



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

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

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Richard Qunatz's new text, *Rituals and Student Identity in Education*, offers an insightful new perspective on education in the 21st century by examining the nonrational aspects of education and the importance of ritual performance. The text confronts the current environment in public education where standardization and accountability are the *modus operandi*. Quantz challenges the reader to reconsider those spaces within classrooms and schools that can be neither quantified nor commodified by the rational methodologies that dominate current educational discourse. Quantz contends that the problems with education today are not found in a lack of methods or "best practices," but rather, in a lack of an understanding of the cultures and politics of the students, teachers, and communities that are the heart of American schools. In the end, the answers for what troubles education today can be found within the nonrational aspects of those cultural and political spaces that all students and teachers must navigate on a daily basis.

Quantz opens his text with a discussion of the rational in education. It is here that he grounds his argument against what he perceives as our national obsession with rationality in education. Within formal public education, the rational is found in the policies and procedures that promote evaluating and quantifying student mastery of objectified curricula as the most important function of schooling. Quantz argues, "Never has rationality been stressed more than under the 'No Child Left Behind' policies that emphasize explicit outcomes, precise measures, and 'research-based instruction.'" (Quantz, 2011). This refutation of current national education policy lies at the heart of Quantz's promoting ritual critique of nonrational performance as paramount to resisting the standardization that stifles our public schools.

Chapter one explicitly counters the idea of rationality in education by tracing the idea of the nonrational in the works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, all of whom challenged the idea that human beings act rationally within economic and social exchanges. The non-rational, where Quantz proceeds to focus his argument, exists in those unquantifiable and unpredictable behaviors and actions that emerge while human beings interact with each other and the environment. As Marx and Weber saw rationalization as leading to the creation of bureaucracies that dehumanized society, the author contends that rationalization also works against the humanizing aspects of public education.

In chapter two the reader is asked to reconsider the common understanding of ritual as something that is simply habitual. One often thinks of ritual as a behavior void of real meaning, such as an athlete eating a specific pre-game meal in hopes it brings luck in the game, or the teacher who must begin each morning by drinking a cup of coffee while reading *New York Times*

headlines on her iPad. Conversely, Quantz argues for an understanding of ritual as the “nonrational aspects of human action,” which is found in “formalized, symbolic performance” (Quantz, 2011). For the author, this performance, which is often marked by unpredictable and unscripted behavior, offers us the possibility that we can learn to understand the associations and connections we develop with others over time. The author’s assertion, steeped in Deweyan notions of democratic interaction (Dewey, 1916/1997 & 1991), is that we come to understand how to live democratically by interacting with others and interpreting our own actions in accord with the performances and actions of others. It is here that the author grounds his new pedagogy; a pedagogy that evolves out of the ongoing interactions and performances of students, teachers, parents, and the community.

Chapter three is a chapter co-authored with Terry O’Connor in which the authors critique the development of ethnography into a methodology that presents society as an objective and predictable entity. Throughout recent history, the ethnographer’s quest for objectivity forced the nonrational aspects of human culture and behavior into categories so as to be more easily described and evaluated. This, in turn, led to researchers’ focusing on a given culture’s gestures, symbols, and signs instead of developing a genuine understanding of how ritual and performance informs a culture’s actions and behaviors. The authors contend that ritual critique, which examines interaction and performance more closely, and without forcing behaviors into categorical relationships, offers a more distinct and powerful means by which to understand the nonrational aspects of human performance.

After critiquing the theoretical foundations of ethnography in favor of ritual critique in chapter three, Quantz uses ritual critique in action as an observer in several high school and college classrooms. It is in these classrooms that Quantz finds rituals that are both nonrational and ordinary, and both speak to the connections that students develop so as to live fulfilled lives. The contention here is that ritual need not be ceremonial to be impactful in the lives of students and teachers. It is in these ordinary, everyday activities that we come to understand each other as real people with complicated and unquantifiable beliefs and desires.

It is also in these ritual critiques of classrooms that Quantz observes a pattern of student-teacher interaction ritual he names the “puzzlemaster” interaction pattern. The puzzlemaster interaction pattern is easily recognizable to anyone who has spent time in American public schools. It is a pattern that is steeped in the technical action of solving problems with fixed ends. Problem-solving in real world applications involves critical thinking and actively working to find a solution that the problem solver does not initially comprehend. Conversely, the puzzlemaster pattern involves students solving puzzles that are bound by discreet, rational solutions administered by teachers. In this ends-oriented puzzle-solving arrangement, the use of rational methodologies to promote efficient problem solving capacity is privileged over the growth that may come from open inquiry.

Quantz proceeds to trace the development of the puzzlemaster pattern in schools to education’s ongoing role in supporting national interests by preparing students to be obedient workers and citizens. The factory model of schooling that developed in the 20th century supported these ends through rationality and ends-oriented schooling. Quantz cites the work of Alex Molnar and Deron Boyles in tracing the development of the puzzlemaster pattern to the connection between schools and the industrial state. School-business partnerships have been a reality in public education since the early 20th century and they have continued to proliferate in the past twenty-five years. The school-business nexus has furthered the idea of schooling as a rational enterprise where pre-determined outcomes for behavior and academic achievement direct what goes

on in actual classrooms. With this understanding, our national interests, which are driven by the industrial state, can then be furthered by public education which is steeped in the rational aspects of schooling.

Aiming to confront the consumerism promoted by rational, ends-oriented schooling, Quantz develops his ritual critique for a new pedagogy. He turns to Durkheim's notion of ritual as dividing the world into the sacred and profane in arguing that testing and accountability have become the sacred in public education. As numerous scholars have argued in the past two decades, policies such as "No Child Left Behind," and now "Race to The Top," promote a "one-size-fits-all form of education that confuses equality with sameness; that leads almost invariably to passivity-inducing behaviorist pedagogies....that puts excessive pressure on students to perform in certain narrowly defined contexts" (Granger, 2003). Once viewed as sacred, an idea or methodology is beyond reproach; any argument against the sacred can be labeled as profane. As the author offers,

Making it sacred makes it so. It becomes the reality within which we live. By treating teaching as a technical enterprise where having the right toolbox of methods guided by the measureable objectives provided by the decision-makers becomes the reality (Quantz, 2011).

Within this context, arguments for understanding the nonrational aspects of education, such as a student's class, gender, or sexual orientation and the impact those have on education, become non-arguments. They become, in part, profane.

Quantz closes his optimistic text by reasserting his belief in ritual critique being the force that will lead teachers and students to understand and embrace the nonrational aspects of classrooms and schools. It is in these nonrational spaces where critiques of rationality and resistance to the tools of objectivity must develop so that democracy and justice thrive in schools and society. Democracy and social justice require that individuals interact across differences in ways that are both nonrational and unquantifiable. At a time when American education is bound by standardization, accountability, and high-stakes testing, Quantz's commitment to education as critical emancipation is both timely and needed. Education for democracy and justice can only occur with an understanding and appreciation for the ongoing rituals and performances of students and teachers engaged in ongoing inquiry that is emergent, reflective, and liberating.

References

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