Talking Beyond Schools of Education

Educational Research as Public Pedagogy

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Given the centrality of educational issues across societies, as well as the inherent accessibility of educational research in comparison to other academic fields, educational researchers are uniquely positioned to engage in forms of public pedagogy by sharing our findings with non-professional audiences (Labaree, 1998; Willinsky, 2001). By rendering our empirical work more public, educational researchers not only contribute to a more educated citizenry, but also increase the influence of educational research in political deliberation, democratic dialogue, and concrete social change. Despite its considerable value, however, public pedagogical work is viewed by many educational researchers as tangential, if not antithetical, to the mission and mandates of the profession. This disposition is often linked to the belief that the field of education is ill equipped for rigorous intellectual activity (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Lanier & Little, 1986), as well as the notion that public engagement undermines the intellectual objectivity and distance that are requisite for rigorous scientific inquiry (O’Connor, 2007; Rudalevige, 2008). For others, professional socialization and institutional barriers have eliminated public intellectual work from the realm of possibility (Hill, in press). Due to this disciplining of our professional behavior, everyday people are denied access to crucial research knowledge related to education and schooling.

In light of these conditions, this chapter explores what it means for educational researchers to embrace the role of public pedagogues. To do this, I situate my analysis within a broader tradition of public intellectual work in the American academy. I also outline specific forms of public intellectual work, supported by relevant examples, that can be taken up by educational researchers. Finally, I raise critical issues, concerns, and tensions that complicate such work.

What Is a Public Intellectual?

Despite its relative youth as a formalized term, public intellectual work is as old as the American academy. From W.E.B. Dubois’ editorship of The Crisis Magazine and attempts to serve as superintendent of African American schools in Washington, DC, to John Dewey’s anti-war activism and school reform efforts, American scholars have consistently worked beyond the walls of the university in order to intervene directly in conversations and activities related to the broader public interest. In addition to professional academics, groups like the New York Intellectuals of...
the mid-20th century represented a significant sector of university-trained intellectuals whose work as journalists, authors, and literary critics shaped both public and academic discourse (Wald, 1987).

The actual term *public intellectual* and its variants can be traced at least as far back as the mid-20th century writings of C. Wright Mills (1944) and John Dewey (1935), both of whom emphasized the need for refashioning academic work into accessible and serviceable public information. The notion of the public intellectual was later popularized by Russell Jacoby (1987) during the height of the “cultural wars” of the 1980s, when he lamented the decline of intellectual work that was accessible to an educated lay audience. Although Jacoby’s analysis focused primarily on intellectuals working outside of academe, he also critiqued university professors for producing theoretical and empirical work that was “largely technical, unreadable, and—except by specialists—unread” (p. 141). Since this historical moment, discussion of the public intellectual as a unique vocation has grown increasingly prominent within the academy and broader society.

Despite (or perhaps because of) a rapidly growing body of scholarship on the subject, there remains little consensus about what constitutes a public intellectual. A large portion of the literature has primarily focused on university professors who operate within popular media (e.g., Dyson, 1996). A smaller body of critical scholars has framed public intellectuals as politically engaged cultural workers (e.g., Giroux, 1992; Said, 1994). Still others have highlighted researchers who work within the public policy sector (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Rather than viewing these as competing definitions, each are subsumed under my broader operational definition of the public intellectual: *an individual whose intellectual production is articulated to a non-academic community*.

In the spirit of Stuart Hall (1996), my use of the term “articulate” is deliberately double-entendred, signifying both “to speak” and “to connect.” On the one hand, the public intellectual articulates (speaks) to outside communities in order to share her work with a broader audience. While this work is often within an intellectual’s area of professional training and expertise, many scholars, as detailed in the subsequent sections, produce public work within other theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological domains. On the other hand, the public intellectual’s work, as Gramsci (1973) argues, is organically articulated (connected) to a particular community and its expressed interests and concerns. As such, the character of public intellectual work is fundamentally democratic, always animated by dialogical encounters between the university and outside communities. As Borofsky (2000) argues, such an arrangement allows for scrutiny and accountability of intellectual production from the broader public. By situating traditionally private and exclusive forms of knowledge production within the reach of a broader public, educational researchers are forced to operate within a context that limits the extent to which “power elite can manipulate problems and solutions to their personal advantage” (Borofsky, 2000, p. 9).

