

Book review, forthcoming 2012 in the Journal of Beliefs and Values.

Rituals and Student Identity in Education: Ritual Critique for a New Pedagogy

by Richard A. Quantz with Terry O'Connor and Peter Magolda, 2011, xii+193 pp., New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan (paperback) \$28 ISBN: 978-0-230-10116-6 (hardback) \$80 ISBN: 978-0-230-10115-9

This book by Richard Quantz (henceforth 'Q') incorporates material from a range of articles since 1988, some co-written with O'Connor and Magolda. Q starts with the observation that schooling in the USA, obsessed with testing, has in a brief generation become anti-intellectual and anti-democratic, which provides the context of his study on ritual in school. He plots his argument from Durkheim's discussion of ritual solidarity as a reaction to modernism. From Marx and Weber he takes their antagonism to instrumental reasoning based on a socially-constructed model of social processes. The thesis of the book is that the character of schooling is determined by unplanned and unrecognised nonrational ('ritual') processes, that is, formalised symbolic performances. This is the crux of his argument in the book, claiming support from Durkheim and Goffman who sought secular rituals to explain social interactions – rituals of greetings and farewell for example, or of authority and deference. Rituals are symbolic acts, with physical manifestations and maybe words, to promote amity and status. Goffman uses the term 'ritual' loosely (i.e. without in depth justification) as one element of social analysis amongst many (see for convenience Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 27-33,109-127). Thus, nonrational aspects of schooling (what we once called 'the hidden curriculum') contain ritual acts but also a broader set of assumptions, some of which are given, taken for granted and unchallengeable. Ritual, Q argues, produces a status quo which is *sacred*, that is accepted as the true state of being, and an authoritative expectation. This is too bold a generalisation: what is sacred to a believer is more than a demand for conformity, and what can be regarded as sacred to the non-religious will be their most profound insights and values. Fortunately this is Q's error of wording rather than substance. The book illustrates some negative aspects of conformity and positive aspects of nonconformity, applying both to school and classroom critique in ways which are helpful. Some aspects of conformity can be described as ritualistic (for example graduations and school assembly pep talks such as at Harman Elementary School (pp. 73-4). Deferential conformity to authority may have ritualistic aspects. However, the issue raised by the book is unreasoned and unreasonable conformity (and expectations of conformity). There are many examples given of *reasoned and reasonable non-conformity* which links the argument to student voice and wider issues of social critique (such as class, race and gender), and it is this that Q. promotes.

The introduction invites the general reader to read the theoretical chapters (2 and 3) after the practical ones which follow, which this review is doing. The discussion of classrooms (e.g. chapter 4) asks how interactions are symbolic, discussing both formal graduations and (non-religious) whole-school pep-talks, and informal 'ritualised' (or better 'conventional') behaving within set expectations. There are examples of breaking with tradition or expectation (the book opens with a girl student objecting to males and females having to wear different coloured graduation gowns, her protest breaching tradition and convention; also a working class girl breaking the expectations first of

school resistance, and second of deference). He discusses the 'ritual of solidarity' in which members of a group (actually a single MA class) dress and behave similarly in an apparent attempt not to stand out – which draws particular attention to those who do not (that is, in his terms, do not buy into the ritual). In the following chapter (5) Q focuses on 'the puzzlemasters' arguing that problem-solving is at best *technical action* (i.e. the application of rules) rather than *meaningfully intellectual*. He adds: "But I must admit that after a year visiting high schools, I would be pleased to see any kind of intellectual nurturing at all" (p.144) and concludes, "Democracy requires well-educated meaningful problem-solvers. *The greatest irony in schooling today is that the most dangerous, revolutionary act that any teacher and student can engage in is education itself.*" (his italics, p.145). On this he bases his view that American public (i.e. state) schools are anti-intellectual and anti-democratic. Chapter 6 concludes that the reality of attainment being linked to class has been obscured by unchallengeable beliefs in measurable testing; that the construction of morality is technical rather than relational, a game rather than authentic values (and that reasoned and reasonable resistance to convention is viewed as troublemaking); and that conformity to a school identity requires students to relinquish other identities in order to belong. He argues that more needs to be invested in discovering why so many pupils do not engage with schooling: so little is expected of them that their refusal to learn must be deliberate. He draws then on Paulo Freire's attempts to make learning politically relevant and discover what it is schools do that prevents students from learning. This leads to a 'new pedagogy' centred around *teaching as critical problem-solving*. It is an intellectual pursuit, *education, not training* (e.g. 'critically compassionate intellectualism', p.166). It will be *value-based, not outcomes-based* with values discussed and agreed locally having regard to democracy, diversity, respect, social justice and courage.

My problems lie not with this (often self-evident) application but with the notion of ritual critique, so it is to this I now turn. Q means critique of conventional assumptions and is right that these have to be brought into the open so that they can be recognised and reviewed. His theoretical underpinning draws on the work of Victor Turner (chapter 2) and the Bakhtin circle (chapter 3), both well-written and helpful chapters. At the conclusion of chapter 2, Q describes the heavy rituals of power and student rituals of resistance. The "rituals of everyday life" (p.44) reveal subtle politics. The idea owes much to Peter McLaren's *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (1986) both of which draw on Victor Turner's (1969) suggestion that ritual as transformative, promoting change through liminality through performances which continually redefine the status quo. It may be true that dealings between teachers and pupils are more performance than authentic relationships, and it is certainly true that rituals of greeting and authority are used by teachers, and rituals of resistance are used by some pupils (that is repetitive strategies and behaviours); but they are the status quo until more mature relationships between teachers and pupils make ritual posturing unnecessary. That is the point, perhaps, that liminality (coming of age/rite of passage) settles into new respect. In my view, it is not that the ritual effects the transformation (as Turner suggests); rather it is evidence of the liminality which disappears when change is achieved.

From Bakhtin and Volosinov, Q draws out the ideas of dialogue, multi-voicedness, the transformative power of carnival, ambivalence, social construction and performance as reported speech. These 'power' his ethnography in that he targeted moments of ritual

for his field observations. The picture emerges of the ability to achieve bottom-up change, with humour (or as those in authority might express it, the power of the pupil to subvert the authority process). Ritual critique therefore focuses on power and hegemonic aspects of schooling. Turner (1969) hoped that this was 'processual', that is, contributed to the processes of change which lead to a recalibration of relationships. We might hope that by recognizing the battlefield that is school as resolvable into a new mature relationship of adult and child learning together, learning relationships might be transformed.

References:

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