

A Review of *Teaching About Hegemony: Race, Class, and Democracy in the 21st Century*

By Paul Orlowski

Review by Jennifer A. Tupper

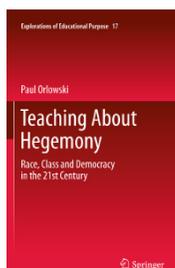
IN HIS BOOK *TEACHING ABOUT HEGEMONY: RACE, Class, and Democracy in the 21st Century* (Springer, 2011), Paul Orlowski attempts to “foster political consciousness in our educators, so that they, in turn, can help develop a politically conscious, informed, and active citizenry” (p. 1). Blending critical theoretical perspectives with narratives of teachers and students in high school classrooms, Orlowski advances an approach to teaching about hegemony he believes effective and urgent.

Given the current education agendas that contribute to what Pinar (2012) has termed school deform (Pinar, 2012) in both the United States and Canada, the multiple ways in which social inequities continue to be (re)produced in both countries, and the need for an informed citizenry that understands and is able to resist hegemonic practices, this is a timely and important book. Throughout it, Orlowski calls for action from an informed citizenry, of which teachers figure prominently. He advances the need for political consciousness in educators in order that they “develop politically conscious, informed, and active citizenry” (p.2). Like critical pedagogy, his call for action requires rejecting an apolitical stance in teaching so that teachers may foster political consciousness in their students.

Orlowski draws on his nineteen years of experience as a classroom teacher attempting to develop a political consciousness in students along with his decade of work in preservice education toward social justice aims.

Questions to Ponder is one of the book’s excellent features, repeated at the end of each chapter. These questions attempt to engage readers in deeper considerations of the chapter’s ideas in light of real-world examples and personal anecdotes, supporting an intentional integration of theory with the practice of teaching.

In Part I, Orlowski details ideology, discourse, and hegemony to frame his critique of school curriculum and lay the groundwork for the second part of the book, in which he offers concrete suggestions for transforming theory into practice offering educators insight into how to strengthen democracy and resist normative discourses that render invisible issues of power and privilege. Orlowski’s efforts to deconstruct ubiquitous political terms,



including *right wing* and *left wing*, by situating them within “a more sophisticated taxonomy that includes specific ideological positions on both economic and social issues” (p. 5) is particularly helpful. For those of us struggling to make sense of ideological nuances that inform current governments’ approaches to social and economic policy in the United States and Canada, this is a revealing discussion, particularly as Orlowski traces ideology through its

historical contexts to present-day practices. He uses the Tea Party in the United States to illustrate how conservatism “can resonate in the political culture of a nation” (p. 29). This is timely example that would benefit from further development. Exploration of the Tea Party’s strategies to garner support among many Americans, particularly as they appeal to a sense of nationalism and patriotism, would strengthen Orlowski’s concern about the influence of conservative ideology on the contemporary political landscape. However, an in-depth discussion of this contemporary sociopolitical phenomenon does not materialize, leaving the reader alone to fill in the blanks. Perhaps this is Orlowski’s purpose: He has offered up the tools for critique through his detailed discussion of ideologies.

Indeed, discourse as a force on its own is one of Orlowski’s focuses. He notes its connections to desire and power. He argues for educators to engage in critical discourse analysis of texts and curriculum as a means of revealing hegemonic strategies of inclusion and exclusion at work in schools. Drawing on poststructural approaches to understanding power, Orlowski carefully illustrates the ways discourses not only represent the world but shape our consciousness of the world. Because of that, discourse and hegemony can work in tandem to privilege some and marginalize others:

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In the period of White settlers populating the western regions of North America, the dominant discourses of White supremacy, Christianity, capitalism, the dying race (i.e., Aboriginal peoples), and the yellow hordes (i.e., East Asian peoples) all worked in concert to increase economic, social, and political power for the White middle class at the expense of the Other (mostly Aboriginal and Asian). Once White hegemony was entrenched, this particular discursive formation was not required anymore and was, therefore, abandoned. (p. 40)

Orlowski offers counter-hegemonic discourse as a means for the development and realization of positive social, political, and economic change. He provides real-life examples of teachers and students engaged in counter-hegemonic discourses, and this is where real hope for change resides. Orlowski's exploration of the ideological purposes of schooling, particularly as they are manifest in the curriculum, is carefully situated in the historical struggle over curriculum, with reference to John Dewey and Herbert Kliebard. Through engagement with three examples of race-class intersections in history that remain absent in provincial and state curricula, Orlowski argues students come to better understand "the epistemological underpinnings of knowledge, and by corollary, the social construction of racial, class, and gender relations" (p. 71).

