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Review of *Crossing the Digital Divide: Race, Writing, and Technology in the Classroom*. Language and Literacy Series. Barbara Monroe. Foreword by Victor Villanueva.

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As I was reading Barbara Monroe's excellent book, *Crossing the Digital Divide: Race, Writing, and Technology in the Classroom*, I was reminded of a famous statement by John Dewey in *The School and Society* (pp. 106-107):

Experience has its geographical aspect, its artistic and its literary, its scientific and its historical sides... We live in a world where all sides are bound together...Relate the school to life, and all studies are of necessity correlated.

Dewey's statement applies in at least two significant ways to this collection of case studies. The first is that Monroe shows how the digital divide cannot be productively conceived as an issue of physical access alone, nor as an issue of race, class, geography, language, knowledge, attitude, information ecology, or a number of other purported factors taken in isolation. These elements are bound together in ways that make the very discourse around "digital divide" part of the problem. They obscure, for instance, how a reluctance to respond in the way a teacher expects may derive from a

complex interplay of linguistic conventions, cultural expectations, the implicit demands of a learning activity, as well as features of the technology per se.

In Chapter 2, "Putting One's Business on Front Street," for example, she says "Hardware and software metaphorically reconstitute the world of their designers, often rendering a reality inclusive of their experience but exclusive of the experience of the technological underclass" (p. 31). This mirroring of one reality is recapitulated in the design of learning activities, such as one enacted in a classroom with tenth-grade, African American students.

On the first day in a new computer classroom, the teacher assigned the widely-used "biopoem" activity, in which students construct a fill-in-the-blank poem by answering simple questions about their personality traits, family members, desires, and fears. In this case they were to ask the questions of their neighbor in the class, compose the poem, and post it on Deadulus Interchange, a synchronous chat program.

The students "flatly refused to do the assignment, and protested vigorously" (p. 41). A second iteration failed as well. On the third try, the students complied somewhat, but avoided all mention of the personal issues implied by the original activity. Experiences with similar activities revealed consistent differences related to public and private communication, and in particular, different attitudes concerning which personal information is appropriate to display on "front street." Through her analysis, Monroe shows that "formal schooling is largely grounded in the language socialization patterns of mainstream children" (p. 69). An activity such as the biopoem, which might pass without much notice in one setting, can thus become highly charged and threatening to cultural identities in another, particularly when digital technologies change the parameters of public and private. Monroe challenges both teachers and the public to be "aware that other Englishes, other rhetorics, and indeed, other epistemologies do exist" (p. 125).

A second connection to Dewey's quote is Monroe's call for "a pedagogy that can kindle critical consciousness" (p. 84). Her cases show various ways for "crossing the

digital divide,” both by connecting schooling and life, and by deliberately crossing the very barriers that the digital divide describes, yet at the same time perpetuates by reifying difference in purely technological terms..

As an example, in Chapter 3, “Crucible for Critical Literacy,” she analyzes an extended, (online) threaded discussion among students in a Latina/Latino Majority school and a tribal school, two schools with opposing political views and histories. As the students negotiate conflicts among themselves and with outsiders, they demonstrate the capacity to help each other develop critical literacy. Drawing not on Dewey, but on Paolo Freire, she cites this case as evidence for the need for teachers to learn the world of their students, and to get their “words and parallel worlds out in the public domain” (p. 84).

Thus, although she begins with the problem of the digital divide and reports describing computer access and usage patterns, Monroe quickly moves beyond a technological determinist position to consider the nexus of power, culture, language, learning, and technology. She stresses the “benefits of interconnectivity between students, between classes, between schools, and between schools and universities. Such connections crisscross the digital divide ” (p. 29).

One might add to that list the importance of establishing interconnectivity between schools and non-academic life as well, such as that found in workplaces, leisure activities, neighborhoods, political and religious activities, and international sites. The new communication technologies—email, online threaded discussion forums, movies, video, television, online chat, games, blogs, and such—make it possible to re-open the walls around formal learning that have been erected since Dewey’s days. Monroe stops short of calling for that sort of interconnectivity, appropriately grounding her recommendations on the specific cases she analyzes, yet her argument could easily be extended to opening schooling to life in many other ways.

In a similar way, she restricts her implications to actions that teachers can initiate within existing academic institutions. That itself is a major challenge, one that this book makes more possible to accomplish. Monroe's own experiences working in diverse communities across the United States provides her with a deep understanding of how limited economic resources interact with under-recognized cultural resources to produce failures of schooling.

The actions of teachers, which Monroe proposes, are important, yet Monroe is clearly aware of the difficulty of reforming schools when they operate within hierarchies of privilege and inequitable access to resources. Dare we hope that books such as this may also energize citizens to see that the project of fostering critical literacy is inseparable from the project of working toward democracy in the larger society?

### **References**

Dewey, J. (1907). The school and society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.