Representation

Why read this text…

The concept of representation refers to a central social practice that produces culture and meaning – it underlines that the symbolic domain is at the heart of social life. Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It involves the use of language, signs and images that stand for or represent things (Hall 1997). Language, in its broadest sense, here encompasses not just spoken or written language, bodily gestures and alike, but also other ways of meaning-making, like the way in which fashion industry uses clothing, or television uses digital images and so on. As such, representation is a central feature of education, or, more precisely, education itself is a system of representation, just like scientific disciplines are, including anthropology. Institutional arrangements and discourses, as well as individual educators, are deeply involved in meaning-making – they organize, define and represent historically specific knowledge and world views.

Therefore, reflecting on the process of representation in educational setting is of great importance to educators. The text will first explain what is meant by representation and place it in the context of anthropology. It will then offer a rethinking about education as one of the discourses that also makes the systems of representations and offer an ethnographic example.

Historical context

We refer here to what Hall (1997) broadly identifies as a constructivist approach to representation and meaning-making. This approach posits that neither things themselves, nor individual people can fix meaning in language. Meaning is produced, it is constructed through representational systems. A rock can be a dense mass on the side of a road, it can be a boulder, it can be a weapon, a tool, a building material, an ornament etc. The meaning of a rock is not in the rock itself but in relations humans put it into. We must not confuse the material world in which things and people exist and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate (Hall 1997).

In the 1980s dominant views on representation in social sciences and humanities shifted toward these constructivist approaches that were germinated by theoretical and historical conditions of the time (post World War II, decolonization, postcolonial criticism etc.). Marcus and Fisher (2003) have named this transition "crisis of representation".

The theoretical shift toward questions of representation in a number of disciplines involved applying a self-critical reflexivity to problems of knowledge production, truth-making, interpretation and discursive forms of representation. In anthropology the "crisis of representation" arose from uncertainty about adequate means to describe social reality and prompted a critical debate about the subject matter of anthropology (the 'Other'), its method (ethnography), its medium (fieldwork and field sites) and ultimate intention (knowledge

production) (Marcus & Fisher 2003; Clifford & Marcus 1986). Seeing culture as composed of seriously contested codes and representations, seeing political and poetic as inseparable and acknowledging that science is not above historical and linguistic process (Clifford & Marcus 1986) highlighted a set of fundamental issues for the discipline. How can anthropology ever make objective claims about those it casts its gaze upon? What are the ethical and political dimensions of constructing representations of other cultures? What can these pointed questions reveal about reflexivity, how can the discipline adapt to such a critique, and should it at all? These critical questions are useful to explore with regard to educational practices and processes of representation.

a) Discussion

Let's start with an example of segregated schooling in Bosnia and Herzegovina called "two schools under one roof" (dvije škole pod jednim krovom) common in the central and southern parts of the country primarily populated by Bosniaks and Croats. Students effectively constitute two distinct schools in one building. Students attend school in different shifts and with long breaks, in order to minimize contact between them. In some schools, they enter different entrances or must use different stairwells. They use different textbooks; have different teachers, and even an entirely different administrative system. Even in so-called 'unified' schools, such as the Mostar Gymnasium, Bosniak and Croat students a different curricula is used – together in gym class and computer lab, but learning apart, in a different language, geography, and history classes.

Now think about educational institutions as representational systems that deal with ideas and 'truths' about what the world is and should be like. The teaching of particular subjects – mathematics, language, music, geography etc. – and their organization (in terms of when, to whom and how they are taught) do not simply give objective descriptions of the world or transfer objective knowledge. They do not simply form logical assemblages; they generate representations and attribute value and meaning in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemes that are historically specific. Educational institutions appropriate, display, produce and share knowledge to certain ends. They are arbiters of meanings since the institutional position allows them to articulate and reinforce specific frameworks of knowledge.

