We Are What We Teach: American Studies in the K-16 Classroom

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American Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 2, June 2008, pp. 443-453 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/aq.0.0010

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We Are What We Teach:
American Studies in the K-16 Classroom

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American studies is in part characterized by long-standing debates over what the field is, was, or can be, but such debates are temporarily resolved the moment we each enter the classroom to actually teach it. We may introduce the contours and history of those disciplinary debates in our courses, but when we stand before our students on that very first day of class, we are pressed to start teaching American studies in a way that makes the most sense to us individually. Whatever academic department or grade level we may call home, if we consider ourselves to be American studies teachers, then our particular syllabus and our teaching style in effect become American studies for the students sitting in that room during that semester. Given this shared experience, it is surprising that our field’s penchant for asking “What is American studies?” does not lead us more often to the related question, “How do you teach American studies?” Both questions, of course, raise the specter of having to define a discrete methodology for a field that may or may not have a method. Both questions also oblige us to draw distinct boundaries between what American studies is and what it decidedly is not. But because the question “How do you teach American studies?” necessarily focuses the discussion around concrete classroom practice rather than abstract conceptualization, it
can bluntly illuminate both the possibilities and the limitations of our branch of learning.

Three recently published books have significantly advanced this discussion by laying out practical approaches to teaching American studies in the K-16 classroom. All three books share a common view of what American studies is: the interdisciplinary study of identity, community, and culture. They also agree that American studies is taught most effectively when teachers collaborate and when students find the material relevant to their everyday lives. Taken together, these three books are noteworthy for both their presentation of innovative pedagogical strategies and their conviction that American studies can act as an agent of social change in classrooms and communities.

*American Identities: An Introductory Textbook* is the product of a university-secondary school collaboration that began in Boston more than a decade ago. In 1996, administrators at University of Massachusetts, Boston, asked the American studies department to develop an introductory American studies course that would meet a general education requirement for all entering students, regardless of their major, and help acculturate them to college-level work. Three American studies faculty members, Lois Rudnick, Judith Smith, and Rachel Rubin, consequently teamed up with Carol Siriani, a social studies teacher at Cambridge Rindge and Latin High School (CRLS), to create “American Identities.” This interdisciplinary course was designed to serve both undergraduates at UMass and CRLS seniors who could take the class for college credit. The first incarnation of “American Identities” was taught in 1997, and the story of its development is recounted in a 2002 *American Quarterly* article, “Teaching American Identities,” written by the four instructors along with teaching assistant Eric Goodson. In that article, the authors announced that a course reader was being assembled for publication by Blackwell Publishers, and that text appeared in 2006, edited by Rudnick, Smith, and Rubin. An accompanying Instructor’s Guide is available for download at the Blackwell Web site (www.blackwellpublishing.com/rudnick/); a print copy is provided to instructors who adopt the text.

*American Identities* is an anthology of primary and secondary sources that focuses on the question of how “American” has been defined by different people at different moments in history since World War II. The collected readings include works of journalism, poetry, fiction, memoir, oral history, and songwriting placed side by side with essays written by scholars from the fields of history, sociology, economics, and cultural studies. As a whole, the reader is meant to encourage students to “explore the powerful individual and social dynamics that shape family, ethnic, class, gender, sexual, and racial experiences
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and that form national and transnational identities” (xiii). What distinguishes this anthology, in addition to its rich multidisciplinary content, is its commitment to making American studies relevant to students’ everyday lives. Both the substance of the readings and the accompanying study questions for each passage encourage students to actively reflect on their own process of identity formation. By foregrounding this line of inquiry, American Identities strives to overcome a common challenge for teachers of history—how to convince students that their present-day lives are actually connected to “history and historical forces” (4).