Orlowski begins Part II of his book with an examination of the forms of racism, which he grounds in his own narratives as a teacher and education researcher. Using results from his own research project on contemporary social studies curricula, Orlowski explores manifestations of Ruth Frankenberg's three discourses of race and ethnicity—essentialist, color-blind, and race-cognizance, which "work to further entrench or destabilize the dominant view toward people of other races or ethnicities" (p. 83). The voices of these research participants are powerful as they highlight the real ways that race and racism are mediated in social studies. For example, one classroom teacher attributes lower Aboriginal graduation rates in Vancouver, British Columbia, schools to their physiology. Another teacher uses essentialist discourses in his description of the academic differences between immigrant East Asian students and White upper-middle-class students, suggesting that these differences have to do with genetics as well as socioeconomic differences. Orlowski's critique of liberal multiculturalism, which "glorifies neutrality" (p. 91), is also illustrative of a curriculum's potential hegemonic effects. This is a necessary and timely critique given the uncritical way teachers take up liberal multicultural education, students accept it, school boards and administrations enact it.

Next, Orlowski moves to considerations of social class as "the forgotten identity marker in social studies education" (p. 99). He expresses concern over a "waning class consciousness", arguing for an ideology critique of neoliberalism in order to advance a more social democratic agenda, one in which issues of social class figure more prominently (p. 99). Neoliberalism, Orlowski says, must be understood not as an ideology but as an economic rationality. This is an important distinction, particularly as it fosters a more

nuanced understanding of current economic policies and practices and facilitates a more in-depth critique of the production of social, economic, and educational inequity through the enactment of neoliberal policies. With knowledge and understanding of neoliberalism, teachers will be in a position to help young people consider the "deleterious effects of neoliberalism on civil society" (p. 192).

Orlowski draws attention to the ways in which curriculum developers "may be influenced by the dominant discourses in a corporate capitalist society that includes the meritocratic anyone-can-make-it ethos" (p. 107) and, as such, do not include considerations of social class in curriculum. While this may often be the case, as Orlowski argues, he is not attentive to those instances when curriculum writers do make an effort to include considerations of social class, race, gender, etc. in curriculum documents but are stymied by overt external influences. For example, stakeholders outside of education who have business or political interests in the content that is included (and excluded) often vet curriculum writers' work. This happened recently in Texas, when elected education officials had direct influence on curriculum (McKinley Jr., 2010). Orlowski carefully considers veteran classroom teachers' perspectives and experiences to better understand how social class is thought about and taught (or not) in social studies contexts. It is his contention that issues of social class are absent in both the published and the enacted curriculum.

Sharing the results of a case study, Orlowski explicates the ways in which education "exacerbates the situation for Aboriginal high schools students" while asking, "What can teachers do to help more Aboriginal students graduate from high school?" (p. 128). One thing Orlowski thinks they can do is to help students to understand political ideology, the connections between corporate media and corporate interests, the flaws in our democratic traditions, and the "inherent benefits for citizens in a strong democracy" (p. 149). Orlowski expresses concern about what he perceives to be a lack of political awareness on the part of the public, suggesting that teachers have a significant role to play in fostering a citizenry able to challenge inequity and oppression. He rejects the assertion that schools serve merely as vehicles for social reproduction, arguing that schools do have the potential, through teacher and student agency, to effect positive social change. He recognizes the tremendous obstacles educators face in challenging the status quo but holds to his belief that the classroom, and public education more broadly, are potential sites to resist hegemony in its multiple and varied manifestations. This is a must-read for any educator committed to challenging hegemony and should be required reading for educators content with the status quo.

Orlowski, P. (2011). *Teaching about hegemony: Race, class, and democracy in the 21st century*. New York: Springer.

McKinley Jr., J.C. (2010, March 12). Texas conservatives win curriculum change. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html>

Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.