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Just Tweets and Hashtags: Justice-Oriented Youth Literacies Education

by Erik Skogsberg

@djangoparis: #JustTeacherSyllabus is about what educators read, watch, and engage as we learn to teach justice in an unjust world.

@erikskogs: .@djangoparis's & HSamyAlim's "Culturally Sustaining" & "What Are We Seeking...?" Essential frames. #JustTeacherSyllabus

Early in my teaching career, theoretically committed to justice-oriented teaching, I utilized journaling as a space for student voices. I soon—surprised at the time—fought a student who would not write there. Having made daily space in our syllabus for journaling work, I battled him regularly. Over time, I wore him down to quiet compliance, and he would produce a couple sentences. And as he begrudgingly filled a few lines in his journal, he would sneak a peek at his phone resting in his partially unzipped bag. Years later, when I was preparing to talk with teacher education students about the importance of building curriculum in connection to students' literacies, I came across this student's Twitter account: peopled with numerous followers and tens of thousands of tweets and regular conversations (many going back to that year). I had not seen his literate social media practices, his "Twitteracy" (Greenhow & Gleason, 2012), then. I oftentimes think back to that classroom and the many other literate practices being forged in the margins of my noticing. What else had I missed through my narrow frame on "Adolescent Literacy"? What else had I missed in thinking that writing only happened in a journal and, in this specific case, that Twitter was just tweets and hashtags?

Now, through social and other digital media, I am learning how to watch, listen, and engage in justice-oriented conversations such as those in the tweets that start this piece. Here, Dr. Django Paris, a Language and Literacy scholar, opens a space for educators to share ideas and resources, connected—through



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#JustTeacherSyllabus—immediately to other educators committed to justice-oriented work. In this same Twitter stream, he cites other social “justice syllabi” hashtags used to crowdsource curricular responses to injustices and facilitate conversations about race and equity, such as #FergusonSyllabus. #FergusonSyllabus was created by Dr. Marcia Chatelain, after Michael Brown, a black teenager, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer. Dr. Chatelain created this hashtag to support teachers and students toward immediate engagement with Ferguson, race, and equity as they started school that year (Chatelain, 2014). With this and other justice syllabi (e.g. #CharlestonSyllabus, #SayHerNameSyllabus), educators and others are able to share ideas and resources for responding to recent tragedies and larger issues of equity and justice. These justice syllabi, an example of the power of social media spaces and the literacies practiced there, quickly allow for the gathering of people and ideas in response to imminent issues of equity. And these hashtags, like other justice movement hashtags such as “#BlackLivesMatter,” “#NotYourModelMinority,” “#NotYourMascot,” and “#NoDAPL,” mobilize people digitally and face-to-face in challenging injustices.

In the tweets that begin this piece, I responded to Paris, along with others, by tweeting what inspires my work. In my tweet above, I included Paris's own traditionally published scholarship: “Culturally

Sustaining Pedagogies: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice” (2012) and Paris & H. Samy Alim’s (2014) “What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy,” shortening their journal article titles to fit in 140 characters, and asserting them as being “essential frames” for me in learning how to be a justice-oriented educator. “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies” (CSP) builds on the legacy of “Culturally Relevant Pedagogies” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and further purposes literacies teaching toward “sustaining” marginalized youths’ literate practices and cultures. By boldly centering sustainment, Paris’s work helps to focus on what and whose literate practices are often not sustained in the process of schooling or even in the best-of-intentioned multicultural education spaces (where youth practices may only be taken up to build a one-way bridge toward canonical texts and practices). CSP importantly focuses teachers on facilitating a dynamic, back-and-forth movement between dominant classroom practices (e.g. Standard English, reading and writing traditional classroom texts) and those that students already practice within and across cultures toward extending what is possible in and beyond classrooms (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Looking back through my current frames with CSP, my inability to notice past students’ valuable literate practices, seems distant, but now in such stark focus. Students were already reading, writing, and making meaning in their lives in ways I wasn’t willing to see. Social media, and other digital and youth spaces powerfully challenge and move people in ways that, as a young English teacher, I feigned could exist across just “student-centered” journal prompts and other traditional academic texts and practices. By now approaching literacies education work through the lens of CSP, I have been able to further examine just what and how I and other teachers design curriculum to dynamically sustain youth cultures and literate practices across classrooms and communities.