To make the study of history feel less alienating, the editors have created numerous opportunities for students to situate themselves and their families within larger historical frameworks. Ultimately, American Identities wants to teach students to become “cultural and historical analysts of their own texts” and to “develop the means to more fully assess and shape their own dearly held American dreams” (4). To this end, the original “American Identities” course on which the book is based requires students to produce a three-generation family history project. The project includes a time line that links significant family stories to relevant historical events that are discussed in the text, as well as a twenty- to twenty-five-page family history narrative. This engaging assignment is detailed at length in the 2002 American Quarterly article and in the Instructor’s Guide (with excellent student examples to boot), but the editors stress that their text can be used in a variety of ways in the classroom even without assigning the family history project. To be sure, the collection can stand alone as a valuable sourcebook in an introductory American studies course, although, as with any anthology, it has intrinsic strengths and limitations.

The book is organized into five sections; the introductory and concluding parts bookend three sections, each covering distinct historical time periods from 1945 to 2000. Part I, “Identity, Family, and Memory,” provides students with a theoretical framework for approaching the subsequent readings. Particularly helpful for this purpose is the very first reading, “Identities and Social Locations,” by Gwyn Kirk and Maro Okazawa-Rey. This passage introduces students to the idea that identity formation is an ongoing process that is shaped by both individual choices and broader social forces. Kirk and Okazawa-Rey describe three levels of social relations that influence our identity formation: the micro, meso, and macro-global levels. At the micro level, we identify ourselves in a way that feels the most comfortable to us (e.g., I am male, heterosexual, middle class), and we organize our daily activities around those preferences. At the meso level, other people try to “categorize us and determine their
relationship to us” by discerning how we fit into an immediate community, be it at school, at work, or even on the street (11). The macro or global level refers to larger social constructions of difference (i.e., gender, race, class) that serve to assign power and privilege and to maintain a particular social order. The process of negotiating these three levels of relations places each of us in a particular “social location,” and from this location, “we are forced to differentiate our inclinations, behaviors, self-definition, and politics from how we are classified by larger societal institutions” (15). American Identities shrewdly structures student inquiry around this concept. From the start, students must consider how these levels have influenced their own identity formations. This first chapter effectively introduces students to the notion that identity is shaped by forces within and outside themselves, and it gives them a framework for analyzing the diverse documents they will proceed to read.

One of the major strengths of American Identities is the way in which its selection of documents invites students to make meaningful connections among different expressions of identity and social location. For example, the section on “Family Migrations, Urban and Suburban,” from 1940 to 1960, juxtaposes Chicago blues songs by Bo Diddley, Muddy Waters, and Jimmy Reed with excerpts from Jack Agueros’s memoir “Halfway to Dick and Jane: A Puerto Rican Pilgrimage” and Philip Roth’s novel Goodbye, Columbus. Part III, “War and Social Movements, 1960–1975,” includes the “Port Huron Statement” produced by Students for a Democratic Society, the “Proclamation” issued by the Indians of All Tribes upon their occupation of Alcatraz Island, and the “13-Point Program and Platform” written by the Puerto Rican activist group the Young Lords Party. The text’s study questions adeptly guide students through analysis of individual readings and help them relate selections to one another. One question, for example, asks students to compare how National Organization for Women cofounder Pauli Murray and National Farmworker Association organizer Jessie Lopez De La Cruz each envision the role women should play in social movements. Another question invites students to contrast the lyrics to James Brown’s “Say It Loud (I’m Black and Proud)” with “We Shall Overcome” and other songs of the civil rights movement by reflecting on “what is similar and what is new and different” in Brown’s song (168). In Part IV, “A Postindustrial and Global Society, 1975–2000,” students are encouraged to connect three songs from Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska album to the broader historical context of corporate restructuring, a topic that is discussed in a previous passage written by two political economists.