**Locating the Public(s)**

In the most basic sense, the notion of the public intellectual is redundant, as all forms of intellectual production are invariably conducted, produced, and consumed for a literal or imagined public. Even in light of my narrowing definition, which demands a connection to non-academic communities, we must consider the ways in which all academic work reflects and informs the interests of organizations, special interest groups, and power blocs that exist outside of the university (Bourdieu, 1990; Giroux & Searls-Giroux, 2006; Readings, 1996). The critical issue for
educational researchers, then, is not to consider whether or not to engage the public, but to critically examine which publics should be addressed through our work.

In his book *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey (1927) defines a public as a group of people bound together by a set of circumstances outside their sphere of control. As Dewey argues, such circumstances produce not a single public, but multiple publics that emerge, transform, and overlap across space and time. From this stance, professional communities like the American Educational Research Association (AERA) can be viewed as one of many bona fide publics with which educational researchers can associate. Within this particular space, educational researchers engage in forms of intellectual production that address the prominent theoretical, empirical, and practical questions of particular educational subfields. Typically, academic journals, books, conferences, and policy reports provide the primary venues in which this information is disseminated and consumed. As such, communities like AERA represent a legitimate, albeit academic, public that, based on the definition provided above, does not satisfy the conditions for public intellectual work.

When considering what it means for educational researchers to engage non-academic publics, it is also necessary to consider the various spaces in which these publics are situated. For Habermas (1962) the “public sphere” represented a space where ordinary citizens could distribute information, debate ideas, and form opinions. While indispensable for understanding the various sites of bourgeois knowledge formation, Habermas’ conception of the public sphere fails to account for the ways that various groups, such as women, people of color, and the working class, are excluded from such spaces (Fraser, 1992). In order to account for this dilemma, scholars have emphasized the importance of locating alternative public and counter-public (i.e., resistant) spheres for knowledge production (e.g., Fisher, 2006; Harris-Lacewell, 2004). For educational researchers, this expanded conception of the public sphere forces us not only to locate multiple audiences, but also alternate contexts, such as the Internet, television, barbershops, and community centers, in which to engage these audiences.

**Engaging the Public(s)**

Based on the definition of the public intellectual that I have developed throughout this chapter, I outline three methods of public intellectual work for educational researchers: (a) *cultural criticism*, (b) *policy shaping*, and (c) *applied work*. This list is intended to be both descriptive and instructive, serving as a heuristic for understanding current modes of public intellectual work while outlining methods for situating future work. While this list is not (nor could it be) exhaustive, it serves as a frame for understanding the current division of labor among educational researchers who function as public intellectuals.

**Educational Researcher as Cultural Critic**

One of the most recognizable and popular forms of public intellectual work is *cultural criticism*, wherein the educational researcher draws upon research knowledge in order to discuss current events, controversial topics, or the general condition of society. Typically, the cultural critic uses outlets such as newspapers, blogs, trade publishing, radio, and television as the means by which to intervene in public discourses. By writing an op-ed, maintaining a blog, publishing a book for general audiences, or offering media punditry, scholars bring empirical insights to bear on discussions related to education and schooling. In this capacity, the cultural critic operates as a public pedagogue who educates lay audiences and non-specialists about issues within her sphere of expertise. Additionally, the cultural critic often functions as what Elshtain (2001) calls a *party*...
pooper by challenging simple solutions and common sense assumptions about public problems. Due largely to the increasing role of media culture in everyday life (Appadurai, 1996; Kellner, 1995), cultural criticism is often used interchangeably with public intellectual activity. Whereas this conflation ignores the existence of other forms of public intellectual work, it nonetheless speaks to the growing significance of the cultural critic within the public consciousness.

A key instance of educational researchers operating as cultural critics emerged during the “Ebonics controversy” of the 1990s. In 1996, the Oakland (California) School Board voted to recognize Ebonics as the “primary language” of African American children. Although the purpose of the resolution was to facilitate the development of more culturally responsive methods of teaching Standard English, it was frequently misrepresented within the popular media as an attempt to provide African American students with substandard education by teaching them to speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE). In response to this controversy, many educational researchers produced a series of widely read books, wrote op-ed columns in national newspapers, appeared on television, and testified before Congress in order to demonstrate the intended purpose of the resolution, the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy, and the legitimacy of AAVE as a coherent language system (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rickford, 1999).

