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Making Community Through Educational Transformation:
An Essay Review

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Bennett, Alan. (2007). *The Uncommon Reader*. New York, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007. ISBN 978-0374280963.

Lear, Jonathan. (2008). *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. ISBN 978-0674023291.

Martin, Jane Roland. (2007). *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. ISBN 978-0742546738.

Suárez-Orozco, Carola, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova. (2008). *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. ISBN 978-0674026759.

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One evening in the spring, some friends were gathered in my apartment's little kitchen. We chatted loudly over the music as I fussed over a large pot of lentils on the stovetop. My friends and I frequently gather for home-cooked dinners in one of our homes, forming family units just for a night, eating with one another and getting some emotional sustenance for our modern urban lives.

Glancing at the recipe, I pulled the called-for can of tomato sauce from the cupboard and opened the drawer where the can opener belongs. I shuffled through the drawer's contents, but after a few moments, it became clear that the can opener was missing. Tel, my boyfriend, started to put on his jacket and said he would go buy one from the corner store. There is a little market on the corner, which is one of the things I prize about my neighborhood. We also have a library, a beautiful park, and other community

infrastructural assets within a couple of blocks.

“Wait,” I told Tel as he started to open the front door.

And then I made a declaration. It marked a small but important transformation in my life. And embarrassingly, it took at least ten minutes of overcooking the lentils before it occurred to me:

“I’ll just go borrow one from the neighbor,” I said.

So I walked out the front door and went downstairs. I knocked on a door, successfully borrowed a can opener from a neighbor, went back upstairs, finished cooking, and returned the can opener. I did not think to invite my newly acquainted neighbor to dinner. But on that evening, my neighbor and I made a first baby step of community building.

Since then, I have been grappling with this question: what does it take to build a community, beyond merely sharing can openers in emergencies?

To address this question, I turn to the curriculum of Professor Donna Kerr’s spring 2008 course at the University of Washington “Education as Transformation”. Perhaps there are elements of transformation through education that lend themselves to the study of the transformation of disconnected persons into a community. In the following pages, I draw on the four recently published books in Professor Kerr’s curriculum as lenses to examine the making of community: Alan Bennett’s *The Uncommon Reader*; Jane Roland Martin’s *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture*; Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*; and Carola Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova’s *Learning A New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*.

Alan Bennett’s *The Uncommon Reader* takes a satirical, fictional approach to the issue of educational transformation. In this novella, the Queen of England comes across a mobile library on the palace grounds as she walks her pet corgis. Out of courtesy, she exchanges introductions with the librarian and a young patron named Norman, and borrows a book. In the coming days, a string of incidents leads her to start reading, and she starts to enjoy it. As she reads one book and then another and another, she becomes thoroughly taken by a serious reading habit, despite the disapproval and bewilderment of many of her royal subjects.

Ultimately, she is transformed through reading. She engages with the characters and stories in the books. She develops relationships with the authors, albeit only through their works (personal encounters with authors prove far less rewarding). She discovers and begins to use her own creative writing voice. In the end, she abdicates the throne to write a book. This is transformation through education at its cleanest and most easily understood: an individual grows and flourishes by reading and writing. How might this apply to a larger question of transformation, where disconnected



individuals become a community?

As any author does, Bennett carefully selects the protagonist. Practically any character could be the subject of transformation through literature. Bennett chooses the Queen because she is the epitome of high status and superficial leadership in a society. Her royal status raises her well above everyone else, so she is disconnected from the rest of her society. This disconnect makes a compelling (and humorous) vehicle for exploring how transformation through reading impacts the individual as well as the community around the individual.

Importantly, it is clear that Bennett adores literature, and he wrote this novella as something of a valentine to literature. Why does Bennett love it? According to the text, his affections lie with the sharing, the commonness, and the equality in reading. In *The Uncommon Reader*, the Queen thinks:

Literature, she thought, is a commonwealth; letters a republic. . . . Books did not defer. All readers were equal, and this took her back to the beginning of her life. As a girl, one of her greatest thrills had been on VE night when she and her sister had slipped out of the gates and mingled unrecognized with the crowds. There was something of that, she felt, to reading. It was anonymous; it was shared; it was common. And she who had led a life apart now found that she craved it. Here in these pages and between these covers she could go unrecognized. (pp. 30-31)

Anonymity appeals to the Queen because to her anonymity signals shared status with the rest of her community. It would apply to any of us: anonymity means that we are not so separate from the rest of our community that we are identified as something different. In a sense, anonymity is the first step in becoming part of a community, because it is the first signal of equality. This degree of sameness must be established first, before connection can begin to occur. Bennett makes this point in the final paragraph of the book, when the Queen's reading leads her to abdicate: the ultimate act of joining her community.

