

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 679

CS 215 832

AUTHOR DeStigter, Todd
TITLE The Public Uses of Power.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperative Learning; Grade 11; *High Risk Students; High Schools; *Hispanic Americans; Literacy; Political Power; Spanish Speaking; *Student Empowerment; *Student Needs; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS Democratic Communication; Educational Issues; Hispanic American Students; Michigan

ABSTRACT

A project called the "Tesosros" (Treasures) Literacy Project matched six Spanish-speaking ESL (English as a Second Language) students, working collaboratively, with an equal number of "at risk" Anglo counterparts from a regular section of grade 11 American Literature at a high school in southeast Michigan. Students came together to read Spanish and English language texts, translate those texts, write in response to their own and each others' stories, and assist each other in revising and editing their work. In this project students created a public within a single classroom but, on a broader scale, changes at the school on the levels of curriculum, textbook choice, and funding for bilingual programs depended on decisions that needed to be made in "publics" understood in the broader sense of the entire school and its surrounding community. A way to motivate people to participate in democratic publics should be found, but changing the institutions that contribute to public problems, such as the 70% dropout rate of Mexican immigrants, will require political power exercised shrewdly. (CR)

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Todd DeStigter, Assistant Professor of English, U. of Illinois at Chicago
1997 4C's presentation

The Public Uses of Power

DRAFT

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T. DeStigter

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I'd like to add my voice to this public conversation today by talking briefly about a project I was involved in about a year ago that grew out of my work as an ethnographer focusing on the experiences of a group of Latino students attending a predominantly Anglo high school (which I'll call "Addison High") in Southeast Michigan. Though I'll mention a few things about how I believe the group that participated in this project may be viewed as a "public," I also will raise a couple of questions that have complicated my thinking about it since then.

The project I'm referring to was called the *Tesoros* (Treasures) Literacy Project, which an ESL teacher, a member of the Addison English faculty, and I initiated in response to what we understood to be some of the challenges that come along with being either poor or Latino at Addison High. The framework for the *Tesoros* Project was to have a group of six Spanish-speaking ESL students work collaboratively with an equal number of "at risk" Anglo counterparts from a regular section of eleventh-grade American Literature. The specific reading and writing activities we included were centered around the notion that students should search for and value the "treasures" of their own experience. Our plan was that students would come together to read Spanish and English-language texts, translate these texts for those in the group who could not understand them, write in response to their own and each others' stories, and assist each other in revising and editing their work. I hoped that such activities would help us work toward the type of democratic "public" that John Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems*, envisions when he writes, "A distinctive way of behaving in conjunction and connection with other distinctive ways of acting, not a self-enclosed way of acting, independent of everything else, is that toward which we are pointed" (352-353).

In my more optimistic moments, I believe that what emerged during the *Tesoros* Project were forms of communication that enabled us to imagine new and different ways to revise those

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dispositions that Dewey calls our “habits” of thought and conduct. Within this “public,” which was made possible by deviating from the regular Addison High curriculum, students who rarely did any of their assignments in school began to read and write more regularly than any of their teachers could remember; Hector, a Latino student who had been suspended for skipping school, actually snuck past the hallway security guards to attend this one class; at the end of the project, as the *Tesoros* participants arranged their work in the school’s main lobby display case, *Jorge*, a *Mexicano*, turned to me and said in Spanish, “Now everybody can see who we are.”

I don’t mean to undermine the positive things that happened during the *Tesoros* project. The problem that tempers my optimism, though, is that my work at Addison High was with students creating a public within a single classroom, and a small one at that. But on a broader scale, and in many ways a more important one, the action needed to improve those students’ education (and, hence, the choices available to them later in life) had little to do with what was going on within that group of about a dozen people. Rather, changes at the school (on the levels of curriculum, textbook choice, funding for bilingual programs, and so on) depended upon decisions that needed to be made in “publics” understood in the broader sense of the entire school and its surrounding community--that is, in *arenas* where I sometimes confronted people who, in my view, were not inclined to act on behalf of these poor and so-called “limited English proficient” students. I am thinking now, of the math department chair who insisted that teaching non-English-speaking students was not her responsibility, or the principal who viewed even transitional bilingual education as a threat to our allegedly unifying national identity. I would have preferred to be patient, to wait for these educators and others who held similar opinions to experience a change of heart and mind. In the meantime, however, Latino students continued (and continue) to drop out of Addison High at a rate of over 50 percent.

