize the risk of romanticizing our potential impact as academics, I also know that we all have different roles to play in social justice work and that all people cannot do all things. This returns me to Hutchinson's queasiness. Perhaps it is this queasiness that can keep us from romanticizing, as well as help to ensure that those of us who are committed to cultural studies work remain self-reflective about our endeavors. It is in this task of self-reflection that I see the real strengths of Hutchinson's essay. Not only does she show us the issues we need to be both queasy and reflective about, most notably the institutionalization of cultural studies, she also gives us several visions for addressing some of the queasiness. These include working to change university reward systems, setting up different classroom structures that might include interdisciplinary cohorts working for extended periods of time on projects, and remaining vigilant in our efforts to open up possibilities in our classrooms. In embracing the queasiness that cultural studies work engenders, we can be sure not to become complacent in our efforts to create a more equitable and just society. Only if we are a bit queasy will we undertake this challenging task seriously.

1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

2. Audrey Thompson talks about the importance of seeing theory as a way of reorienting practice in "Colortalk: Whiteness and *Off White*," *Educational Studies* 30, no. 2 (1999): 154.

3. Henry Giroux, David Shumway, Paul Smith, and James Sosnoski, "The Need for Cultural Studies: Resisting Intellectuals and Oppositional Public Spheres." Available: <http://english-www.hss.cmu.edu/theory/Need.html>, 6.