

The Reading Matrix
Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2006
5th Anniversary Special Issue — CALL Technologies and the Digital Learner

Marketing Fear in America's Public Schools
Edited by Leslie Poynor and Paula M. Wolfe (2005)
Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, USA
Pages: 207
ISBN 0-8058-4704-9 (Paperback)

Reviewed by Juan Carlos Palmer
Universitat Jaume I

Freedom of speech is the only asset that many teachers could aim at having in their daily duties. This statement seems to point out the current situation of many professionals who are involved in the teaching practice. In an ideal situation, any teacher will analyze the class he/she has to deal with, observing all possible pros and cons and devising a personalized syllabus for his/her daily routine. Unfortunately, the actual teaching practice is not always as “close to perfection” as expected. As lecturers, our aim should be to use all the possible tools helping us to better carry out our teaching activity. However, education authorities do not seem too interested in letting us fulfill this goal. In fact, many lecturers all over the world cannot choose the way they have to handle their classes, as the political regime of some countries disallows any possibility of moving from what has already been established. Those of us working in democratic countries are supposed to have the opportunity of being heard, deciding not only contents but also the methodology and materials we want to use in the classroom. Despite this situation, and as the volume edited by Poynor and Wolfe suggests, this situation is far from perfect in the United States. The enforcement of the “No Child Left Behind” act has defined a new framework where a standardized reading curriculum is jeopardizing many teaching and learning possibilities. In fact, as many contributors on the volume suggest, there is neither a program, nor a curriculum, which could ever serve the needs of diverse and particular students.

The need to endorse scripted programs all over the States has forced many schools to purchase a core reading program. Unfortunately, as some contributors to the volume aptly point out, not all programs get supported. Some publishing houses have had the opportunity of commercializing their material, whereas other companies have not been allowed to compete for the same market, as some authorities have considered that their material did not have sufficient scientific backing. An initial thought could simply lead to commercial considerations (it seems, as in many aspects of life, that there are always people on the take). However, Poynor and Wolfe suggest that the advent of these new teaching policies had a lot to do with the establishment of a new religious and conservative apparatus within the U.S. Secretary of Education. In other words, as Edelsky points out in Chapter 2, American schools are facing a new McCarthyism.

The structure of the volume is fairly comprehensive. In the initial chapter Poynor and Wolfe introduce the topic, leading the way for Edelsky (Chapter 2) to emphasize on that new concept of neo McCarthyism suggested above. Then, the rest of chapters are divided in four parts. Part 1 deals with the players, analyzing how corporate and government interests have

recently used fear to dismantle public education. In Chapter 3, Altwerger analyzes all those people and organizations who have taken control of public education away from local constituents. In fact, this author observes how all these players have helped corporations to get full control of the whole education process. She observes the whole chronological framework implying this game of fear. Hers is an important chapter in the book, as it helps to understand the historical and political framework discussed by the following contributors. Matthews, in Chapter 4, continues this analysis started by Altwerger, though she focuses on those who are not key players in this game. In her opinion, the decision has been handed from reading experts to special educators. In her view, the important fact is that now the conservative agenda implies a mixture of interests, most of them based on the political and economic agenda of the players. In order to get control of the whole process, corporations defend a medical model that is being misused, as Strauss points out in Chapter 5. In his opinion, this model is currently affecting children and families, having caused stress, anxiety, and physical illness as a result. He also points out that the real motive to enforce such a model is to offer an image of objectivity and reliability, something that the political agenda cannot fulfil.

The influence of federal policies in the American school is explained in Part 2. All the contributors pay attention to how some pedagogical views on the teaching practice have been abandoned, whereas other philosophical views have been promoted. Yatvin, in Chapter 6, has observed the way the National Reading Panel has been working in recent years, destroying all the scientific research and educational practice that had been carried out for over four decades. Her chapter also points out that all those critics to the system have not got the power to state their views publicly, as they cannot have special access to the press and often act without financial backing support. This support is often shared by different organizations, and there is a great interest in showing that those who do not support this view are against a system that has been directly accepted by God, as Brinkley and Weaver point out in Chapter 7. This new type of fundamentalism plays an important role into forcing families to use reading as a way to enhance Christianity. As the authors suggest, both religious fundamentalism and education policies come hand in hand in order to show the way students should understand texts, forcing them to misread fiction. Reality and fantasy would be hard to differentiate for those students engaged in this new teaching approach endorsed by the National Reading Panel. It is easy to think that some parents, children, and teachers would fight against this system, and Shanton and Valenzuela, in Chapter 8, show how they have been intimidated in order to stop this war against the Success for All program.

The third part of the book is devoted to the influence of the media in this new teaching paradigm. Considering that many teachers are currently having problems to offer their views on this war on literacy, the public opinion just gets an idealistic image promoted by the media, which in turn is promoting the conservative and corporate agenda. In Chapter 9, Haas analyzes how the conservatives are using different means (web sites, research papers, books, surveys and even brainstorming meetings) in order to “sell” a positive image of the whole process. Similarly, the author also observes that this positive image is always endorsed throughout an atmosphere of fear. This role of the information media (or should we better say “disinformation”) wants to perpetuate anti-bilingual and anti-immigrant sentiments in the American school, as Faltis and Coulter aptly point out in Chapter 10. The success of the media disinformation campaign regarding bilingual education was based on the creation of fear toward immigrants and minorities. Unfortunately, this situation is also happening in many democratic countries, and it seems that the press is eager to help these repressive views on multiculturalism.

Finally, Part 4 offers a couple of chapters on what the editors have defined as “liberatory education”. This concluding section describes some local, state, and national organizations that are engaged in changing the educational policies established by the corporate and political right. Meyer et al., in Chapter 11, introduce some actions that can be taken against these federal policies, whereas Poynor and Wolfe, in Chapter 12, try to conclude the volume by showing a possible way out of the mess, giving web pages where the reader can find relevant information on the alternatives to the No Child Left Behind Act.

Marketing Fear in America's Public Schools is a highly provocative book, very accessible for any reader interested in literacy issues. Despite dealing with the American system, the book helps lecturers from other countries to understand how politics affect teaching, and what can we do in order to overcome some obstacles. Poynor and Wolfe's approach is both fresh and innovative, having collected many contributions that offer a unique look to the topic. Its organization is both clear and progressive, becoming a volume that is hard to put down, something that readers will surely appreciate.

As a summary, I recommend this book to everyone interested in how politics interfere with education. Unfortunately, most teaching efforts are jeopardized by political and economic interests and the current situation in American public schools is affecting the way that many parents and community activists understand the politics of schooling and school reform.

Juan Carlos Palmer (Universitat Jaume I, Castelló de la Plana, Spain) focuses his research on reading and writing in the EFL classroom. He is particularly interested in the use of summarizing techniques as a way to improve his students' ability to both understand a text and being able to create a new version of a given piece of discourse. His PhD dissertation (1996) dealt with this specific field of study. He is currently working on how politics and economy affect school reform in different countries.

Email: palmerj@ang.uji.es