

## **Critical Book Analysis**

### **Introduction**

The questions of what is known, how it is known, and why it is known are what many scholars try to answer (Hall, 1997; Willinsky, 1998). Various approaches have been taken in order to answer them, including studying how media affects knowledge and how imperialism spreads singular versions of information. Concepts from Stuart Hall's lecture on media, specifically conceptual maps, meaning and absence, and language and communication are discussed in John Willinsky's *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire's End*, but more importantly tie into issues regarding the spread of knowledge today in U.S. schools.

### **Conceptual Maps**

Individuals naturally want to classify and conceptualize everything that they encounter in order to make meaning from the world (Hall, 1997). While this strategy of approaching the world is biological, "[the] particular classifications that we use to classify out the world meaningfully...is learned" (Hall, 1997, p. 10). Therefore, while everyone forms "conceptual worlds" (Hall, 1997, p. 9) in their minds, meaning cannot be achieved without comparing and contrasting these worlds with others (Hall, 1997). These maps begin to form at an early age and are influenced by the media, family, and cultures that individuals surround themselves with.

Willinsky discusses the importance of Hall's conceptual maps in his book. In describing the educational interests that drove imperialism, Willinsky quotes, "Descartes...declared that all knowledge 'is obtained by the comparison of two or more things with each other' (p. 52)" (1998, p. 27). In explaining how explorers made sense of the New World, Descartes mentioned how the explorers used their concept maps to categorize what they observed in order to give meaning to the unknown (Hall, 1997; Willinsky, 1998). Also, Willinsky discusses how "[race] became natural history's great contribution to naming human difference" (1998, p. 162). People took what they knew about the world and compared it with what was new to form divisions and make sense of the world (Willinsky, 1998).

Students in classrooms today will listen to and observe what is being taught and form meaning based on similarities and differences between previous knowledge and new material. Teachers should have an understanding of conceptual maps so that they can understand how students will interpret information differently in order to anticipate student responses. Problems arise when teachers expect students to conform to the same understanding of information as them.

### **Meaning & Absence**

Hall explains, "meaning manifestly has to do with the relationship between what you expected to find in the first place...contrasted with what actually is in the image" (1997, p. 15). This idea is similar to conceptual maps in that individuals take what they already conceptualized and predict what they expect to learn from new experiences (Hall, 1997). When these experiences do not match predictions, new meaning is formed (Hall, 1997). This is observed in Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk when she discusses what it means for something to be "authentically African" (The Danger, 2009). The professor that raised this issue took what he knew and realized that it contradicted what he observed in her writing and made new meaning from it (The Danger, 2009).

However, along with this creation of meaning, when something is absent from an

experience, a new meaning is formed (Hall, 1997). Hall sums up this concept by stating, “absence means something and signifies as much as presence” (1997, p. 15). Adichie also discusses the concept of absence by stating, “[start] the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story” (The Danger, 2009). She observed that the absence of the Native American lives create a whole new meaning to imperialism and history.

Similar to how Adichie discusses absence changing meaning, Willinsky notes how explorers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries viewed the New World as a blank page “that awaited inscription by the West” (1998, p. 36). In viewing the New World as a blank page, the meaning formed was based upon the absence of life prior to colonialism (Willinsky, 1998). This led to the Eurocentric version of history taught today.

Just as explorers viewed the New World as a blank page, many teachers today view children as being blank slates to be filled with knowledge. Teachers need to take into account previous experiences and familial influences that children enter the classroom with since these shape the meanings created in the classroom.

### **Language & Communication**

Once individuals use their conceptual maps to analyze what is present and absent in situations, they use language and communication to share their formed meanings with others (Hall, 1997). Language covers a multitude of things, including spoken and written word, physical gestures, musical expression, and the use of clothing to express meaning (Hall, 1997). Since “[language] externalizes...the meanings that we are making of the world” (Hall, 1997, p. 11), Hall states, “...without language, meaning could not be exchanged in the world” (1997, p. 12). Therefore, without language and communication, concept maps would not be formed, which would lead to meaning not being formed (Hall, 1997).

Adichie discusses this concept when she references how John Locke used the written word to spread false claims about physical features of Africans, which included having headless bodies and breasts with eyes and mouths (The Danger, 2009). Those individuals who had not witnessed African individuals formed a schema in their minds, which would have been contradicted if they were to ever visit Africa.

Willinsky also discusses the important role that language and communication played in imperialism’s creation and spread of meaning. Willinsky states, “[naming] was to think about the world...in one’s own terms” (1998, p. 36) when he discusses the actions of early explorers of the New World. These explorers learned the names that Natives gave to objects or places and renamed them based on meanings they created of the observed objects or locations (Willinsky, 1998). This action of renaming was a gesture of ownership and superiority that imperialism brought about that devalued the lives of the Natives (Willinsky, 1998). Willinsky also discusses how the early encyclopedias were a direct representation of imperialism in that individuals in the West collected knowledge from all over and displayed it in the context of their understanding for the learned to study (1998). If individuals did not read the language of the encyclopedias, which typically were only English, French, or Spanish, then they were not given the opportunity to be educated (Willinsky, 1998).

Unfortunately, these actions of language dominating knowledge and meaning are still present in schools today in that teachers still expect students in the U.S. to learn in English and bilingual educational opportunities are rarely offered. It is in this way that the educational system

forces assimilation, spreads more singular meanings, and thus keeps the dominance of imperialism alive.

### **Conclusion**

Willinsky states, “[imperialism] does not tell the whole of students’ stories, but it does figure in what they will learn of the world” (1998, p. 8). Through analyzing how conceptual maps lead to meaning, which gets shared through language and communication, and being aware of what is present and absent in material that is presented to students, teachers can understand how students will create meanings of what they observe and are taught (Hall, 1997). In the end, teachers need to avoid forgetting the past, since learning how knowledge was formed and spread through imperialism is how they will avoid falling victim to continuing the spread of imperialism’s teachings (Willinsky, 1998).

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