

***Dialogue in Places of Learning: Youth Amplified in South Africa*, by Adam Cooper**

Routledge. 2017. Routledge Research in International and Comparative Education. pp. 116.
ISBN: 9781138600218

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How do young people learn across educational spaces? How do they understand the effects of a past they have yet to fully transcend? How do contextual factors influence aspirations, frustrations and agency in youth? These are some of the questions Adam Cooper deals with in his book *Dialogue in Places of Learning: Youth Amplified in South Africa*. Weaved together through research, theoretical analysis and storytelling, Cooper's multi-sited ethnography traverses the spaces and places of learning occupied by youth from Rosemary Gardens as they negotiate their identities in relation to the grammars of belonging in the "new" South Africa.

While Cooper's interest is specifically in notions of dialogue, language and learning, the text articulates the intimate connections between the codification of belonging through embodied practices (including language and modes of expression) and the ways that this codification affirms and reproduces the deeply-rooted inequalities that continue to impact the social landscape in Rosemary Gardens, Cape Town, and South Africa more broadly. It is evident that the past is always present in schools, communities and social assemblages. Moreover, the effects of particular forms of social engineering remain acutely visible in contemporary South Africa. However, the notion of *dialogue* that is so central to Cooper's argument is also visible in the dialogic relationship between past and present: if we are to understand the present as constantly in dialogue with the past, the space for understanding continuity, change and disruption opens up much further than a position of either assuming the past is no



Education as Change
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>
Volume 22 | Number 3 | 2018 | #5201 | 6 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/5201>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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more or that it remains an overly determining force in people's lives. This is deftly demonstrated in the text, which does not collapse into stereotype in its depiction of one of South Africa's marginalised communities.

This review will briefly outline the progression of *Dialogue in Spaces of Learning* in order for future readers to understand the nuanced approach taken in constructing the narrative. From there I will pick up on three points of interest emerging from the text and relate these to the broader context in which Cooper's work is located.

The pertinence of the text draws specifically from its position at the intersection of several disciplinary fields. Critical youth studies has particular salience in the global South, yet is still an emergent field requiring a sophisticated integration of what is an overwhelmingly Northern body of work into new contexts confronting challenges both local and global in nature. This interlinks with urban studies and work on space and place which is critical to the formulation of Cooper's argument about the contextual nature of learning. Finally, a broad range of literature on education, linguistic education and the cultural politics of schooling informs an analysis of institutions and spaces of engagement for young people, alongside critical scholarship on the experiences of marginalised youth in schools.

As identified above, the book's central focus is on how young people learn across educational and social spaces. Chapter 1 begins by setting out the economic and socio-historic context of the book, presenting both descriptive analyses of the community and research sites as well as providing key statistical context on issues such as income and poverty in South Africa. Cooper addresses the trickiness of using racial categories as part of introducing the setting of Rosemary Gardens, a historically "coloured," working-class neighbourhood located on the Cape Flats in Cape Town. The introduction itself is preceded by personalised descriptions of important research participants who contribute to the three sites that the young participants inhabit in the text: the school, the DoodVenootSkap hip-hop crew and the Youth Amplified radio show.

The first section of the book (chapters 2, 3 and 4) presents the theoretical and conceptual grounding of *Dialogue in Places of Learning*, slowly building a rich context through bringing the relationship between Cooper's knowledge framework and the research into sharper focus. Chapter 2 historicises issues of language and race in Cape Town, linking these to the spatial engineering of the colonial and apartheid city, as well as the legacy of forced removals and racial segregation. The linkages between language, economic status and political authority are thoughtfully teased out as a way of locating the research context within historic and ongoing developments. This narrows in focus in Chapter 3, which looks at language in education and how this exists in a reciprocal relationship to the linguistic ideologies that exist within a given society. The spatially contextualised nature of language is brought out in relation to the research sites as well as the broader cultural and educational registers that they

borrow from and dialogue with. Chapter 4 then moves into a discussion of the places where learning takes place, and the way that social and educational relations unfold in the three sites and produce them as “places.” Throughout these chapters the research context and participants begin to be introduced and located within the ethnography to follow.