Despite its effectiveness in reaching mass audiences, there are several dangers to engaging in cultural criticism. Given the fast pace and style of popular media, the cultural critic is often forced to offer her insights within narrow intellectual spaces. By forcing complex knowledge claims into 20-second sound bites or 400-word op-ed columns, accessible scholarship is often reduced to journalism, which West (2000) describes as “too simplistic, flat, or clever” (p. 344) for nuanced argumentation. Even when given adequate space, concerns about “accessibility” (often code language used by for-profit entities to disguise profit motives) compel the critic to compromise intellectual nuance and rigor for the sake of broader appeal. For example, whereas the difference between correlation and causality are critical for the researcher, such a distinction is often unimportant to the book editor or television producer for whom bold claims (i.e. alleging pure causal relationships) translate into greater public attention.

Given the commodity-driven nature of popular media, the cultural critic who gains public prominence is often transformed into what I have termed the “celebrity intellectual” rather than a public intellectual (Hill, in press). Instead of operating in the interest of a broader public, the celebrity intellectual’s presence within the public sphere serves her own pecuniary and personal interests, as well as those of profit-making entities, rather than the non-academic communities that she purports to serve. It is from this role that the educational researcher may comply with requests to provide analysis about topics outside of her realm of empirical expertise. While such a circumstance is not necessarily problematic, its danger rests in the possibility that the cultural critic will overstate or misrepresent her scholarly expertise.

Another significant (and dangerous) consequence is that the cultural critic will be coerced to misrepresent, obscure, or otherwise alter research findings. An example of this danger came in 2005, when it was revealed that conservative cultural critic and radio host Armstrong Williams was paid by the United States Education Department to promote No Child Left Behind during his broadcasts (Kurtz, 2005). As part of a 2003 agreement with the Bush administration, Williams was contracted to regularly highlight the benefits of NCLB (which Williams had publicly criticized for its failure to include voucher provisions) and to regularly interview Secretary of Education Rod Paige on his New York radio show (MediaMatters, 2005). After receiving more than $240,000 in advertising funds, Williams withdrew his critiques of NCLB and began to regularly praise the legislation, thereby shifting from cultural critic to surrogate for the Bush administration. Although Williams was not an educational researcher, and likely represents an extreme and unusual case of ethical turpitude, his scandal highlights the political and economic
pressures that can compromise public intellectual activity. These pressures also exist within traditional academic spaces, but they are particularly acute for the cultural critic, whose work has a greater potential to directly shape public opinion and decision-making regarding educational issues (Henig, 2008).

*Educational Researcher as Policy Shaper*

For many educational researchers, the most intuitive pathway to non-academic audiences is performing the role of *policy shaper*. While all forms of research have the potential to inform policy—as research studies are frequently appropriated by a range of intermediaries (e.g., policy staffers, journalists) who circulate ideas between the academic and policy domains—the policy shaper affects policy in more direct and deliberate fashion. Examples of policy shaping include advising politicians, conducting program evaluations, serving as an expert witness before legislative bodies, or working with policy research organizations. Through this work, educational researchers link relevant research knowledge to critical public policy issues. In many circles, policy shaping is seen as the most *legitimate* of all public intellectual work. While this belief can be attributed to the common perception among education researchers that the policy realm is the most efficient means by which to effect sustainable educational change, it is also linked to the frequent connection between policy work and formal networks of power (e.g., politicians, lobbying groups) and lucrative funding sources (e.g., grant money). It is for these reasons that policy shaping is at once the most acceptable and most untenable of all forms of public intellectual work.

Examples of policy shaping include Tennessee’s Project STAR, a three-phase study that examined the effects of smaller class sizes on short- and long-term student performance. The study was prompted by local parents, educators, and politicians who were interested in improving student achievement but concerned about the economic consequences of adding new classrooms and teachers. As a result, the Tennessee legislature, prompted by several individual legislators who had read an influential meta-analysis of the relationship between class size and achievement (Glass, Cahen, Smith, & Filby, 1982), authorized a four-year study of students in grades K-3. The study’s findings demonstrated that students in reduced-size classes performed better on standardized and curriculum-based tests. In addition to providing one of the most impactful educational studies of the 20th century (Mosteller, 1995; Orlich, 1991), as smaller class sizes have become a taken-for-granted condition for improving educational achievement, Project STAR provides a lucid example of public intellectual work.

Unlike most policy-oriented projects, Project STAR can be considered public intellectual work because it emerged organically from the needs, interests, and consistent involvement of a local community. As Ritter and Boruch (1999) argue, the catalysts for Project STAR were not only educational researchers interested in addressing urgent intellectual questions raised within the research literature, but also local legislators responding to their constituents’ desire to address an immediate problem. Rather than viewing the academy and the public as competing interests, Project STAR researchers articulated research knowledge to public deliberation and political negotiation, thereby allowing their research findings to produce concrete educational change. As such, Project STAR not only represents a “serendipitous connection between the research world and the policy world” (p. 111), but an organized and democratic response to an academic policy and practice-based problem. Furthermore, the STAR case demonstrates that public intellectual projects are not only individualistic endeavors performed by lone researchers, but also community-based efforts that draw upon diverse material and human resources.