While the editors skillfully place the various documents in dialogue with one another and with students’ individual lives, there remain several notable
silences in this book-length conversation about identity in the postwar United States. For one, conservative voices are highlighted in just two chapters. There is one chapter on “The New American Right” that features an excerpt from *Suburban Warriors*, Lisa McGirr’s study of grassroots political culture in Orange County during the 1960s and 1970s. Another section on “Marriage and Family” includes an extract from Kristin Luker’s *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* that contrasts the social backgrounds of self-described pro-life and pro-choice activist women. In effect, two chapters out of forty-nine in *American Identities* offer a conservative perspective on what “American” means, though arguably this ratio reflects much of the scholarship produced in American studies today. Such silences grow even louder in a later section on “Multicultural America,” in which none of the three included documents alludes to the fierce debates multiculturalism has ignited in conservative circles. The role of religion in constructing social location is similarly underrepresented in the reader, as is the role of regionalism—the number of first-person accounts coming out of California and New York conspicuously outweighs southern and midwestern voices. An instructor could easily provide students with supplementary readings to fill these gaps, although the book’s current organization does raise the question of its ready adaptability to secondary and university classrooms in different parts of the United States. Still, *American Identities* does an estimable job of showcasing some of the central questions and approaches American studies practitioners employ in the interdisciplinary study of identity. As a text that is expressly designed to introduce high school and first-year college students to the field, the reader effectively converges on a foundational skill in American studies: the ability to make meaningful connections across time, space, and genre while reading different cultural documents.

Another foundational skill in American studies is the ability to write well, and whereas *American Identities* primarily tackles the challenging job of teaching students how to read culture, two other books undertake the equally difficult task of teaching students how to write about culture. *Writing America: Classroom Literacy and Public Engagement* and *Writing Our Communities: Local Learning and Public Culture* both have their roots in the Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) program, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities that aims to build links between K-16 classrooms and local communities. The original NEH grant was developed in 1999 by Mimi Dyer and Sarah Robbins in collaboration with a team of five teachers in Georgia. As described on the KCAC Web site (http://kcac.kennesaw.edu/), the main goal of the program is to “develop a humanities-based, writing-centered model for studying how local/regional
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Communities in the United States are formed through such shared texts as literature, language, architecture, social events, geography, literacy practices, and governmental action.” The program promotes collaborative research that links together students, teachers, and members of the community in the study of how and why communities form in different times and places. KCAC was first implemented in numerous K-16 schools across Georgia, and the program is currently being piloted by teachers in California, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. For instructors interested in integrating the teaching of writing with community-based learning, these two books offer a variety of classroom-tested activities that are readily adaptable to different grade levels.

Writing Our Communities collects together twelve lesson plans taken from a mix of elementary, secondary, and university classrooms that all focus on the “interdisciplinary, writing-based exploration of American communities” (xv). Each lesson follows from the principle that writing can serve as a “crucial tool for creating communities, in the classroom and beyond” (xvi). In line with the original KPAC objective, activities are designed to engage students in recovering and interpreting community texts (“keeping”) even as they produce their own texts (“creating”). Each chapter is authored by a different teacher, who first describes the lesson objectives and instructional sequence and then provides an example of student work as well as a teacher reflection on the lesson. Every chapter ends with a series of suggestions as to how instructors might adapt the lesson to a different classroom setting.

Taken as a whole, Writing Our Communities is especially useful as a sourcebook for instructors interested in designing writing assignments that deviate from the typical research paper or response paper format. For example, in her “Viewfinders” activity, secondary history teacher Gerri Hajduk requires students to take photographs of local sites that “depict change, tension, historic significance, or community icons” (22). After choosing one photograph that best exemplifies the topic of public memory, students write a caption and brief explanation of what the photograph shows and why they selected it, and then they present their snapshot to the entire class. All of the photos are subsequently displayed together in the classroom in order to give students a “more complete picture of where [they] live” and to visually reinforce the idea that “academic research is a cumulative, ongoing process of knowledge building with public significance” (26). For her “Hometown History” project, secondary English teacher Peggy Maynard Corbett has students interview a resident who has lived in the community his or her entire life and who was born prior to 1940. Students record and transcribe the interview and also write a first-person narrative from the interviewee’s point of view. A team of
student volunteers then pores over the collected narratives and proceeds to write a documentary film script about farm, school, church, and community life in their hometown. Other activities described in *Writing Our Communities* involve students in creative composition: poetry composed in the imagined voice of displaced persons, readers' theater scripts drawn from works of historical fiction, personal essays about students’ own sense of place. Analytical writing is also encouraged: research papers that explore the question “What defines the culture of a city?” and PowerPoint presentations that analyze the local history of residential development using Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* as a theoretical model. For instructors interested in creating their own community-based writing activities, the afterword to *Writing Our Communities* helpfully includes a series of “frames and questions” to guide curriculum development. These prompts challenge teachers to “view underexamined histories as fruitful paths to critical literacy,” and to organize lessons around the question “What can we learn about the identity of a culture, a society, a place, or even a person by examining what is chosen to preserve or keep?” (94–95).