This provides an essential foundation for the second section, which moves into the three research sites and discussions of each. Chapter 5 engages with the class and schooling context and the way that schools, teachers and peers teach learners things about the value of the codes they use and how these become “tradeable” in the market of cultural, social and linguistic capital. This is contextualised in relation to the historic and scholarly analysis presented in the first section. Chapter 6 presents Cooper’s interactions with hip-hop crew DoodVenootSkap, who work with learners from Rosemary Gardens High School (RGHS) and youth in the community. The crew attempts to subvert discourses of inferiority, lack and criminality imposed on them through creative navigation of the alternative, global linguistic economy of hip-hop, dialoguing with its South African antecedents such as Black Noise, and the space of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and grassroots organising. Chapter 7 then addresses the space of the Youth Amplified radio show established by Cooper and students from RGHS and peers from three other schools from different socioeconomic contexts in the city. This chapter is particularly illuminating in drawing together previous chapters’ focus on the community of Rosemary Gardens in *relation* to other experiences of class, race, space and schooling. It provides a critical and nuanced snapshot of how the dialogues learners partake in in school and community spaces transpose out of those spaces into dialogues about/with self and Other, in the context of a highly unequal and stratified society.

Chapter 8 consolidates the preceding section by generating a discussion across the three spaces and analysing emergent themes and ideas relating to how youth learn, the elements that enable and constrain learning and participation, and the broader factors that impact what is accepted and discarded in the dialogic production of knowledge and status in the three research contexts. The final chapter links this back to the original theoretical and conceptual literature presented in the opening section, demonstrating the relationship of the research to global debates in education, language and youth studies.

The value of *Dialogue in Places of Learning* is precisely the journey that Cooper metaphorically and physically sets out on in following youth through the places they learn in. This lends the text a sense of motion through space and place. In so doing Cooper demonstrates the profoundly spatialised nature of our identities and experiences, providing a holistic image of the participants and the way they navigate the world through language and dialogue. Language should be viewed as a filter through which bigger social, economic and political dynamics are expressed, negotiated and transformed in encounters with self and Other. How young people

construct their identities, use agency (whether for better or worse—the text neither valorises nor demonises youth’s capacity for agency) and engage in conversation with the world becomes a crucial insight to experiences at the interface of the new South Africa. The book is also an interesting contribution to the disciplinary fields it straddles for the way it traverses their epistemological foundations without being overdetermined by any particular one.

Three key points I wish to make relate to the findings and arguments shared in the book but also, I hope, provide pathways into and out of the text for readers and future researchers.

The first is about schooling as cultural politics. Cooper’s work is situated at the interface between the “canon” of Northern scholarship on the topic and the vast array of related work done in post-apartheid South Africa. As an aside, the dialectic relationship between North and South in knowledge production is important for the way Southern scholars destabilise universalising applications of what are considered canonical texts. This text is one example of how this is achieved. But it is also important to think about how it reflects a wider relationship between youth and communities who are, in one way or another, located at the peripheries of global capitalism, and what this looks like in different contexts. The book emphasises local and national historical developments influencing the research context, but does this with an eye on the way global forces shape, respond to and are adapted to by communities. At a concrete level Cooper deploys the idea of schooling as cultural politics to identify the school as a space of “cleansing” marginalised learners of the pathologies they bring from what are perceived as dysfunctional homes and communities. Here, home and school—home and society—are constructed as oppositional; the behaviours, values and codes learned in the home context are viewed as incongruent with the successful “product” of schooling, where dominant behaviours, values and codes must be inculcated successfully in order for social mobility to occur.

The text demonstrates that young people contest, resist or assimilate into this mode of cultural reproduction, but also that they *play* with its mechanisms by negotiating behaviour and language in relation to context, without succumbing to mere mimicry. *Agency* is embedded in the way youth negotiate social and educational spaces. It is also what is lacking in canonical literature that foregrounds the power of institutions and powerful actors. Agency is not the freedom to act as one chooses, but it is certainly not passive acceptance of imposed norms and codes of conduct either. It is in fact the tension between the two, and how people negotiate that tension, that reveals the points of rupture and transformation in particular social systems and institutions. This is a crucial contribution that is demonstrated in the stitching together of the three research sites in the book, but also a contribution that can be taken further in future research. What are the cultural politics “from below” that can mitigate against the alienation of youth in formal learning contexts? How can these be adapted into how

teachers and care workers learn to engage their charges, professionally and personally?