To think further about education as a representational system, we can explore the question of race. Evolutionary and physical anthropology was deeply implicated in the construction and dissemination of representations of racialized others that even today underlie general understandings of race. However, cultural anthropologists have also worked to counter these kinds of representations. In the first half of the 20th century, one of the "fathers of anthropology", Franz Boas (1858 - 1948) and a group of his anthropology students analysed popular K-12 textbooks in American schools. They found that the majority of textbooks "misuse the concept of 'race'", while a significant amount "teach what amounts to Nazi doctrines abut superior and inferior races" (Boas in Burkholder, 2011). Boas worked directly with teachers' unions, prominent national educators, and many of his own former students in the field of anthropology in order to cultivate a more accurate representation of human

diversity in primary and secondary schools. One of Boas' students, Ruth Benedict went on to teach teachers about the concept of race. Another, Margaret Mead taught teachers a more rigorous definition of culture. Following Boas' example, both Benedict and Mead worked directly with teacher educators, teachers, educational organizations, the military and trade unions to design tolerance programming during World War II (Burkholder, 2011).

Historical and social changes, political struggles, the passage of time, globalized labour markets, and the geographical dissemination of scientific racism and other events have changed the way race is represented and thought of all over the world. What we teach and the way we teach (as well as what we think) about race has not become any less of a contested question for both educators, anthropologists, scientists, students, parents and the society in general.

b) Ethnographic Example

In the 1990s, Linwood H. Cousins (1999) carried out an ethnographic study of a black high school and community in an American city. A two-year stint of field work allowed him to describe how representations of class displace onto racial/ethnic and gender relations in a school that prides itself on upward mobility embodied in notions of respectable values, behaviour and attitudes in school, family and community relations.

Cousins specifically analyses which ways of dressing, talking, gesturing and socializing are constructed as respectable by the school staff, students, parents and the wider community, and by contrast, which are seen as troubling and inappropriate for various reasons. He investigates how students "play" on and with different representations of race, class and gender and how they negotiate their own identities based on these.

In the context of a community and school that they see themselves as aspiring to upward social mobility by adopting middle class lifestyles, behaviour and culture – the aesthetics of a popular black genre, such as hip hop, are viewed as self-destructive, self -mocking and disrespectful of the black community. In the popular imagination, hip-hop is considered "underclass" and associated with black crime, violence, sexism, and sexual promiscuity.

Even though some students who dressed and played as if "underclass" had parents with college educations, good salaries, and an ethic of upward mobility through education, their lifestyles—primarily where they lived, the kind of black ethnic clothes they wore and food they ate, and their tendency to speak in largely black English (AAE) —supported other symbols in school to signal to many students and staff an underclass influence in their backgrounds. To many teachers, parents, students, and staff, loud behaviour, for example, represented licentiousness, social backwardness, and a general lack of appropriate values and taste, especially when students were 'loud' in a non-black public. For many in the community, loud behaviour shamed "the race" and displayed "underclassness".

In the course of Cousins' research, the school decided to police student's behaviour and began to punish students who did not display preferred behaviour and styles such as dressing neatly, speaking properly and respecting authority.

While students acknowledged and valued the regard their community held for particular speech acts, behavioral actions, and aesthetics associated with race and gender respectability,

they also trampled and profaned these by exaggerating, marking, and mocking their middle-to-underclass properties. In this vein, student actions– like resisting the whiteness of the curriculum transcend simple interpretations of defiance, immaturity, resistance, and reproduction. Cousins argued that these adolescents had their own agency and a host of aspirations and intentions that were compatible and incompatible with those of their peers, family, and community. Trends, like clothing trends, language, music and attitudes are incorporated into personal and public politics and appropriated as negative symbols of racial/ethnic, class and gender identity. Negotiating between different representations of life possibilities, students formed their own identities that did not fit in neatly to given classifications, but showed a profound effect on their educational possibilities.

Thinking further:

1. Think about topics you teach. Have you ever questioned how the subject matter is represented, by you or by the textbook? Does your subject mean something different to you, your students, other colleagues and the general community?

2. What values are associated with your subject? Do these associations (which?) make what you teach harder or easer to teach?

3. Does your school have rules about 'decent' or appropriate behaviour and dress? Does the school police student behaviour and lifestyles, based on what these represent? If so, what and whose identity is at stake?

4. Can you give an example of how students play on/with the rules of appropriateness? Discuss what this 'play' might mean to students?

5. Do you think what you teach affects your student and how beyond the comprehension of the knowledge and skills? Is it associated with a particular kind of life course?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES
Representation, language, symbolizing, culture, education, race

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