WORLD-MAKING

Why read this text…

World-making is an important concept for educators. It refers to both the minute outcomes of everyday social interaction and broader historical processes of social transformation. All educators are deeply involved in world-making, as they organize, define and present a particular version of the world to new generations. The world as presented and imposed often comes to be taken for granted as both 'natural' and 'necessary.' Yet this world is always contested, fraught with value conflict, divergent interests, power struggles, internal contradiction and social inequities.

Pedagogy is a form of world-making. As teachers guide children to make sense of and navigate a world not of their own making, teachers and children inevitably make the world anew. It is thus important to recognize and reflect critically on which world(s) we present to children as well as the world we bring forth together with children through classroom interaction and other educational practices.

Historical context

World-view refers to people's perceptions of an ordered reality, their pictures of 'the way things are.' Fundamental understandings of the world include conceptions of nature, self and society and how these are ordered. As tacit knowledge about 'the way things are,' a world-view serves as an implicit interpretive framework for making sense of people's actions. A particular world-view may influence, but never determine how individuals behave (Rapport 2007:431).

World-views are perspectival in that they represent a view from somewhere. Subject to negotiations of power, they are also open-ended. Just as there is no 'absolute and ultimate knowledge,' a 'completely adequate and comprehensive world-view' is not possible (Geertz 2016: 635). Anthropologists mark differences between groups of people based on how people envision the world (Rapport 2007:431). There are no clear lines between world-views in that no sociocultural version of reality is fully original. Nor is a particular world-view a collective, standardized or harmonious cognitive template that all individuals internalize. It is a hypothetical figure constructed by an ethnographer from the patterned ways people move in the world, and thus a momentary synthesis of an ongoing process (Pina Cabral 2017).

W*orld-making* refers to the ongoing fashioning of the world through social interaction. It denotes the way people create distinct realities and practices as they engage with conventional sociocultural forms (Rapport 2007: 427). Humans rework collective forms through processes of composing and decomposing, weighting, reordering, deleting and supplementing with new variations (Goodman 1978). Anthropologists understand world-making as *bricolage* – as everyday tinkering with the world to hand – a reworking of culture that has no beginning or end. Each new reality borrows from, adapts and parodies previous ones, yet without being predictable, encompassed or otherwise predetermined. From this

perspective, the order we experience is not 'out there' waiting to be discovered; it is fashioned through particular power relations and ways of knowing and perceiving such as the sciences, arts, and everyday practice (Pina-Cabral 2017, Rapport 2007: 429). The human imagination is central to world-making processes, as it allows us to both give reality to the world at hand and keep inventing social worlds anew, to transform the world by questioning present conventions and envisioning new horizons.

Whereas the concept of *world-view* helps us capture the perspectival nature of sociocultural realities, the concept of *world-making* helps us grasp transformative sociocultural processes and the transformative quality of individual imagination (Cf. Rizvi 2006).

a) Discussion

We can view world-making from different perspectives. Religions are world-making phenomena as people bring transcendent worlds into being through beliefs, symbols, visions, rites and ritual practices (Geertz 2016). World-making is also inherent in policy-making. Policies are never just coercive and constraining texts; they are contested and productive of social and semantic spaces and sets of relations, as different groups and individuals appropriate and adapt policies to their own purposes (Shore et al. 2011; Levinson and Sutton 2001).

Berger and Luckmann's notion of 'social construction' (1966) draws on the idea that groups of people – precipitated by historical circumstances, social forces, ideologies and human creativity – configure the world in ways that have very real consequences for individuals (cf. Hacking 1999). Ruth Benedict (1935) noted that particular ways of organizing life present practical problems for those who live with these. While the idea of 'social construction' may feel liberating to, for example, mothers and fathers who realize that constructs of 'good parents' are not set in stone, others may feel ensnared in constructs like 'children with learning disabilities' (McDermott 1993; Hacking 1999).

World-making takes place in everyday interaction as people work to figure out what to do next at any given moment. Varenne and Koyama (2011:51) argue that the search to figure out a plausible *next* act produces new conditions, which like previous conditions are grounded in specific times and spaces and fully factual in their consequences. Figuring out a 'next' involves discovery, interpretation, explanation, and convincing others of a course of action in relation to a particular cultural problem, such as how best to teach in an over-crowded classroom. Acting 'next' together, people transform, reconstitute, and tweak what was previous, and thus 'culture' the world through their ongoing activity. Varenne and Koyama (2011:51-2) view this culturing as educational, as learning and teaching in the "fully progressive sense of an ongoing collective process activated, throughout life, when faced with renewed uncertainty."

b) Ethnographic Example

In the article entitled *Acquisition of a child by a learning disability* (1993), Ray McDermott discusses Adam, a 9-year-old American schoolboy officially described as a Learning Disabled (LD) child. Drawing on 18 months of fieldwork, in which he visually recorded classroom

interaction and observed Adam in school settings and beyond, McDermott (1993:271) begins his sociocultural account of LD by posing the question of where a 'learning disability' is to be found. Is it best thought of as 1) a phenomenon going on in the Adam's head, 2) a rhetorical shorthand for talking about some children, or 3) a political label and resource for sorting schoolchildren?

McDermott challenges common approaches to learning failure, which make the child the unit of analysis and maintain that traits like attention deficit, and problems with word access and phonetics "belong to the child and are the source of both the disordered behavior and the subsequent label" (1993:272). By making the school the unit of analysis, McDermott argues that a diagnostic label like LD, as a well-established cultural category in educational conversations, precedes any child's entry into the world. Moreover, LD acquires a certain proportion of children in each new generation exactly because it is given life in the school's organization of tasks, skills and evaluations, in which rates of learning risk becoming the full measure of the learner.

In answering his own question of where a learning disability is to be found, McDermott (1993:273) concludes that we might say there is no such thing as LD, just social practices of "displaying, noticing, documenting, remediating, and explaining it." Although he acknowledges that some children learn more slowly or in different ways than others, he suggest that these differences have a particular reality in school because schools provide so many occasions for their display. In this sense, the world is not a neutral medium for what children like Adam cannot do; rather the disabilities of Adam and others are visible because the world is precisely organized for making their disabilities apparent (1993: 273).
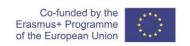

Thinking further:

1. How is your world ordered and organized? Explain your version of the 'world' and share and discuss with classmates/colleagues.

2. Discuss with classmates/colleagues whether and how you see teaching as world-making.

3. What understandings of 'the world' do you impose on students/children and why? What cultural categories do you use to make this world apparent and real to students?

4. Ruth Benedict (1935) noted that particular ways of organizing life present practical problems for those who live with these. What 'practical problems' does your version of the world pose for all/some children?

KEY-WORDS/ CROSS-REFERENCES
World-view, conceptualization, culture, policy, religion, education, diagnoses

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