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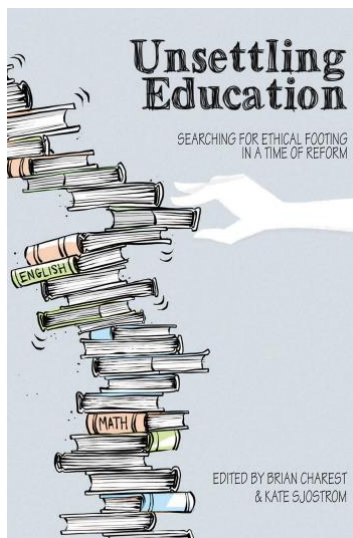
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Review of Unsettling Education: Searching for Ethical Footing in a Time of Reform

Edited by Brian Charest and Kate Sjostrom

Reviewer: Brandie Bohney

Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH



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Education in the United States is clearly in a holding pattern of attempts to fit teaching and learning into the neat and tidy boxes of objective accountability. Starting in 2002 with the No Child Left Behind legislation mandating regular testing and adequate yearly progress, the past twenty years have been crowded with high-stakes testing and accountability for students and teachers alike (Sass, 2020). Although some strides have been made both nationally and at various state levels to mediate the burdens of the extensive testing of the 21st century, students nationwide are still tested at a rate unprecedented prior to the turn of the century: the ubiquity of standardized testing remains (Council of the Great City Schools, 2015). Students and teachers, however, are human beings, not objects to be quantified through rigid benchmarks, and the endless cycles of testing have reduced the humanity of education to numbers on a spreadsheet. I could say that there have been no real winners in these two decades of increased focus on standardized testing, but of course, there are the winners: testing companies. That is an issue for another manuscript.

What that means, however, is that there are a lot of losers in a score of years of repeated tests that prove over and over again that standardized tests really only demonstrate who is good at taking tests. The losers include students and teachers subjected to endless testing cycles purported to evaluate their learning and teaching, exhausted parents who want their children's classes to be places of genuine learning rather than test-prep factories, and school administrators who want to encourage innovation and creativity but feel pressured instead to require teaching to the test. Standardized tests are generally terrible at measuring growth or legitimate understanding. These tests are equally poor measures of critical thinking, creativity, or persistence. Twenty years of testing also means that teachers and teacher advocates have been worn down and—in some cases—made to believe that

there is little that can be done: that these matters of testing and evaluating students as though they are merely quantifiable data points and then being evaluated on students' performances are settled.

That is where Brian Charest and Kate Sjostrom's edited collection, *Unsettling Education: Searching for Ethical Footing in a Time of Reform*, steps in. An intriguing collection of eleven essays divided into three sections and an epilogue, *Unsettling Education* works hard to both unsettle the reader's assumptions about the seemingly settled nature of education reform and position the educators to unsettle their classroom practices. Most of the essays not only illuminate the damaging and dehumanizing practices that accompany the high-stakes testing environment currently pervasive in our public schools, but they also offer practical and transferable strategies for working in the best interests of students' learning and humanity. Some suggestions and theories will be more easily taken up by classroom teachers than others. Other essays challenge educators to dig deeper to dislodge assumptions in ways they may never have considered—and perhaps will be unable to fully accomplish. As a burgeoning teacher educator, I found the book both encouraging and alarming as I wrestled with the difficulties my students will face in their own classrooms, both as student teachers and when they enter the "real world." The benefit of this book is that it is not so challenging as to relegate the reader to hopelessness, nor so easily applied as to seem too obvious: it strikes a delicate balance of reality and possibility.

This review mirrors some of the structural features of the book. I begin with an overview of the organization of the book, and each review section that follows is divided according to the three main parts of the text and the epilogue. In each section, I offer a summary and critique of the chapters included in that part of the book. The review closes

with considerations of the utility of the text for a variety of audiences and commentary on its collective contribution to the field.

Text Overview

This collection is a well-balanced combination of theory and practice in three sections. Charest and Sjostrom introduce each section and provide an overall introduction for the whole text. The first section, “The Promise of Unsettling Moments,” hosts three essays investigating the inevitability of encountering unsettling moments in the classroom, and the ways in which such moments can be used meaningfully. In the second section, “Pedagogies of Resistance,” two of the three essays lay out clear classroom strategies for humanizing instruction, and a third outlines common issues in doing so because of heteronormative practices. The third section, “Unsettling Education through Institutional Critiques,” encourages readers to “make the familiar strange and the strange familiar by exposing the contradictions that we negotiate in our daily work as educators” (p. 133), working to push back against structures and logic that may be comfortable or expected. Finally, Jay Gillen’s epilogue, “Everyone Knows Whose Side I’m on: Teachers, Students, and the Struggle for Freedom,” serves as a call to action that synthesizes much of the actionable work laid out in the rest of the text.

