

Reality Shapers: Teaching Adventurous Thinking to Co-Construct a Revolution

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Book Review of Blackburn, M. V. (2019). *Adventurous thinking: Fostering students' rights to read and write in secondary ELA classrooms*. NCTE.

“Youth is the Age of Revolt” writes Blackburn (2019), echoing the 1981 and 2009 iterations of NCTE’s *The Students’ Right to Read* (p. 2). A provocative assertion, this fundamental belief in young people’s revolutionary potential drives Mollie V. Blackburn’s new Principles in Practice text *Adventurous Thinking: Fostering Students’ Rights to Read and Write in Secondary ELA Classrooms*. An edited volume, the text highlights pedagogical approaches to English education that center how reading and writing can ignite a social revolution led by the young.

Because of my own commitments to youth-centered education, I found myself enticed by the invitation to center young people’s acts of revolt, doing so, as Blackburn asserts, “to deny, oppose, and resist” (p. 2) the racism, sexism, xenophobia, queerphobia, transphobia, and ableism that continue to structure US schooling. However, the relegation of revolt to a youthful endeavor raised new concerns for me: aren’t we educators, as adults who share today’s realities with our students, equally responsible for revolting against oppressive systems? I worried that such a statement might be read as justification for inaction, for relegating justice to the provenance of young people in ways that elide English educators’ own complicity in maintaining oppressive educational systems. Adventurous thinking, however—defined as a form of critical inquiry that exceeds “indoctrination” (NCTE, 2018, p. ix)—challenges such systems through the cultivation of “criticality, community, and connections” that heal, humanize, and forge solidarity (Blackburn, 2019, p. 109).

Each of the teachers spotlighted in this text as "reality shapers" highlights the importance of co-constructing revolution, of holding close the responsibility of building a more just reality through incisive English language arts (ELA) pedagogy. Arianna Talebian, for example, in her chapter "Black Lives Matter: Disrupting Oppression by Identifying Hidden Narratives in the English Language Arts Classroom" demonstrates how personal narratives can reshape a literary canon. Nestled within a larger unit on racial justice, Talebian invites students to pick an index card that, on one side, holds the name of a Black or Brown person and, on the other, an "outcome" (p. 48). Circulating around the room, students begin to share those names and stories and soon face the hard reality that each has been lost to police brutality. Weighted by pain, shock, and sadness, the stories do, however, keep moving, gaining speed and movement in pursuit of revolutionary change.

As a white, queer educator committed to antiracist pedagogy, I found in Talebian's story a kindredness and, more important, a locus for solidarity building. In the first years of my own K-12 teaching in the Deep South, I was expressly forbidden from teaching queer texts. I came to understand this recommendation—no, mandate—from a caring department head as protection from an administration that would rather fire me than allow me to teach about any queer life, including my own. A point of connection, my and Talebian's situations were neither equal nor the same, each shaped by their own historical weight and present realities; however, they resonate. Talebian drew upon personal narratives with pedagogical expertise to honor painful histories of her community of BIPOC individuals; I, however, allowed the histories of my community to remain hidden in the marginalia of curriculum (Coleman, 2019). Cultivating adventurous thinking, Talebian engaged alongside her students in a "praxis" of reading and writing, infusing an all-white ELA curriculum with silenced stories and with the joy of Black and

Brown life (Love, 2019) and, in so doing, foregrounded the revolutionary truth that “[h]ealing and humanizing classrooms matter most” (Talebian, 2019, p. 52).

Addressing xenophobia, anti-Muslim sentiment, rural conservatism, queer exclusion, and the erasure of disability, each featured educator in *Adventurous Thinking* harnesses pedagogical tools to invite adventurous thinking to reshape oppressive realities: together, student and teacher revolt! The book concludes with two final revolutionary sparks: an interview with Angie Thomas (the author of *The Hate U Give*) and Millie Davis’s “protection plan” for students’ rights to read and write, both of which provide further strategies for English educators to harness “the teaching and learning of writing and reading as not just a right, but also an art, a revolutionary art” (Blackburn, 2019, p. 9). A work of revolutionary art itself, *Adventurous Thinking* provides pedagogical approaches needed for ELA students and teachers to co-construct revolution, reshaping past and present realities into a future defined by justice.

References

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