The field of Language and Literacy Studies has been part of providing the necessary vision for what, too often, is left out of dominant noticing. For

example, Language and Literacy scholars have illuminated the brilliant, situated literacies that youth, especially youth of color and other marginalized youth, already practice in rap cyphers (Kirkland, 2013), through tattoo ink (Kirkland, 2009), on backpacks (Paris, 2010), and across multiple Englishes (Hudley & Mallinson, 2013). And they challenge a narrow vision of who is seen and heard as literate, who matters, in lineage of oppression and exclusion that pushes many of those outside a white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered gaze to the periphery (Collins & Blot, 2003). Our current moment, filled with ever-more sobering stories of persistent structural racism and many other inequities, reminds us that classrooms and society are still very much set up to privilege a few. Much work has been done. But there is much work to do.

I’m currently learning how to do some of this work alongside a small group of early-career teachers committed to CSP. There is no cookie-cutter formula for this work, as it responds to dynamic cultural practices, daily examples of inequity, and schooling structures more or less open to it. But, I’ve witnessed these courageous teachers remain vigilantly committed to continually learning about the literate practices of students, designing and redesigning curriculum to provide spaces for these literacies in connection to the various standards they are tasked to meet, and opening critical spaces to reflect with students about what they are all coming to learn in the process. This has often meant attempting to make text choices reflect student interests and literate practices, assessments that provide multiple ways for students to respond through their literate practices, and critical reflection that engenders a collective examination of this process. Through this work, we continually attempt to learn how to face a major question CSP asks: Whose literacies will we sustain in our work with youth? I hope I will continue to learn to ask and answer this question. With stark, recent reminders of injustices across lives and literacies, it is a question I hope we all continue asking.

As we begin another fall as Youth Literacies Educators, I hope we will continue learning to

challenge deficit-oriented perspectives of youth and literacies ultimately undermining our collective humanity. I hope we will continue leveraging—and learning—with youth and literate practices inside, outside, and across traditional scholarly and other spaces to address continuing inequities. I hope we will continue learning how to be critically aware of our own biases when it comes to what counts as literacies across classrooms and communities. Overall, I hope we will continue seeking ways to challenge persistent injustices: dynamically learning how to build our #JustTeacherSyllabus, across the spaces we work, and alongside youth toward a Justice-Oriented Youth Literacies Education.

Three Steps Toward Justice-Oriented Youth Literacies Education

Learn about students' literacies: How do the students you work with already read, write, watch, listen, communicate, and make meaning in their lives? You can come to know this through surveys, conversations, and even in just paying attention to what students are doing and talking about. Be curious and open to learning from and with students here. Challenge others you work with to do the same.

Design dynamic spaces for students' literacies: In what ways do the literacies students already practice come to inform and connect with your class? Provide spaces where student practices and texts are welcome and students have multiple options to show what they know and can do. This could mean, for example, that assessments provide students both traditional and nontraditional opportunities, such as crafting multimodal assessments or reading youth texts alongside canonical ones, ultimately stepping back to critically reflect on what the process both allows inside and outside classrooms. Challenge others you work with to do the same.

Critically engage with larger justice movements: Since definitions of what counts as literate practices oftentimes intersect with larger issues of equity, how can you critically engage with and in those conversations? A good place to begin might be with the

hashtags mentioned and the movements they represent. Start there, seeing what ideas and resources others have already contributed. Perhaps contribute some of your own. Provide students spaces where what they do in class not only engages their literate practices alongside traditional classroom practices, but ultimately results in opportunities for them to authentically engage in justice issues you and they care about in and beyond school. Make sure to provide critical space to reflect on that process. Challenge others you work with to do the same.

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