In those final pages, the Queen also addresses her urge to *do* (to be active). Through her transformation, the Queen starts to understand that reading is not *doing*. It is more passive. She thinks:

Reading was not doing, that had always been the trouble. And old though she was, she was still a doer. . . . [She] wrote: "You don't put your life into your books. You find it there." (p. 101)

This is when the Queen is actually transformed. Readers of the book might be deceived into thinking that the Queen is transformed into a reader and a writer, and hence, her educational transformation is complete. This is not the case. She is transformed *through* reading and then writing. The end result of this transformation cannot be discerned from Bennett's book; it ends too soon to know. Bennett's story is a chronicle of the Queen's transformation, and not what lay before and after. However, he does begin to hint at what she has become in the final pages:

One has met and indeed entertained many visiting heads of state, some of them unspeakable crooks and blackguards. . . . One has given one's white-gloved hand to hands that were steeped in blood and conversed politely

with men who have personally slaughtered children. One has waded through excrement and gore. . . . I have at the instance of my various governments been forced to participate if only passively in decisions I consider ill-advised and often shameful. (p. 116)

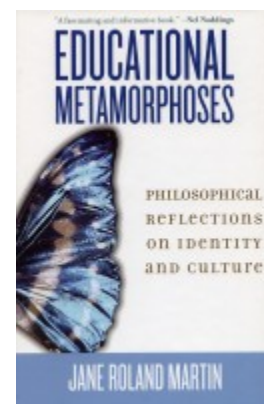
While we don't know exactly what lay ahead for the Queen, a few things are clear. The Queen knows that she is a *doer* and intends to continue to *do*. She is not abdicating to simply join the masses and become equal to the rest of her society. She is abdicating in order to write a book about political corruption and warfare. As the Queen talks about her experiences in the above quotation, Bennett hints that the Queen will take true leadership in her community. She will expose corrupt heads of state and the shame and horror of war. She will be honest, reflective, and analytical. Given that she is a *doer*, it is not unlikely that her writing will guide her to further action or calls to action to her community. In essence, this story is about the disconnect between superficial leadership, as the Queen had when the transformation began, to true leadership, as lay ahead on the Queen's path.

The Uncommon Reader is a story about the transformation from a superficial leader into a true leader and community member. The transformation into true leadership is highly complex, but involves a crucial step: the leader must identify with and belong to his or her own community. Might this transformation into true leadership be a critical step in community formation? The implications of this leadership are beyond the scope of *The Uncommon Reader*, since it is limited to only the transformation.

The Queen also models what it takes to join a community, leadership aside. In her case, it involved recognizing her own voice and values, then intentionally relinquishing her role which did not align with her values, and thirdly committing to expressing her values in a way that would benefit society. She would benefit society by using two key resources: her newfound affinity and ability for writing, and her lifelong exposure to privileged information and experiences.

To continue exploring the idea of individuals joining community, I turn to *Educational Metamorphoses: Philosophical Reflections on Identity and Culture* by Jane Roland Martin. Martin discusses how education, broadly construed, impacts identity and cultural identification. Through most of this book, she explores the transformation of individuals. These transformations occur across a wide spectrum, from infants who are acculturated to human society by their mothers, to working class people who are transformed into members of the intellectual class through education. Throughout the book, she makes the argument that education occurs everywhere, and is certainly not solely the function of schools. We are each educated and subsequently transformed in a wide variety of settings.

Martin argues that educational transformation occurs unnoticed at many stages of life, and typically requires the guidance or leadership of another to be successful. A key example is the educational transformation that takes place via mothering, as the mother



educates her infant to guide the infant's transformation into a member of human culture. Fundamentally, this is not different from the transformation of an individual to a community member. With the guidance of an established member of the community, an individual is educated until he or she is transformed into a member of the community.