*Writing America* similarly brings together teachers from different grade levels to discuss the ways in which they have implemented KCAC principles in their curriculum. This collection promotes the teaching of “social literacy” in the schools, and it is grounded in the belief that “public” education should engage students in “public work” (9). The book makes the case that students develop social literacy when they are invited to make meaningful contributions to the communities that exist both inside and outside of their classroom. To demonstrate this, *Writing America* presents readers with a series of activities designed to “[invite] teachers and students to see themselves both as cultural stewards and cultural creators, active composers of a community identity” (1). The twelve essays, each authored by a different teacher, are organized into two sections: Part I showcases lessons that bring the community into the classroom, and Part II features projects that put students and teachers in contact with the outside community. Every essay ends with an “analysis and implications” section in which teachers reflect on both the activity and their own professional growth.

The first part of *Writing America* emphasizes the impact community studies can have on classroom culture, with contributors recounting how the social space of their classroom was affected by the study of community. For example, in her essay “A City Too Busy to Reflect? Public History, Controversy, and Civic Engagement,” Kennesaw State University professor LeeAnn Lands describes how she tried to push students in her introductory public history
course to engage an especially contentious community issue. Knowing that Atlanta would soon be playing host to the controversial Without Sanctuary exhibit, a collection of lynching photographs assembled by James Allen, Lands had her students explore how they would mount their own exhibit of these disturbing images. After studying Allen’s primary materials, which were already available online, the students had to plan an exhibit that would “create a dialogue within the community about our city’s and region’s past history of racial violence and, in turn, to confront its legacy” (55). Students generated a list of questions they would want answered by the exhibit, which in turn led them to articulate central themes to guide their design. They then decided which photographs would be used, how much interpretation would be provided to the public, where in Atlanta the exhibit would be installed, and what the floor plan would look like. Lands notes that this process forced students to confront not only the controversial material, but also their own tendency to shy away from conflict and polite disagreement in the classroom. In experiencing their collective discomfort with this project, students learned how difficult but important it can be for public historians to foster community dialogue.

Activities that move students out of the classroom and into the community are the focus of Part II of Writing America. Here, contributors reflect on what happens when students and teachers “extend their cultural work beyond typical classroom boundaries, by purposefully disseminating their learning to public audiences and actively participating in civic life” (97). Each of these “public literacy” projects combines community research with public writing in the service of teaching students how civic action can effect social change. An example of such a project is the team research activity implemented by English teacher Traci Blanchard at her suburban Atlanta high school. Blanchard’s students were tasked with identifying and researching an issue that was “having an impact on our local community,” and then proposing a “legitimate public response to the issue” (104). In the course of their research, students conducted interviews and onsite visits, all the while keeping in mind how a real-world audience would benefit from this research. Students could present their findings in a format of their choosing, provided it somehow incorporated text and graphics and did not take the form of a traditional research paper. Student topics included school budget cuts, laws concerning the sale of cigarettes to minors, and the impact of 9/11 on the city’s economy. For their final projects, students produced letters to local lawmakers and school board members, Web sites, PowerPoint presentations, and video documentaries. One Web site graphically described the problem of pollution in the Chattahoochee River and outlined...
steps residents could take to improve water quality. A student-produced video documentary chronicled a grassroots effort to save the local rock climbing area from sale to a subdivision developer (this project proved particularly rewarding for the student research team; in the end, the sale was blocked and a local climbing association successfully purchased the property).

