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Review of Classroom Action: Human Rights, Critical Activism, and Community-Based Education

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Heble, Ajay, ed. *Classroom Action: Human Rights, Critical Activism, and Community-Based Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.

Educating for human rights and social justice is more critical than ever, but engrained institutional structures can too often sabotage the best of intentions. In *Classroom Action*, Ajay Heble presents an innovative and inspiring framework for how humanities educators can overcome barriers and reimagine their teaching practices in ways that empower their students to create meaningful community-based projects. Coming from a background in jazz and improvisation, Heble, a professor of English at the University of Guelph, embraces a classroom culture of flexibility and willingness to learn from his students and in turn listen to the needs of the community—values that are readily translatable to the archival enterprise. While explicitly aimed at a broad audience of educators, scholars, and activists, *Classroom Action* poses questions that can and should be of interest to archivists and special collections librarians, particularly those interested in social justice education, radical teaching practices, and community partnerships.

Consistent with Heble's clear focus on making the classroom a site of collaboration, the bulk of *Classroom Action* is devoted to case studies authored by Heble's current and former students. With refreshing honesty, the students/co-authors detail their efforts to bring community-based projects to fruition, discussing their mistakes along the way but also celebrating their successes. Projects include a symposium on access to education, a multimedia anthology authored by community members, two separate theater productions, and a community photo-art initiative.

In the book's introduction, Heble provides context for the student case studies. He thoughtfully lays out the challenges of community-based education and offers techniques he has developed for grappling with these challenges through years of teaching community-based graduate and undergraduate courses. Heble lists some of the arguments against community-based education, including that “advocacy and political activism have no rightful place in our classrooms and curricula; that such practices are an affront to academic standards; that scholarly rigour and neutrality are being compromised, and institutional structures and protocols are being ignored; that *all* [emphasis his] points of view are not being fairly represented” (9). With these criticisms in mind, Heble, however, insists that educators examine their purpose in teaching. Academia, with all the privilege that entails, cannot claim to have all the answers to society's ills, but educators can prepare their students to do work of real consequence. Heble argues for “a radical rethinking of our pedagogical practices and priorities in order to cultivate opportunities for students in our classes not only to reflect, but also to act on the connections between what they learn or do in their university classrooms and how they come to understand themselves as socially responsible citizens” (11). At the same time, issues emerge as basic as the need to contain projects within the confines of a semester and assign grades to the students' work. Heble offers practical solutions to these and other questions, and this concern with the everyday realities of teaching is one of the strengths of this book. For example, Heble encourages his students to develop projects that are sustainable and transferable (and thus have the potential to live on beyond one semester), and on the issue of grades, he has experimented with self-critiques and peer evaluations. Heble also notes that toward the end of the semester he asks his students to suggest their own well-supported revisions to the course outline, readings, and assignments. This kind of engagement with the material and emphasis on education as process helps students take a more active role in both the classroom and community.

The most successful student projects described in *Classroom Action* are those that had a clear community partner, the best example being the project discussed in the final case study, “Reflections on Dialogic Theatre for Social Change: Co-Creation of *The Other End of the Line*” by Majdi Bou-Matar, Brendan Main, Morvern McNie, and Natalie Onuška. Bou-Matar is the founder of the Waterloo, Ontario-based theater company, MT Space. While Bou-Matar was a student in Heble’s course, MT Space was approached by the Center for Community-Based Research (CCBR) to create a short dramatic production for a conference on community mental health. This conference was part of a five-year research project that sought ways to support the mental health needs of people from culturally diverse backgrounds. The students’ resulting production, *The Other End of the Line*, tells the stories of immigrants attempting to navigate the Canadian mental health system. As described in the chapter, the production and performances of *The Other End of the Line* clearly benefited from the early and engaged involvement of both subject experts and community members, who were invited to participate in the writing and rehearsal process. This methodology was informed by the students’ reading of bell hooks’ *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* and Paulo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (two essential texts frequently cited in *Classroom Action*). As a testament to the production’s success, *The Other End of the Line* continues to be adapted and performed for mental health professionals throughout Canada. Success based in community feedback and collaboration is one of the most powerful lessons of this book and should resonate with archivists interested in undertaking community-based projects of their own. It is also important to note that the creators of *The Other End of the Line* were not approaching the issues from a distance but specifically addressing a need expressed by experts and the community.

Classroom Action is an appropriate supplement to the literature of community-based archives and the interplay between archives and social justice. Examples would include Randall Jimerson’s 2009 book, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice*, and the more recent edited volume *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*. As Heble observes, most of the projects undertaken by his students and described in *Classroom Action* attempt in one way or another to present the voices of community members, particularly those from marginalized groups, and in doing so “emphasize the importance of storytelling, of narrative, and of performance practices in struggles for human rights” (13). This focus on the “transformative potential of stories” will not be foreign to archivists, and many of the issues that the students grapple with in their community-based projects throughout the book will be relevant to archival work and particularly community-based archives. One specific example is a section in the chapter “The Guelph Speaks! Anthology: Storytelling as Praxis in Community-Facing Pedagogy,” by Ashlee Cunsolo, Paul Danyluk, and Robert Zacharias. The authors describe the problems and questions they faced in attempting to assemble a representative anthology of the Guelph community’s creative work:

It may well be true that stories are potentially powerful aspects of social change, but how does the process of “editing” and “compiling” the anthology affect their impact? What do we mean by “the community,” and how is it reflected in the relatively small numbers who will be willing to share their stories? How and what do these stories, placed within the very particular context of a “community anthology,” really signify? (62)

One might easily replace the word “anthology” in this passage with “archives” and accurately summarize collecting and appraisal challenges. Our efforts to collect the “stories” of the communities around us will always be flawed in one way or another, but as Heble observes in his

conclusion to *Classroom Action*, it is better “to focus on hope and opportunities for change” than the challenges of undertaking community-based projects. Heble and his students/co-authors concede that community-based projects can be “messy and complicated” at times, but that does not mean that the work is not worth our time and energy. “Messy and complicated” might be dirty words to an archivist’s ear, but the main takeaway from *Classroom Action* is that real and sustained community partnerships, particularly those that defy our existing institutional structures and upend our assumptions, are absolutely vital in this day and age.