Section I: The Promise of Unsettling Moments

The section begins with advocacy for play—a suggestion that one might assume comes from an elementary perspective—in high school classrooms. Avi Lessing and Glynis Kinnan’s “Against Measurements: Making a Case for School Play” emphasizes the need for students to be able to take risks, fail, wonder, and develop a certain comfort level with uncertainty. The current focus on measurable data leaves “no room for valuing experiences that have intrinsic meaning” (p. 18),

leaving many students to “regard schools as a hoop they must jump through to get to the next hoop” (p. 19). The authors argue convincingly that students see little value or pleasure in their learning because it is neither authentic nor interesting. Lessing and Kinnan’s chapter connects meaningfully to a great deal of scholarship in both literacy education and writing transfer research, particularly in regard to authentic writing experiences (Slagle, 1997; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016), assessment measures that encourage risk-taking and failure (Inoue, 2019), and moving students toward dispositions that welcome ambiguity (Wardle, 2012). Toggling between the experiences of the authors and scholarship that support their suggestions for humanity and pleasure in the schooling experience, the chapter leaves the reader feeling hopeful and challenged to find ways to incorporate pedagogies that see students as people rather than numbers.

The second chapter uses an unsettling incident as a powerful underlying narrative. Angela Whitacre de Resendiz and Will Hudson recount a White first-grader’s suggestion that Black students “do a dance” as part of Black History Month and the faculty’s inability to deal with the situation in the moment. Their piece, “Calculating Justice? Using Mathematical Mindsets for Teaching from a Social Justice Perspective,” then uses seven tenets of inquiry-based mathematics instruction to interrogate the unsettling incident as well as to frame possibilities for enacting anti-racist and social-justice-focused pedagogies. The framework of positive norms for math instruction was an interesting outline for the piece, and although it initially caught me off-guard because of my own biased thoughts of math as rigid and inflexible, the authors’ suggestions of creativity, openness, and inquiry are reminiscent of habits of mind outlined in *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, & National

Writing Project). Such considerations are critical in working through highly charged issues in the classroom, and the chapter is filled with experiential examples from both authors; the examples not only ground the math-norms framing but also lend a sense of reality and possibility to the suggestions.

Rounding out the first section of the book, Noah Asher Golden's chapter, "Challenging Misrecognitions through Reflexive Teacher Education: Knowing and Growing in an Age of Commodification" opens with a somewhat lengthy introductory experience of "misrecognition" the author experienced with a student. He goes on then to define several other educational misrecognitions that happen frequently in schools where the faculty does not reflect the student population, and wherein the teachers' homes and life experiences are often far removed from those of their students. He notes with great clarity and through much scholarship how important it is for teachers unfamiliar with the communities they serve to get involved and legitimately take an interest in those communities, lest their "lack of awareness may lead to them enacting misrecognitions" (p. 64). Golden renames the often-mentioned "achievement gap" a more appropriate "opportunity gap," squarely rejecting deficit models of community understanding and meritocracy, and instead looking through a lens of privilege and oppression. He closes the chapter with a set of questions for educators to consider in their own positions of privilege or oppression, challenging readers to look closely at themselves and their practices for evidence of misrecognitions. The questions in particular may be a good resource or discussion starter for teacher educators or administrators looking to create professional development that encourages reflective consideration of self and students.

Overall, this section lends itself well to readers looking to develop a certain comfort with

discomfort: each piece discusses different ways in which feeling or being unsettled in education is essential to growth—both personally and educationally. It might be particularly useful for teacher educators seeking pieces to help their pre-service students feel more at ease with unease, since unease is so prevalent in early teaching experiences but is so clearly valuable in learning. There is overlap in the chapters in terms of embracing uncertainty, and if pressed for the chapter that best encapsulates the whole section, Golden's "Challenging Misrecognitions" would likely be it. As a graduate student working with preservice teachers in English education, though, I found Lessing and Kinnan's "Against Measurement" an excellent resource for encouraging authentic writing project development, but de Resendiz and Hudson's chapter also reinforces the importance of numerous threshold concepts in writing studies (Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) through the lens of mathematics.

