



Teacher Education and the Cultural Imagination: Autobiography, Conversation, and Narrative. Susan Florio-Ruane, with Julie deTar. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001. 186 pp.

JAMES O'DONNELL *New Mexico State University*

jodonnell@nmsu.edu

"Making culture a more central concept in the texts and contexts of teacher education is the focus of this book" (p. xxvii). Through the use of, and sustained conversations about, autobiographical texts, Florio-Ruane introduces teacher education students and experienced teachers to the complex nature of culture. She understands culture not as a product reduced to a set of artifacts, foods, costumes, and rituals but rather as a meaning-making process. "Culture is both meaning and the process of making meaning" (p. 27) where the cultural participant is both the weaver of this "web of meaning" as well as the strands woven. Using ethnic autobiographical texts as "representations" of an ethnicity is risky business. Such a tactic can create new stereotypes as well as reinforce held stereotypes. But the author shows that through sustained conversation, "the idea of an autobiography being reducible merely to an 'ethnic' one—the story of a 'them' different from an 'us' merely on the basis of nationality, mother tongue, or hue of skin, grew less and less appropriate" for the participants (p. 134).

Florio-Ruane has written an important and insightful book. She has taken up the challenge to educate her students about the role culture plays in the lives of teachers. Perhaps, by understanding how culture has informed their own lives, these beginning and experienced teachers may come to understand how their classroom students' lives are informed by their culture. Florio-Ruane conducts this pedagogical activity in a book club format. In one setting, a group of six white female student teachers meet for six months to discuss six assigned books. In a second book club, a group of experienced teachers come together for conversation with the author and several coresearchers for twenty-six months, and read a like number of books. It is important to recognize the effort invested by these individuals to explore and share in conversation over a set of texts dealing with differences. The potential for learning is great. The author shares her observation that organizing the book clubs is not as difficult as the tactics of dealing with the art and science of conversation within them.

In their conversations, the participants are confronted with issues of race, class, and gender. In this confrontation, "derailing talk as one participant grows 'emotional', [the group members] back away from the related, and very uncomfortable, topic of race" (p. 113-114). This statement captures part of the dilemma exposed, but not fully analyzed, in the book. Culture, the author understands, is informed by, coupled with, and reflected in issues of race, class, and gender. These issues are culture. The author describes how



conversations are started and changed as the group approaches the "hot lava" topics of race, class, and gender. She acknowledges that the issue of sexism is much more apparent for these white females than the issue of racism. As the metaphor suggests, the "hot lava" topics of race, class, and gender, especially for the student teacher group, are avoided. The experienced teachers, however, "over time and by means of intertextual experiences, ... were gradually more willing to engage and sustain the topic [of race] as they became familiar with one another, book club as an activity, and diverse authors and texts" (p. 137).

How does one talk about issues of race, class and gender and other "-isms" in polite company? This is the dilemma. The usual practice is to avoid addressing such issues, especially in polite society. But, we need to remember that society is not polite to people of color, the poor, and women. The author understands this and does state that "over time" the individuals, engaged in a process of examination of the complexity of culture, do come to confront these "hot lava" topics. Sadly though, most university teachers only have a quarter or semester--ten to 16 weeks--to approach and confront, much less handle, "hot lava" topics. In a classroom context, teachers and their student allies must confront the topics with a full awareness of the emotional crises to unfold. Presently, our university classrooms do not afford us the luxury of sustained conversation over six months, let alone two years. If we are to take advantage of Florio-Ruane's insights into how best to challenge beginning and experienced teachers' perspectives on culture and the "hot lava" topics, we need sustained engagement with these ideas through a teacher education program that employs conversation--dialogue--as a pedagogical praxis. Such praxis can confront the ideas of culture and related "hot lava" topics in not just one teacher educator's classroom but in all of the teacher education courses. Culture, for example, does inform classroom management and motivation strategies. In this instance, teacher education is a program and not simply a series of courses void of a shared and articulated philosophy and praxis. Florio-Ruane's work can lead us in the development of culture's role in teacher education.

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