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Book review

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Smith, D. I., & Osborn, T. (Eds.). (2007). *Spirituality, social justice, and language learning*. Contemporary Language Education Series. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. 172 pp. ISBN 978-1-59311-599-9, \$39.99 (paperback).

In *Spirituality, Social Justice and Language Learning*, editors David I. Smith and Terry A. Osborn explore intriguing and seldom-studied connections between religion, morality and language learning and teaching. While aimed primarily at Christian educators within Christian institutions, the essays in this work promise to engage even committed secular educators who have ever questioned the political and moral ramifications of how and why they teach foreign languages. Though not entirely unproblematic, *Spirituality, Social Justice and Language Learning* offers useful practical and theoretical treatments of foreign language education in both secondary and post-secondary settings.

Eight essays as well as section introductions and an epilogue comprise the work, but the voice that dominates is that of David I. Smith, co-editor. Smith supplies an essay to each of the four sections of the book, and most of the other contributors appear to be either colleagues or former students of Smith's at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The apparent professional relationship between the various contributors makes one question the criteria used to compile the edition, but as Smith and Osborn acknowledge, *Spirituality, Social Justice and Language Learning* is not offered as a definitive statement on the relationship between religion and foreign language education, but rather as the beginning of a dialogue.

Contextual considerations

Terry Osborn, in perhaps the most politicized essay of the collection, introduces the work with a critique of secular elitism in North American educational institutions. He argues that humanist, secular education ignores metaphysical aspects that, while elusive, define humanity. Without a commitment to these metaphysical (read religious) aspects, language education "reflects a veneer of 'justice issues' superimposed on a technicist curriculum" (p. 9). He points out the disconnection between the secular goals of U.S. education and the religious beliefs and values of many students. Rather than a top-down approach to education, in which academic elites dictate educational goals, Osborn suggests a grass-roots education which springs from the

values and needs of the people being educated. His call to “trust the people” is simultaneously inspiring and probably unsettling to many in academia (p. 9).

Osborn’s essay, however, conflates morality and religion and only offers brief lip-service to non-Christian religious traditions. His justification for using terms like “morality,” “religion,” “spirituality,” and “metaphysics” almost interchangeably is that “moral issues. . . in the public discourse are often tied to issues of spirituality, including beliefs in God or gods, religion, and similar themes” (p. 4). Osborn argues persuasively that religion has been marginalized by positivist education, but he in turn marginalizes those whose morality is not linked to religious beliefs, especially theism.

In the next essay, David Smith seeks to establish how moral and religious values influence both teachers’ and learners’ experiences of the foreign language classroom. His critique that current practices in foreign language learning reduce communication to “transactional” and utilitarian language is particularly thought-provoking (p. 19). Foreign language educators are encouraged to question why and how they justify the profession. Power, profit and self-interest, he argues, are often the carrots that educators use to encourage foreign language study. When this is the case, foreign language education can become a tool of domination rather than of liberation. Smith’s review of the scanty literature available that studies the relation between teacher/student beliefs and language learning shows that teachers and students want to be morally engaged in their education. He also shows that current language pedagogy relies unduly on utilitarian exchange.

Foreign language teacher education

In the two essays of the second section, David Smith and John Watzke write respectively about informal and formal ways that religion can influence teachers in the classroom. Smith reconsiders experiences common to every foreign language teacher and encourages teachers to re-evaluate the moral implications of their reactions in these situations. While considering a minor disciplinary problem in his French classroom, Smith reminds readers that all actions that teachers take have moral implications. The second anecdote Smith narrates involves the common second language education practice of telling students to make up an answer if they cannot communicate what they really want. Smith questions the moral implications of telling students it is okay to “lie” in a foreign language (p. 38). Finally, he again critiques the portrayal of language populations in class materials and the ultimate, though possibly unstated goals, of learning a second language. Smith views the people portrayed in foreign language textbooks as “shallow consumers” and never as people who “suffered, hoped, believed, doubted, prayed, wept, sacrificed for a cause or died” (p. 41). This observation leads Smith to develop curriculum materials based on the lives of real people, and to encourage his college students/teachers-in-training to use real-life narrative in order to morally and linguistically engage their language learners.