Section II: Pedagogies of Resistance

Sarah J. Donovan, who also writes the blog [Ethical ELA](#), opens the second section with her chapter, "Beyond Mandates and Measurement: Imagining a Gradeless Classroom." The author skillfully relays the story of her shift to a "gradeless classroom" with scholarship focused on the importance of regular assessment and the danger of relying on grades as a motivator. Much of the chapter describes her own process in creating a gradeless classroom, and while it would take the cooperation of administration to pull off a similar system of evaluating student work, Donovan's examples and excerpts make clear how it can be done. This chapter offers practical suggestions for secondary teachers who would like to incorporate labor-based grading practices (Inoue, 2019) but have struggled to determine where to begin because of the omnipresence of testing and standards-based evaluations.

In Chapter 5, “Pedagogies of Resistance: Reflecting on the Successes and Challenges of Humanizing Classrooms in a Time of Standardization and Accountability,” authors Matthew Homrich-Knieling and Alex Corbitt weave vignettes of classroom experiences with a synthesis of three relevant and recent approaches in education: culturally sustaining pedagogy, critical race English education, and pedagogies of healing. Their chapter is reminiscent of Golden’s Chapter 3 in that it focuses on ways in which teachers may not fully “get” their students’ life experiences. Homrich-Knieling and Corbitt, however, turn to student-centered pedagogies as a way to bridge understanding and experience gaps between teachers and the communities they teach in. Through their vignettes, the authors clearly delineate what student-centered teaching and learning can look like, completing with descriptions of their own missteps and revised practices. The chapter is sprinkled with questions that drive the authors’ instruction, but perhaps more importantly, these questions provide examples for readers looking to develop their own driving questions.

Mikela Bjork’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality: Unsettling and Undoing the Hidden Curriculum of Heteronormativity in Schools” completes the section focused on pedagogy. Bjork’s angle is an interesting one. She notes that her purpose is “to highlight how queer women in AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] come to understand themselves through their schooling stories of resistance” (p. 111) in order to help teachers better support young women, and particularly young women who do not align with patriarchal gender norms. Much of the work Bjork does in the chapter is uncovering the often-overlooked role of heteronormativity in educational contexts, and she does so powerfully through excerpts of interviews with queer women in AA. Unlike the first two chapters in this section, Bjork’s work does not focus on providing clear examples of model classroom

practices. Instead, between the narratives of the women interviewed and Bjork’s explanation of the scholarship that connects to their experiences, the chapter tends more toward illuminating what *not* to do. There are several suggestions provided for ways to push back against heteronormative practices, but for the most part (with the exception of use of personal narrative), the suggestions are relatively broad and without specific examples. That is not to say they are not powerful suggestions: they are. They simply do not follow the trend of the first two chapters in terms of specific, modeled practices.

Section II is a valuable resource for classroom teachers looking to find specific ways to enact humanizing pedagogies in their classrooms. Each chapter focuses on a relatively specific goal: assessment practices, student-centered learning, and resistance/rejection of heteronormativity, but each goal seems accessible. Chapters 4 and 5 offer clear, structured examples of practices enacted by the authors, and Chapter 6 offers a sense of how relatively common practices may be damaging. Donovan’s chapter may be especially useful to teachers looking to find ways to propose gradeless assessment to their own administrators in order to encourage students to do more creative risk-taking in their writing. For teachers or teacher educators looking to investigate student-centered pedagogy, Homrich-Knieling and Corbitt’s chapter offers theoretically sound, evidence-based practices as examples to build from. Bjork’s chapter is less likely to garner a specific audience (particularly the specific audience that would most benefit from reading it), but it might be a good read in teacher education programs to begin heading off heteronormative practices in early-career teachers.

Section III: Unsettling Education Through Institutional Critiques

“Managing Teachers: Efficiency and Human Relations in Education,” an essay by James

McCoyne, starts the final section with a critiques of the teacher evaluation system and how its purported purpose of improving instruction and driving teacher growth is really a guise for a system of punishment and reward—a system that teachers may game for better rating, but also a system that needs to be questioned by all the players. Although his critique certainly looks at the problematic ways in which administrators may participate in and perpetuate problematic evaluation practices, he also clearly understands that administrators are also under pressure to perform the “dog and pony show” (p. 142) required of them. McCoyne offers no unrealistic easy fix, but he does note that these evaluation issues stem from cultural issues, so starting at the school level to “fix” the culture is a strong step in the right direction.

