Book Review

The More You Know, the More You Owe: Vajra Watson’s *Learning to Liberate*

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Vajra Watson’s 2012 study *Learning to Liberate* seeks to identify the values that community--based, liberatory pedagogues employ in educating youth and to suggest how those values could be used by classroom teachers. Watson asserts that studying values held by community educators can help school teachers better serve their students and that, in doing so, schools would become more successful in their mission of educating every young person. Watson’s goal is to enhance school teachers’ abilities to break down the school--to--prison pipeline and open avenues of opportunity for youth historically underserved by the American public education system. In the sense that, as Marjorie L. DeVault suggests, “Research and writing are supposed to contribute to liberation projects, to benefit oppressed communities and lead to change,” *Learning to Liberate* stands as a shining achievement (cited in Luttrell, 2009, p. 151).

Watson profiles four community educators who model exemplary teaching of core disciplines, produce increased student academic engagement, and increase participation in movements toward social justice by their students. The impact of Watson’s subjects extends beyond increasing relevance of core disciplinary connections to saving lives and positively impacting entire communities.
A former classroom teacher, Watson began Sacramento Area Youth Speaks, a community education program that connects school teachers and social justice-oriented poets. She is also Director of Research and Policy for Equity at UC Davis. Her interest in connecting community--educators and classroom teaching led her to explore the following research questions:

- What values do community--based educators use in order to reach and teach misled, underserved youth in Oakland and San Francisco, California?
- How can school teachers implement these values?
- What policy recommendations can be made considering the differences between the contexts and settings of community--based educators and classroom teachers, and considering challenges faced by young people outside of the classroom? (Watson, p. 6)

Watson’s research stems from a historical analysis of the role education has played in marginalizing young people of color in the US. Watson acknowledges public education’s role in the school--to--prison pipeline, weaving a cohesive thread between the disenfranchisement of young people of color and schools by calling on the works of Apple, Bourdieu & Passeron, Kozol, Duncan--Andrade & Morrell, Giroux, and Ladson--Billings (p. 4). Referencing Freire and Macedo, Watson acknowledges the imperative to recognize that learning occurs always and everywhere (Watson, p. 6).

For her research sample of effective community--educators, Watson drew from Oakland and San Francisco, her area of residence, listservs and contacts in her academic network who would be knowledgeable of community programs (p. 7). After developing a list of candidates, Watson visited the programming sites of each candidate and interviewed young people and colleagues, taking into account each candidate’s ability to “move youth toward positive goals” (p. 7). In addition, Watson relied on a definition of “goodness” established by the candidates in question in order to paint accurate portraits of each of them (p. 199). Of her four participants, one is a woman of color, two are men of color, and one is a white man. Watson purposefully selected individuals with unique approaches to similar work so as to present her audience with a variety of values to use when working with misled youth.

To capture accurate portraits of her subjects, Watson entered their work spaces, community centers, homes, juvenile detention centers, conference rooms, high schools, and universities (Watson, p. 11). She coded her data “using both open and theoretical codes,” as well as memos, which helped her identify “salient attributes” of each of her subjects (Watson, p. 182). The choices Watson made with regard to the units of data analysis and collection included both quantitative data (anonymous questionnaires) and qualitative data (participant observation).

The context of the study centers on community education programs that target opportunity youth, i.e. young people who have been pushed out of school and face
challenges in finding secure housing, employment, navigating the criminal justice system, child care, and general health and wellness. Many of the young people served by the organizations in *Learning to Liberate* have faced the threat of violence in their lives. By the time her research began, each leader profiled by Watson had lost multiple young people over the course of their work.

The context and participants of Watson’s study are a crucial resource for re-thinking how education might better serve those who have been served least by the education system. Watson herself recognizes the importance of avoiding the tendency to search for a turnkey, one--size--fits--all solution to education’s most challenging problems and, instead, advocates for educators to take from her book what works for teachers’ own practices and leave what does not.