The essays by Lands and Blanchard are representative of Writing America as a whole in that they illustrate concrete ways instructors can teach students to be “cultural stewards” and “cultural creators” of their communities. However, providing teachers with pedagogical strategies is just one of the aims of this important collection: Writing America also aspires to tell a larger story about “American studies scholarship at work” (157). As Cristine Levenduski points out in her afterword, the key leaders and advisors of KCAC over the years have all shared American studies “training, experience, and inclination,” and each of the teachers who contributed to this volume explicitly drew on the field of American studies in formulating their core questions about community and in emphasizing the public dimension of their classroom projects (158). Writing America thus serves as a kind of testament to American studies as both a scholarly mode of inquiry and a remarkably effective teaching practice. Indeed, a recurring theme in these essays is the powerful way community studies transformed students and teachers into leaders, writers, and scholars of their own community. What facilitated this transformation, we are told, was a curriculum that integrated the “tools and frameworks of American studies” (5). When teachers combined community-based learning with American studies approaches, their students developed social literacy and came to appreciate what it means to participate in civic life. We are therefore invited to read Writing America as “evidence of the success of American studies as a field whose practitioners aim to make scholarship relevant to the world beyond the academy” (157).

Levenduski’s concluding remarks in Writing America suggest a helpful prompt for considering all three of the books reviewed in this essay: what larger story do they collectively tell about the field of American studies? One story that clearly emerges concerns the potential for American studies to act as an agent of social change. American Identities teaches students to produce self-knowledge and acquire a richer understanding of how they fit into a broader cultural context, while in KCAC classrooms, students produce community knowledge and develop a greater awareness of civic responsibility. All three texts in effect conceive of American studies as a pedagogy of private and public transformation. In one sense, this particular characterization of American studies strongly justifies its place in the K-16 curriculum.
Then again, this view of the field exposes one of its core quandaries: how can American studies make a convincing case for its pedagogical value in an educational climate dominated by the standards and accountability movement? Conventional wisdom among educational policymakers today is that student learning should be uniform, quantifiable, and consequential for schools that do not show results in order to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. This philosophy already pervades K-12 public schools, and it is increasingly driving efforts to reform higher education. Yet many of the learning outcomes discussed in the pages of these three books—identity formation, community building, cultural stewardship—do not lend themselves to easy quantification. The editors and contributors supply ample anecdotal evidence that these outcomes can be achieved, but unfortunately many advocates of standards-based education tend to spurn teacher testimony in favor of results that can be concretely measured. What to do about this quandary?

One possible response is to argue forcefully that American studies should be seen as a pedagogical approach that can help students learn required skills and content. Because it engages students with material that is immediately relevant to their everyday lives, American studies can motivate inquiry while fostering multiple literacies and still addressing content standards. All three of these books effectively make this point; American Identities, after all, successfully fulfilled general education requirements at UMass Boston, and the KCAC programs infused community studies in such a way that teachers could still meet national, state, and district curriculum guidelines. Along the way, students honed their critical reading and writing skills. Because standards typically dictate what should be taught but not necessarily how to teach it, American studies can thus be safely touted as process rather than prescription. This way teachers would not be held accountable for demonstrating quantifiably that their students have “learned” American studies at the end of the semester. If in the course of using an American studies approach, however, teachers help students develop social literacy, or acquire a better sense of their own social location, well, then, all the better.

Consideration of these larger issues makes it clear that trying to answer the question “How do you teach American studies?” can have consequences for the field itself. If we are what we teach, then it seems worthwhile to talk more about how we teach. These three books attest to the value of engaging in such a conversation. The teachers who contributed to them were compelled to clarify their methods, materials, assessments, and outcomes, and, in so doing, they were obliged to define what American studies really means in their classroom. Their answers are sure to influence our epistemology as much as they inspire our pedagogy.
Notes