Kevin Christopher Carey’s chapter continues the trend of resisting problematic cultural understandings in “Motivation, Mental Health, and the Eclipse of Social Imagination.” In this chapter, Carey pushes back hard on the cultural ideal of individualism as the answer to every question or problem. He considers the problematic nature of neoliberal individualism—terms he defines clearly at the outset of the piece—because of its failure to look to society or community for responsibility. He notes that “[t]he problem with this worldview is . . . the essentialist and totalizing ways in which this freedom and agency are construed, undermining and diminishing our ability to imagine the larger social and systemic forces at work” (pp. 159-160). With clear connections to motivation and meritocracy, Carey criticizes ways in which individuals are blamed wholly for problems that are often largely societal or cultural.

The third essay of the section was, in my estimation, the most powerful. Samantha Young and Deborah Bieler’s “A Look into Leaving: Learning from One Equity-Oriented Teacher’s Resignation,” is

structured in a series of journal-like entries from the two authors. Young, a young teacher in a challenging teaching position, and Bieler, her former faculty mentor, narrate in detail the difficulty of continuing work as an educator under the high-pressure conditions laid out throughout the book. Their testimony through the eleven entries that span six months of Young’s career powerfully illustrate why good teachers leave the untenable situations created in the current educational culture.

Finally, Russell Mayo’s chapter, “‘All Schooled up’: One Teacher’s Path toward Deschooling,” serves as a challenging thinkpiece to conclude the section. Mayo begins with a letter to the reader asking for an open mind to concepts that will fly in the face of things educator-readers will likely value strongly. This opening note is important, as Mayo then goes on to describe how he came to be familiar with the work of Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich, whose commentary on education is not widely used in teacher preparation programs since it opposes formal education in virtually all forms. Mayo’s summary and analysis of Illich’s work both disturbs and engrosses the reader—especially the reader who has worked through the book in order and is primed for such extreme suggestions. Although I wish Mayo had elaborated more at the end regarding Neil Postman’s “Illich-inspired evaluation for alternatives to education” (p. 213), the chapter has a way of making readers reconsider education and contemplate their own practices from Illich’s radical perspective.

Each piece in this final section of the book would make an interesting springboard for discussion for teacher educators working to tackle difficult questions with their pre-service teachers, but the frankness of many of the challenges facing educators may make some teacher candidates rethink their career choices. Where I think a great deal of value in this section may lie is for administrators. While the

four chapters do more heavy lifting in terms of questioning the status quo than in offering practicable ways to solve the complicated issues they outline (they each only have one chapter, after all), much of the critique must be addressed at various administrative levels, since teachers cannot be doing this work alone. Of course, teachers can and will be taking up the various calls, but the success of initiating such seismic societal shifts will depend on a collaborative effort.

Epilogue

Jay Gillen's epilogue piece, "Everyone Knows Whose Side I'm on: Teacher, Students, and the Struggle for Freedom" features cheeky-yet-forceful comparisons of school and jail. Gillen, who teaches in a jail for young women, makes convincing parallels between the two cultures. His discussions of school inequalities is reminiscent of Jean Anyon's (1980) work, and although the school-jail comparison could be—under a heavier hand—a depressing journey of the failures of schools, Gillen focuses on the importance of relationships over rules and ways in which teachers might overcome the duplicity they are asked to enact, noting that many educators will "say we will do the stupid things we are mandated to do, while in our hearts we know that we will try to do what is best for our students" (p. 225). It is a purposeful call to action and ends the text on a particularly high note: one that has the reader feeling empowered and encouraged to do the difficult work ahead.

In Closing

Unsettling Education is a thoughtful, useful text for a variety of educators. The whole text is generally quite accessible. I would not be hesitant to assign readings from the book to undergraduate education students, and busy educators looking for important arguments in educational theory and practice will not find it a slog of pedantic jargon. It is not an *easy* read, however. The content of the text is emotionally and cognitively formidable as the reader contemplates his or her own practices and activism, and the difficulty of addressing the complex challenges the various authors illuminate. While I think legislators and other powerful stakeholders in education would benefit from an open-minded, and thorough read of this text, I am hesitant to believe such a use is entirely likely. Teachers, teacher educators, and administrators will all find that it stretches the way they conceptualize education and energizes them to take up new practices and activism in order to better serve their students. Perhaps educators might share and encourage discussions of it with other stakeholders in order to provide greater circulation of the ideas and ideals Charest and Sjostrom have curated. It is important work and thinking, and while it is an invaluable resource to educators, administrators, and even parents, I'm convinced that a broader audience of legislators, policy-makers, and the general public would also benefit from reading it closely and with an open mind.

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