Watson’s findings include a list of 10 values for classroom teachers, in--depth descriptions and explanations of each of the four subject’s unique pedagogical approaches, and policy recommendations for the world of public education in the United States. To summarize, Watson identifies four unique pedagogical approaches practiced by her four subjects: a pedagogy of communication, a pedagogy of community, a pedagogy of compassion, and a pedagogy of commitment (p. xi, xii). From each of these four educators, Watson has distilled ten values for classroom teachers and community educators:

1. Your work is a calling, not a job.
2. Your clients and coworkers are your family, love them honestly and consistently.
3. Listen deeply to young people, oftentimes you may be the only person in their lives who does.
4. Maintain high expectations always and for all.
5. Teach and learn, education is a two--way street.
6. Make your lessons relevant, rooted in reality, and cognizant of the fact that learning happens always and everywhere.
7. Teach to dismantle systems of oppression.
8. Empower youth by teaching lessons young people can apply.
9. Allow young people to teach young people, oftentimes they are the best teachers in the room.
10. Be you, be authentic, model positive morals, values, and ethics. (p. 154--156)

Watson recommends that policymakers support critical pedagogies on a systemic level, encouraging programs that put teachers--in--training in contact with community--based educators (p. 159). Watson also calls on schools to establish stronger community ties through community--school partnerships to bridge the gap between schools as institutions isolated from the lives of their students (p. 161). Watson further recognizes the imperative for teachers to examine their own lives and connections to systems of oppression (p. 7), forcing teachers to ask themselves the important questions that drive each to teach (p. 164). Doing so, Watson argues, helps teachers rethink the ways in which each person contributes to or dismantles oppression in the lives of the young people they work for (p. 164). At multiple points in *Learning to Liberate*, Watson quotes Jack Jacqua, leader of Omega Boys Club, as saying, “The more you know, the more you owe” (p. 120).
this sense, Jack Jacqua, and the other three subjects highlighted by Watson, exemplify in so many ways theoretical assertions made by critical pedagogues such as Paolo Freire (2000), Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000), Christopher Emdin (2016), bell hooks (2003), and others who argue that critical education with the purpose of leading students toward critical action holds the key to educating marginalized youth. Ethnic studies educators and researchers have shown that critical, liberatory, anti-oppressive approaches to education actually serve all students for the greater good (Sleeter, 2011). Watson’s research provides important examples of how critical educators implement such approaches to teaching.

Watson’s research provides values from which teachers might be able to rebuild their teaching practice and begin the work deemed necessary for the system of education to damage less and empower more. In the forward to their 2016 book, Breathe: Notes on White Supremacy and the Fierce Urgency of Now, Ayers and Ayers claim that, “When the institutions of society ... are perfected to maintain the conditions of subjugation, then the status quo itself is a form of violence against the oppressed and the marginalized. ... The solution has to be to tear down the whole thing, rethink and rebuild in new ways” (p. xvi), making a number of important assertions. First, that public education as a societal institution subjugates and further marginalizes certain communities; and second, that in order for education to serve a more just purpose the entire system must be rebuilt. These assertions provide the branches on which Watson’s research bears fruit. Watson suggests policy changes that could rebuild a broken education system by turning teachers towards practices developed by community based educators.

Many education theorists and researchers have identified, in different ways and for different reasons, the importance of the 10 values Watson highlights. Watson’s rigorous emphasis on a pluralist interpretation of her findings and the models she portrays hold the strongest lessons in Learning to Liberate. Watson encourages teachers not to adhere to any one approach to teaching as exemplified by her subjects, but acknowledges that even her subjects exhibit a melange of the four pedagogies she identifies. Therefore, Watson urges educators to interrogate their own purposes for teaching. (Watson, p. 164) As such, Learning to Liberate contributes to the canon of research on liberatory pedagogies by connecting community--based educators with the aims and practices of classroom teachers. Learning to Liberate is a must-read for any educator seeking to properly serve students.

References


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