

Book Review

Rituals and Student Identity in Education: Ritual Critique for a New Pedagogy

By Richard A. Quantz with Terry O'Connor & Peter Magolda

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According to Richard Quantz, contemporary calls for measureable objectives and increased testing in schools are anti-intellectual appeals that promise individual rewards at the expense of concerns for the common good. Quantz does not simply complain. He explores how such appeals to individual advancement came to overshadow democratic concerns. It appears to Quantz that these individualistic objectives fit people's common sense to such an extent that they require no further explanation. For this reason, Quantz sets out to investigate the non-rational influences that brought about the shift.

In part, the problems come from a misapplication of science. Accordingly, Quantz sought a way to think about schools that did not depend on the limited rationality he found in educational thought. Nonetheless, he wanted to maintain the utopian hopes that philosophers such as Rousseau and Locke ascribed to democracy during the Enlightenment. The method Quantz developed is what he calls a ritual critique.

In his book, Quantz does three things. First, he defines what he means by ritual in education and describes the role it plays in school affairs. Second, he links this view of ritual with the theoretical ideas of his philosophical predecessors and shows how he developed a method of understanding how ritual works that avoided the narrowness of scientific limitations. Finally, he proposes a new pedagogy that turns the non-rational aspects of schooling toward democratic ends. In what follows, the reader will find descriptions of how Quantz approached each of these tasks.

To introduce the reader to the nature of rituals, Quantz offers fictitious examples of how they influence education. The first example is about the high school graduation ceremony in which the women graduates must wear white gowns while the men wear blue ones. Quantz highlights the meanings of the symbols by describing the complaints a woman student makes to her colleagues, to school officials, to her parents. This example leads to a consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of investigations of rituals.

Quantz gives Emile Durkheim credit for discerning the importance of ritual performance in forming social structure. For Durkheim, ritual served three functions in society. It pointed to the realm of the sacred so it called forth an attitude of respect. It contributed to feelings of social solidarity, and it maintained the social order. Although Durkheim began with a comparative study of religions, he applied these insights to other realms of social life as well. This contribution influenced anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Goffman to show how commonplace actions reinforce levels of authority, imbue feelings of belongingness, and reinforce the given social order. Not surprisingly, educational theorists such as Peter McLaren and Basil Bernstein made similar observations about the role of rituals in schools.

The development of theoretical understandings of ritual was not a simple and direct line. Quantz shows how theorists such as Victor Turner suggested that ritual might introduce contradictions that enabled the transformation of society. For Quantz, though, the important idea Turner offered was that society was a dynamic process between some forces that tend to bring order and other forces that move toward openness. In this regard, Quantz compliments McLaren for showing how students in a Catholic school move from order of the classroom to the openness of the street corner. Ritual helped them navigate this transition. From this discussion, Quantz realizes the importance of ritual is in the daily interactions people have in schools. In this regard, he breaks with researchers who concentrate on the obvious manifestations such as graduation ceremonies.

In chapter three, Quantz explains how he changed his research methods from making ethnographic accounts to drawing critiques of rituals. In making the shift, Quantz sought to highlight the drive for liberation that he found in groups outside the mainstream and contrast those impulses with the ways authorities explain away the resulting failures. To accomplish this end, Quantz borrowed Mikhail Bakhtin's methods of analyzing fiction. These included Bakhtin's ideas of time and space, characterization, ideology, and ambivalence. Quantz arrived at a set of suggestions for conducting his research.

The first suggestion comes from the ideas of time and space. It is for the researcher to present the words of the subjects in a polyphonic manner. Quantz illustrates this recommendation by describing how Dostoevsky depicted the interaction of the characters in his novels. In the case of ritual critique, the suggestion implies that people living in poverty speak in dialogue with their desires, their conditions, and the existing elites. These dialogues relate to time and space. Although a person's desires may appear timeless, the interactions people have with their conditions and the existing elites place the subjects in historical settings.