John Watzke’s contribution to this section offers a history of Catholic education in the United States and an exploration of the ACE teacher-training program (the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education). Watzke explains how historically anti-immigrant racism and anti-Catholicism became entwined, at least partially, because Catholic educational institutions embraced immigrant communities and served as a bridge to mainstream American society. Watzke paints a one-dimensional portrait of religious education, ignoring, for example, any injustices committed by the Church; this essay also occasionally descends into church-

parlance. That said, the two specific examples that Watzke offers where language teachers have implemented the new national standards for language instruction (the so-called five Cs) are stellar. Lara and Jana, two secondary-school Spanish teachers, created and implemented student-driven curricula that formed bonds between their non-Latino students and the Latino communities in their areas. These curricula were designed with the care and commitment necessary to keep the program from becoming mere academic tourism, and readers will find in them inspiration for their own teaching.

Classroom practices

Marilyn Bierling's essay on legal and illegal immigration introduces the third section, and is a must-read for any teacher of Spanish. Like Smith, Bierling rejects the superficial treatment of Spanish-speaking peoples present in most standard textbooks. She offers instead life-narratives of real people like Henry Marvin Hernández Álvarez, a Honduran man who died while trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border and whose diary was later published. Bierling's essay offers concrete curriculum ideas to instructors who want to engage students on immigration. It also provides a useful overview of current developments in legal and undocumented immigration. Finally it helps teachers and students learn to ask the "right" questions (i.e., those questions often elided in news stories and popular media treatments of immigration).

In the second essay of this section, David I. Smith and three of his former students provide concrete examples of using "(auto)biographical narrative" in the language classroom as a way of providing human depth and engaging students not just on a linguistic, but also a moral level (p. 107). As Smith notes, the narrative-based curricula that he, De Young, Uyaguari and Avila provide surpass, in quantity and quality, the superficial blurbs now offered in many language textbooks. The information supplied by the authors is concrete, offering educators specific examples to follow. The chapter is also honest about the amount of commitment (both in time and energy) required on the part of the teacher to implement this sort of curricula. Finally, the authors offer extended materials accessible to readers through their website.

Theoretical perspectives

The final section of the work demonstrates how Osborn and Smith have purposefully prioritized praxis over theory. The two essays in this section are quite different, but both are engaging. Carolyn Kristjánsson attempts to reinsert religious language into discussion of famed Brazilian pedagogue, Paulo Freire. She argues that North American scholars in particular have ignored Freire's references to his religion and spirituality and focused disproportionately on Freire's political critique. Kristjánsson's essay hearkens back to Terry A. Osborn's introductory essay both in its Freirean call to "trust the people," and in its belief that morality does not exist separate from religion (p. 9).

In the final essay, Smith compares the linguistic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and the lesser-known Dutch theorist Pieter A. Verburg. The goal of this comparison is to show how even theories (such as linguistic theories) apparently separate from religious beliefs still ground their views of humanity on religion and/or moral beliefs. Verburg reacts against the apparent determinism of structuralist and post-structuralist linguistic theories which view experience as mediated through and therefore determined by language. Against these theories, Verburg offers

the free speaker, who while struggling against situational and historical constraints, ultimately has human agency and autonomy. Smith connects Verburg's desire to protect human agency to his religious beliefs in Christ as the Word of God and of humans as "responsible images-bearers of God" (p. 159). Bakhtin, argues Smith, shares Verburg's discomfort with linguistic determinism. Bakhtin postulates that both speaker and hearer are active and possess human agency, but he rejects Verburg's radical autonomy. He argues, rather, that all speech is predicated on earlier speech and already anticipates the response of a hearer. Bakhtin, then, searches for a middle-ground that both preserves human agency and human interdependence. Smith locates the motivation for Bakhtin's concerns in his belief that "intersubjective communion...lies at the heart of human existence" (p. 164). The Christian incarnation is the greatest example of this intersubjective communion.

Spirituality, Social Justice, and Language Learning is written by and designed primarily for Christian educators, and unfortunately hints to include different religious traditions never materialize. While secular educators can and should question some of the assumptions of this work (for example, the conflation of morality and religion), the work still raises very important issues for all teachers of language. It offers a concise and convincing critique of the superficiality of the communicative method used by many language educators, and the work's language is highly readable. The essays are not directed exclusively at Spanish language educators, but Spanish teachers will find them particularly useful because of the possibilities that authors give for engaging marginalized Latino communities in the United States. Personally, I believe *Spirituality, Social Justice, and Language Learning* helps me reflect more carefully on the texts and materials that I use in my foreign language classroom, as well as my own motivations for teaching a foreign language.

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