A second point relates to another binary that emerges from *Dialogue in Places of Learning*. This is specifically the relationality between marginalised and privileged schools within a given education system. The chapter on the Youth Amplified radio show shows the way learners at different schools interact with each other on the basis of their school identities. These identities overlay their own individual identities such that learners at historically “white” schools are seen to be “white” or “whitening” themselves due to their institutional affiliation, regardless of what race they may have historically been identified as. The complexity of racial inequality and diversity in contemporary South Africa requires nuanced, spatially diverse analyses of how young people experience conflicting notions of self and Other in the process of becoming. The alienation that Cooper identifies as an experience of his research participants is also part of the experience of more privileged youth and taken together this demonstrates a wider lack of common ground within a particular society. How schools and shared cultural and social spaces become raced and classed (or otherwise stratified and differentiated) are critical sites of research that demonstrate the way a particular *system* of schooling entrenches inequalities, rather than focusing solely on the effects of an education system on singular groups of learners and schools.

Thirdly, and drawing on Cooper’s discussion of the DoodVenootSkap crew’s relationship to a locally based NGO, it is important to interrogate how local dynamics are impacted by the particular relationship of NGOs to centres of power. As the text demonstrates, the members of DVS engage and incorporate the languages of the NGO space (such as “resilience,” “human rights” and “freedom of speech”) into their own creative and activist frames of reference. While this cannot be discussed in any detail in this review, it suffices to say that DVS were also engaged in a dialogic process of navigating their personal and creative investments in the community alongside the particular organisational orientation of the NGO that offered them a workspace and a platform. A vast critical literature exists on the status of NGOs in terms of acting in place of an organic (and often unruly) form of civil society in post-colonial contexts, reproducing forms of respectability and legitimacy as a means of accessing donor funding and support, and creating greater distance between communities and states by replacing the state’s responsibility towards pursuing greater equity for citizens.

This is not a blanket analysis at all, and NGOs do not come in a singular form, but it is something that Cooper reflects on in his own analysis and remains something that literature on NGOs and advocacy organisations—which come to be conflated with civil society—must engage with as a serious point of contention. Are NGOs a pragmatic, immediate solution that undermines wider systemic reform? Do they neutralise or co-opt expressions of dissent, anger and frustration? And how can scholars and activists engage with the institutional reality of their usefulness without

losing sight of a broader social vision in which they, desirably, become obsolete—as a result of building strong institutions and accountability to a diverse civil society?

What these points demonstrate is the myriad threads that emerge from *Dialogue in Places of Learning*, points that seem at once unrelated and yet intimately interwoven. The value of a spatial analysis of learning and dialogue is particularly that these threads emerge as relevant aspects of how learning takes place and in what context. By opting to keep to his core research focus Cooper has managed to deliver a text that has fidelity to its participants, even where it may benefit from further analyses of particular aspects identified above. Its salience comes from an awareness that reflecting on discrete components of the learning process undermines the richness of the everyday experiences that inform learning processes. Dialogue is evident throughout this text: in how learners engage with their schools and teachers to facilitate acquisition of legitimised linguistic forms; in how the DVS group interacts with the NGO, the community, and discourses of inferiority and criminality in their work; in how peers met each other in the context of a radio show where they had to navigate relationships to each other, to listeners, and to content. Understanding that dialogue and exchanges of knowledge and experience inform how we come to be and belong in the world is critical to working through the dirty, complicated and uneasy ways in which we constitute self and Other within a wider context of inequality, dynamism and change.

A final point to make pertains to the role of the author, in that Cooper's positionality functions as the spaces between the text that speak to the need to take up the challenge of “writing-from” one's own subject position—grappling with its complexities, privileges, and relationality to research participants without centring oneself in the telling—engaging, in fact, in a dialogue of its own. In order for scholarship to move beyond the fallacy of “giving voice” or “representing” some objective truth about the people we work with, this kind of reflexivity and openness to learning, on the part of researchers, is essential.

Dialogue in Places of Learning is what it names itself to be, while managing to be more than itself. It is a snapshot of life within the liminal space of a not-yet nation; a photomontage of the past in the present that looks toward the future with a sense of critical hope. It captures an important moment in the South African and global context while unearthing the stories of the kind of community that is often reduced to caricatures of deprivation and lack. Perhaps it is this that is one of its lasting contributions: the ability to engage with the facticity of young people's lives without allowing their agency, uniqueness and defiance to be reduced or valorised. It is this fluid navigation of the spaces in-between that makes this text an essential read for those interested in, as one of his participants concludes, “see[ing] through the system [to] actually beat the system” (p. 150).