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Peter Schmidt

Swarthmore College, pschmid1@swarthmore.edu

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Recommended Citation

Peter Schmidt. (2006). "Is Teaching Always Local, Education Global?". *American Literature*. Volume 78, Issue 4. 733-735. DOI: 10.1215/00029831-78-4-733
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/105>

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Peter Schmidt

Is Teaching Always Local, Education Global?

In *Darkwater*, W. E. B. DuBois writes: “[T]he fundamental cause of our failure in human education . . . is due to the fact that . . . the world regards and always has regarded education first as a means of buttressing the established order of things rather than improving it.”⁵⁷ How can current academic discussions about the Global South help unsettle the “established order”? How can they improve or change the way we teach? The current debates about the U.S. South in global contexts raise at least three important considerations for new classroom teaching strategies.

First, we need to help our students think historically and critically about earlier incarnations of the idea of U.S. (and the South’s) global connections. We should not simply treat bringing global contexts and perspectives to the study of the U.S. South as an unalloyed good. The key is to create in our students a critical perspective that asks how such global contexts are defined and narrated. Students need to learn to think critically about different competing forms and expressions of globalization, so that they move beyond assuming there is only one kind that one should be either for or against. Ditto for other key terms in contemporary debates such as *democracy* and *development*. Indeed, in what ways are the new emphases on global, transnational connections in U.S. studies in our schools merely reproducing (rather than challenging) the facile, dominant discourses of globalization now rampant in the United States?

For an instance of a historical approach to these issues, students could compare and contrast DuBois’s writings on the role played in capitalist development by global plantation economies with the discourses of modernity and progress deployed by many leaders and intellectuals after the rise of the white New South. Their visions of the ways in which modern Jim Crow solutions to the race problem should provide a model for U.S. imperial policies abroad provide one telling example of a global context for the U.S. South, understood historically. As divergent as DuBois was from such leaders regarding the issue of the color line, however, both he and his adversaries assumed that the post-Civil War South would play an important role in U.S. progressivism’s definitions of reform and modernization. The history of the U.S. New South from 1865 through the 1930s is particularly rich in

examples of competing discourses regarding democracy and development. Students cannot study these discourses without quickly learning that they must also examine issues of power and who gets to speak for whom.

Second, we should focus on how well we model democracy in our classrooms, particularly in classroom discussions. We all know that college and university brochures boast about the virtues of teaching “independent thinking.” But we are increasingly working with students who assume (because of mass-media influence) that a classroom should be a dittohead or *Crossfire*-like environment, where one participates by either fervently agreeing with or violently attacking a position or an idea. Such polarities demonstrate that students have absorbed our consumer culture’s values—you either “buy” an idea or you reject it. Another response students sometimes bring to class is the Slacker pose, apathetic and cynical toward all ideas and effort. This response drives teachers to despair, of course, but it is not entirely unhealthy because it is often caused by despair over the kind of either-or choices described above. We teachers have often absorbed such attitudes too. We need to try to have students critically discuss examples of the Dittohead, *Crossfire*, and Slacker syndromes and imagine alternatives. How can we create spaces where ambivalence and doubt and questioning may speak, and students working together may gain a sense of the interconnectedness and interdependence involved in learning? De Tocqueville’s analysis that the essential danger of democracy is the tyranny of the majority applies no less well to education. But we can’t dissolve this paradox with easy assumptions that we are teaching independent thinking when we might not be doing so at all.

There’s a third goal to which we might aspire, inextricably connected to the second but requiring separate emphasis. We need to demonstrate in our own behavior as teachers and in our syllabi the virtues of humility when it comes to questions of knowledge and power. Students and faculty are too often tempted by the intoxicating sense of power that comes from mastering a discourse, a field of knowledge, a set of analytical tools. All these give a sense of sovereignty, authority, and independence. All these have their virtues, and I hardly mean to suggest that the excitement that comes with learning is always sinful. But even the Enlightenment worried that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and we give our students a dangerous gift if we don’t also show them how to be skeptical of all forms of

power, including the sometimes innocuous-seeming kinds that knowledge brings. The best way to do this is to include on our syllabi for discussion examples of how forms of knowledge and power have blinded users as well as empowered them. Everyone pays a price when knowledge is abused, but some pay more. The virtues of ambivalence and humility can certainly be overstated, but they must be part of the mix of a liberal arts education. Otherwise we're simply validating the next generation as it begins its ascent to power. To educate means to lead forth: where?

Department of English
Swarthmore College

Notes

- 57 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric Sundquist (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 587.