The principal challenge of transformation is that often, when an individual transforms, he or she becomes stuck in a liminal space between the home culture and the new culture. He or she may be unable to fully acculturate to the new culture, but is no longer able to fully "go home." This is because loss inevitably accompanies transformation; for example, a college-educated individual may feel out of place when he or she returns to her working class family. This might be especially problematic in the formation of a new community, where strong senses of cohesion and belonging would be necessary for success. Two of Martin's examples provide insight into making community. These are examples of transformations that developed a fortitude and stability of cultural identity that was not present in many other transformations.

Both Malcolm X and Wilma Mankiller were able to undergo significant transformations into strong and full members of their communities. In fact, they became leaders, which is perhaps the ultimate signal of belonging. Prior to these transformations, they were basically individuals, and following the transformations, they were leaders of their respective communities.

Malcolm X's transformation into strong membership in his community began with a transformation into "disbelonging," when he was shunned from white culture as an adolescent. His subsequent transformations resulted in belonging—first belonging to a culture of crime, and then to his community of Black Americans, and finally belonging to a worldwide community of Islam. Ultimately, he was transformed into an extraordinarily strong leader of his community. Similarly, Wilma Mankiller was transformed into a member of her community to the point of providing leadership. "She [headed] back to the Cherokee culture that she had known as a child. By the time she arrived there she was not simply the Cherokee woman she proudly calls herself. She was a Native American activist" (p. 109). Eventually, she became the chief of the Cherokee. Like Malcolm X's story, this was a transformation of an individual without a sense of belonging, into an extraordinarily strong member of a community. Wilma Mankiller and Malcolm X are models for the successful transformations that individuals need to undergo to become full members of a community, wherein they avoid getting "stuck" in a liminal space between cultures, and become fully acculturated to the point of leadership.

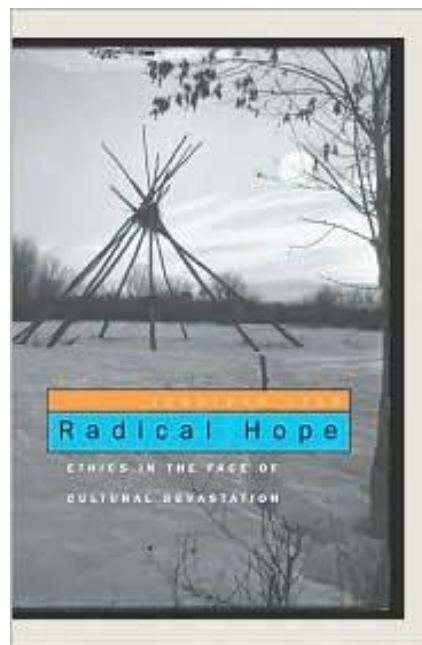
As Martin discusses in the final chapter of her book, "Circulating the Gift," the other crucial step in a successful transformation is for the transformed to pass on the gift of transformation through education to members of their respective communities. Once people are members of a community, they should go back to their homes and educate others to welcome them into the community as well. An excellent example of this is Alcoholics Anonymous, which is an intentionally constructed community:

Alcoholics Anonymous [is] a prime instance of gift giving, on the one hand because its teachings "are free, a literal gift" and on the other because the twelfth and last step that its members take to recovery is "an

act of gratitude: recovered alcoholics help other alcoholics when called upon to do so.” (p. 134)

Martin uses this example to illustrate the point of how newly transformed members of a community bring in new members, which fosters the growth and strength of the community. This example is particularly well suited to the question of community formation because Alcoholics Anonymous is an orchestrated community with a clear history, thus providing a simple model for community-building, relative to complex, longstanding cultures.

Of course, other communities have much longer, more complex histories. Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* is a study of such a community. In this philosophical work, Lear explores the issue of cultural survival under threat of destruction. For the vehicle for this exploration, he chose a man named Plenty Coups, who was the chief of the Crow nation during the time that the Crow were forced onto reservations and suffered the devastation of their cultural traditions at the hands of the United States. We can learn from the Crow that even in the face of the worst possible cultural devastation, it is possible to survive and even thrive into the future. What is necessary is a set of cultural resources, or concrete imaginative concepts, to carry the community through the transformation. Imaginative resources are fundamental to any culture, and provide the foundation for the culture’s existence even in the face of dramatic transformation. Plenty Coups also provided the leadership necessary to apply those imaginative resources to the challenges at hand.