The second suggestion derives from the way Dostoevsky portrayed the characters in his novels. They were the descriptions of how the character saw the world and how he or she saw himself or herself. Researchers can do the same thing. Quantz offers an example taken from working with informants living in poverty. When they express conflicting perceptions, they reveal the extent the ideas of the elites penetrated their thinking. The third suggestion is to look for ideological distortions in the dialogues of informants, and the fourth recommendation is to recognize ambivalence. Following the example of individuals living in poverty, students from low-income homes may make flippant jokes in class to counter the risk of failure inherent in academic activities. In these acts, the students reveal ideological distortions and ambivalence.

In chapters four, five, and six, Quantz shows how he discovered and applied these recommendations in his fieldwork. As readers would expect, the chapters show how he developed increasing understanding as he worked along.

Chapter four covers the daily ceremony at an elementary school and a classroom in a teacher-training program. These cases reveal the differences between the ritual involved in a formal ceremony and rituals in every day events. The point Quantz makes is that the everyday rituals are central to the mission of the school.

In chapter five, Quantz discusses seminars in a college. In the examples Quantz presents, students define their identities in their interactions with each other and with their professors. To make the point more strongly, he includes a variety of types of student and adults. For example, the voices of typical college students counter the voices of college students who rose from lower class circumstances. Among the contradictions the students face are the desire to express solidarity with peers on the one hand and the drive to excel as individual students on the other.

The last chapter in this section shows the pervasive nature of a pattern of interaction that Quantz called the puzzlemaster. In most classes in most schools, the teacher helped the students solve the puzzles they confronted in their studies. As a ritual, the puzzlemaster pattern could

reinforce the conception that there is an approved way of doing everything. This conception is important for people living in bureaucracies. The puzzlemaster ritual could encourage students to adopt a technological mind-set by showing that there is a given solution to any problem. The problem with the puzzlemaster ritual is that it gives a false sense of problems in the world. Unlike school problems, the difficulties people encounter in life have no boundaries and a wide range of influences, many of which are difficult to discern.

In the final chapter, Quantz suggests alternatives for the overly technical conception of education that pervades contemporary thought. The initial difficulty is to convince people that the non-rational aspects of school life are important. This conflicts with the commonsense notions of education as serving individuals or as measured by tests. Although it is impossible to offer techniques that will resolve all problems faced in the classroom, Quantz thinks there are principles that educators could adopt to transform their classrooms. These include recognizing that solving problems is a complex task that requires determining the rules appropriate for the problem. Teachers should recognize their roles as intellectuals who engage in exciting, abstract discussions. Instead of searching for correct outcomes, teachers should reinforce values such as democracy, diversity, respect, social justice, and courage. Quantz hopes that the methods of ritual critique will help educators introduce a new pedagogy because it will reveal the non-rational bases of many commonsense but misleading ideas people hold.

There are two important strengths of this book. The first is the way that Quantz explores how rituals reinforce commonsense but misleading ideas about schooling. He offers excellent descriptions of the ways social theorists conceived the influence rituals had in building mind-sets within people. The second is that Quantz leads the reader through a process he followed to develop the ritual critique. This focus on the everyday nature of school life is especially fruitful when Quantz uses it to contrast the perceptions of people from different social classes.

Despite the strengths, there are two related weaknesses. The first is that Quantz does not adequately use the theories of social change he describes. This is most obvious when he offers principles that teachers should follow to improve education. He does not use the theories of Durkheim or other theorists to show how society can change to the point that people will believe them. Further, it is not clear schools can make such changes if ideas about educational testing and outcomes based curriculum came from the structure of corporate society where people have to work in groups at separate tasks side-by-side. The second is that Quantz seems to violate his own logic when he offers alternative

principles for schools. He explains that he constructed the principles to satisfy questions from students in teacher training programs who wanted to know what they should do to improve schools. The problem is that students seem to be participating in the ritual that puts Quantz in the role of puzzlemaster when they ask such questions. To be true to the idea of examining rituals, Quantz should explore the meanings of this ritual in the ways he looked at other rituals.

These are minor problems in a good book. It is well worth reading.