Given the likelihood that the circumstances in which we find ourselves may include others who have little interest in participating in publics characterized by democratic participation, I’d like to highlight a couple issues--namely, motivation and power--that I think we would do well to underscore in our professional conversations about public spaces. Since Dewey has been invoked

frequently in recent journal articles dealing with notions of publics and communities, I'd like to raise these issues by drawing from the work of one of Dewey's chief rivals, Reinhold Niebuhr, who continually reminds his readers that publics are often not such pleasant places to be.

Niebuhr's principal quarrel is with those, like Dewey, who do not appreciate what he calls humans' "predatory self-interest" and who attribute social injustices primarily to ignorance. Niebuhr contends that Dewey is wrong to think that oppressive institutions represent "relationships fixed in a prescientific age" and that such institutions can be revised by freed intelligence guiding collective action. Rather, Niebuhr argues that this freed intelligence does not sufficiently acknowledge the extent to which humans have a stake in social institutions and practices and our historically proven tendency to act in our own interests. For the most part, I think Niebuhr's critique of Dewey is a fair one, for Dewey's notions of democratic publics rely on the hope that people will willingly enter into localized, face-to-face communication with others and that they will then be motivated by affect and intelligence to act with others based on what they discover to be their common interest. My question, then, after reading Niebuhr and after spending time with the Addison High math department chair and Principal, is How do we motivate people to participate in democratic publics even though they understand perfectly well that what they are doing (or not doing) has adverse consequences for disenfranchised people?

In the absence of such motivation, we confront the second issue that Niebuhr has compelled me to consider: namely, How should power and authority be responsibly used within public spaces? Niebuhr charges that because Dewey had failed to understand the "power of self-interest and collective egoism in all intergroup relations," he could not appreciate that "relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group." In Niebuhr's view, conscience and reason could qualify a struggle for power, but they could not abolish it. "Conflict is inevitable," Niebuhr writes, "and in this conflict power must be challenged by power." Now, I have to confess that this kind of language makes me nervous. I'd prefer not to live in the

type of world Niebuhr describes. Nonetheless, here we are. For my part, especially since my recent move to Chicago, where I've found that that city's notoriously ruthless style of politics extends to decisions of educational policy, and when I walk the streets of the southwest side neighborhood called Little Village, which is populated almost entirely by Mexican immigrants and where the two high schools serving the area have dropout rates approaching 70 percent, I'm inclined to think that changing the institutions that contribute to these public problems will require political power exercised shrewdly.

I'm reluctant to assume the role of this panel's resident pessimist. (Usually, that's Steve's job.) But lately, I've found myself less apologetic to exercise whatever modest power I can muster in my position as a teacher and researcher. I don't want to give an exaggerated sense of my own importance, pretending that I can be the rudder steering educational policy in places like Addison High or, much less, the city of Chicago. Teachers are not, as a rule, very powerful people. Nonetheless, to return to the *Tesoros* project, I had--relatively speaking--more power than did those Latino students, and my questions about what constitutes legitimate uses of power in public spaces essentially comes down to wondering if we can't change people's minds in the context of a dialogic public, at what point should we just go ahead and do what we think is right? This is not to say that I've forgotten Dewey's reminder that our goal should be "to construct the institutions of moral democracy and to do so without resorting to undemocratic means." And, in a conversation about this panel several weeks ago, Aaron was right to ask me "where the encouragement of the students' 'own' interests shift into the promotion of *my* vision of the students' obstacles and possibilities?" I think, however, that the best way to answer that question is with another: Where does a prudent, reflective caution not to promote my own vision of what these students need cross over into the realm of paralyzing inertia, a failure to use my experience, knowledge, and position as a teacher and researcher to help effect change that, after three years of participant observation, I've made my best guess to determine is warranted in that setting?

I've raised questions without offering much in the way of answers. Still, I think these are questions we need to consider when we think about ways we can contribute to the type of publics that Dewey, and presumably we, desire.



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