The Crow were an existing culture that underwent significant changes due to external forces. They were confined to a reservation and no longer fought enemy tribes over territorial borders, as they had previously. The concept of borders and a particular style of warfare had been central to their culture, and the loss of these concepts seemed contemporaneous with the loss of their culture. However, to abbreviate a complex story and analysis, the Crow had some imaginative resources that allowed the culture to survive despite the loss of these concepts. Plenty Coups, as their leader, used these imaginative resources as concrete, stable guideposts to lead the Crow people during the tumultuous process of transformation. For example, when Plenty Coups was a boy, he had a dream and shared his dream with the elders for interpretation, a regular cultural practice. The narrative of the dream was believed to be prophetic, and the interpretation of the dream provided a stable foundation during the Crows’ transformation. Through the decades of the transformation, Plenty Coups persistently applied the narrative of the dream to events

and experiences in reality, providing meaning and continuity through the extraordinary challenges.

Everything was stripped from the Crow culture except for a few exceptionally strong and useful imaginative resources. Through this historical example, we are able to understand what is most fundamental and crucial to their culture's existence. Nearly every custom and cultural practice was ripped from the Crow, but they survived by relying on a few imaginative resources. In essence, this means that in order for a culture to exist, it needs strong and useful imaginative resources.

For a vibrant culture, it is traditionally the task of the older generation to adapt the culture's ideals to current challenges and to pass those ideals on to the next generation. But in the period 1870-1940, the Crow tribe went through such a collective disruption that there was no way to pass on those ideals in an unproblematic way. It was in this context that Plenty Coups drew on traditional tribal resources—the chickadee—to . . . [give] the tribe the possibility of drawing on a traditional ideal that would help them endure a loss of concepts. (pp. 140-141)

There are two key points in this quotation. The first point is that every culture needs imaginative resources, such as myths, narratives, practices, symbols, and the like; and they will function as the foundation of the community. The Crow's history shows that the manifestation of these resources may change over time. For example, the *coup stick*, a symbolic weapon used to demarcate borders, becomes obsolete after the Crow are confined to a reservation and no longer fight their historical enemies. Then, when Plenty Coups attends a United States ceremonial burial of the Unknown Soldier in 1921, he lays down his coup stick at the site of the grave as a symbolic gesture. (p. 33) Despite the coup stick's obsolescence in terms of its customary use, he is able to use the object as a conceptual resource, which endured through the destruction of its customary use.

The second point is that a culture needs leadership to exist and survive. In the quotation above, Lear notes that traditionally, the leaders are the older generation, who adapt the culture's ideals to current challenges and then pass those ideals on to the younger generation. This traditional kind of leadership was impossible for the Crow during their turbulent transformation. Plenty Coups has the traditional leadership title of chief, but he truly and effectively supplies leadership to the Crow by providing stability and meaning with the culture's imaginative resources. He applies these resources to each step of an incredibly complex and devastating transformation, out of which the Crow emerge practically unrecognizable, but fundamentally the same, due to the continuity of a few imaginative resources. This suggests that an element necessary in community formation is leadership. A community can have plenty of concepts and ideals, but without effective leadership, they are useless. Leadership can take the traditional form of elders passing on ideals to a younger generation, or it can take the form of an innovative individual who is able to provide meaning and concepts to his or her community by applying existing imaginative resources to new challenges.

In contrast to cultures such as the Crow that must undergo transformation as a group, immigrants must often face the task of joining a new community on their own. Carola Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, and Irina Todorova's *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society* looks at the question of what happens to young immigrants after they arrive in a new culture. It is the report of a five-year study conducted on a large sample of newly arrived immigrant students in the United States. The researchers explored the impacts of school environment, mentorship, and social networks on the students' educational achievement and experiences, and also documented narratives of a sample of students over five years, in order to capture the experiences of declining, low, improving, and high achievers.

Immigration is an intensely social process that ideally involves a healthy synergy among newly arrived families, their communities, and established institutions in the host society. (p. 87)

This set of ideals provides immigrant students with a sense of belonging and community that allows them to succeed in school. The following case studies provide a lens through which to view the question of community formation.

Rosette, a Haitian immigrant, has had an extremely difficult young life, fraught with violence, tumultuous family relationships, and the challenge of immigration. (p. 271) She manages to develop a sense of community by joining with other Haitian youth in the Haitian Club at her school. Here she feels that she belongs and even takes a leadership role, with activities related to Haitian culture such as food, music, and dance. As reported in the book, peers and friends provide for new immigrants a sense of belonging and acceptance, and also "tangible help with homework assignments, language translation, and orientation to school." (p. 79) Rosette was able to successfully transform into a community member and ultimately improve in school because of the opportunity to foster a sense of commonality with her Haitian American peers. Many young immigrants are isolated from their peers and never feel part of a community because of a lack of emphasis on commonality and shared experiences.

The other key to successful community engagement is guidance and leadership. Since the focus of the study was immigrant youth, the leadership often came from adult mentors. Organized, supervised activities provided by mentors build a sense of community among immigrant students. An example of the opposite is Marieli. (pp. 224-225) She was highly engaged in two communities with her peers: soccer and church. In fact, her sense of community was fairly strong, and she had peer and adult support from these communities. However, she did not succeed academically. In addition to other factors, these communities lacked leadership that pushed Marieli and other members of the communities to achieve their dreams. The soccer teammates do not push one another to



achieve their dreams. In addition, Marieli harbors anger towards adults in general, who are would-be leaders that could have guided her towards academic success. Marieli's experiences are examples of how communities of youth require leadership that promotes academic achievement in order for the youth to succeed in school.

It is clear from every case study in *Learning a New Land* that a sense of community is essential for people to succeed. This is clear in the many students in the study who were unsuccessful in school due to a lack of mentorship and connection, and those who thrived because of the support of others. Community is not only useful when we suddenly realize we need can openers; it is necessary sustenance for humans. We require community; we thrive on community.

The transformation of a non-community into a community is clearly a complex process. Surely, it would be nice if a mobile library were set up in front of our apartment building, and each of my neighboring tenants was transformed into dedicated community leaders as the Queen was in Bennett's novella. However complex the real process is, these four texts are helpful in understanding how to build community in several ways. Bennett, Martin, Lear, Suarez Orozco, and Todorova suggest that the makings of a community include some mechanism for bringing others into the community, a set of strong cultural resources or commonalities, and the respective transformations of individuals into community members. At the heart of each of these elements is leadership.

Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco and Irina Todorova show us that to form a community, it is necessary to emphasize a sense of commonness among the community members, like the young Haitian immigrant who thrived when she had a group of peers from her home country. This is essentially the same idea as Lear's exploration of the Crow's cultural resources, which carried them through the devastation of their culture. Communities need something at their core to exist, and leadership is crucial to the maintenance of this core. A leader, like Plenty Coups or like an enthusiastic young immigrant who leads her club at school, provides the critical service of perpetuating these cultural resources, and translating them so that they can exist in new and unfamiliar environments. Leadership is also central to bringing others into the community. Martin framed this as "circulating the gift." This is similar to Lear's explanation of the continuation of culture from the older generation to the younger one. Finally, community formation requires that individuals are transformed from individuals into community members. As Martin writes, educational transformation is everywhere, and this would be yet another iteration of the transformations that make up our lives. In order to transform, we are guided by a leader or another guiding presence, whether it is a mentor or the friends we might find in books.

Although a strong and lasting community likely cannot be sustained with a can opener as our sole cultural resource, perhaps the dedication of one transformed individual can transform a disjointed neighborhood into a community.

About the Reviewer

Kanna Hudson is a graduate student in the University of Washington's Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. She works in planning and evaluation for educational and other types of organization, and also works individually with high school and college students in planning their educational futures. In addition, she offers consulting and presentations on the "millennial generation," or the generation currently in their teens and twenties, to business and education audiences. She may be reached at kmhudson@u.washington.edu.



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