Regardless of their effects, not all policy-shaping activities satisfy the conditions for public
intellectual work. As Burawoy (2007) argues, policy approaches are performed “in the service of a goal defined by a client. [Their] raison d’être is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions” (p. 31). Implicit in Burawoy’s (absolutist) critique is a narrow conception of the “client” as a corporate or governmental agency rather than an organic Deweyan public. While this conception ignores the wide range of possible alternative “clients,” it rightly challenges corporate or government-driven approaches, which typically stand in sharp ideological contrast to the democratic principles of public intellectual praxis outlined earlier in this chapter. Although these projects can produce welcomed outcomes, and may be explicitly performed in the interest of the “general public” (as most policy workers would likely claim), they often lack the necessarily dialogical relationship between non-academic communities to fulfill the requirements for public intellectual work. For example, in 1988 Mathematica received a competitive contract from the United States Department of Health and Human Services to evaluate the effectiveness of abstinence education programs. The study’s findings demonstrated that abstinence-only education was ineffective for delaying sexual activity, preventing pregnancy, or reducing the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. Despite the significance of the study’s findings—Congress cited it in 2007 to justify the termination of Title V, the $50 million grant program that funds abstinence-only programming—its top-down formation and lack of connection to non-academic communities render it outside the boundaries of public intellectual work.

As discussed earlier, the public nature of policy-shaping work does not merely hinge on the value of particular findings, but the extent to which a study’s design, data collection, and dissemination are conducted in conjunction with outside communities. Based on these criteria, the Mathematica abstinence study, however impactful, does not meet the definition of public intellectual work. Rather, it can be located within a broader category of professional activity that can be described as public interest research. Unlike public intellectual work, which is shaped, monitored, and evaluated by non-academic communities (e.g., Project STAR), public interest research needs only to be conducted with the intent of responding to public problems (e.g., Mathematica). In other words, while all public intellectual research can be labeled “public interest research,” many research projects cannot be considered public intellectual work. Nevertheless, the labels public intellectual and public interest are not hierarchical indices of value or impact—for example, a compelling argument can made for the equal public significance of both STAR and Mathematica—but descriptors of a project’s relationship to non-academic publics.

Educational Researcher as Applied Worker

Educational researchers can also engage in public intellectual work by functioning as applied workers. In this role, educational researchers are able to deploy research knowledge in order to effect change within specific educational contexts. Unlike the aforementioned forms of public intellectual work, which can be performed from physical or intellectual distance, applied work typically demands an on-the-ground engagement with real world issues. Thus, while often not as professionally lucrative or prestigious as cultural criticism and policy shaping, applied work is in many ways the most hands-on and organic form of public intellectual work.

Given its methodological and epistemological diversity, the field of educational research provides a fecund space for applied public intellectual work. One of the best examples comes from the field of practitioner inquiry. Through practitioner inquiry, teachers and other educational workers deploy rigorous research methodologies in order to make sense of and ultimately improve their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Also, many professional researchers have (re)entered schooling contexts in a variety of capacities (e.g., teachers, administrators, curriculum
developers) in order to address specific educational problems. An example of such work is Carol Lee, whose research on “Cultural Modeling” demonstrated the effectiveness of “instruction that makes explicit connections between students’ everyday knowledge and the demands of subject-matter learning” (Lee, Spencer, & Harpalani, 2003, p. 7). This conceptual framework became the curricular foundation for the Betty Shabazz International Charter School, an African-centered K-12 school that Lee developed in Chicago. By deploying her empirical findings in the service of a local community’s need for academically successful and culturally responsive educational contexts, Lee was able to relocate research knowledge from the academy to a concrete context.

Despite its broad boundaries, not all forms of practice-based work or applied research qualify as public intellectual work. Rather, like policy shaping, the public nature of applied work is dependent upon the goal of the project, as well as the relationship between the researcher and the communities with which she interacts. In my own research, I have functioned as a teacher within alternative educational contexts in order to address theoretical questions related to youth culture, identity, and pedagogy (Hill, 2006, 2009a, 2009b). Although this project yielded positive, concrete outcomes for the study participants, its design and implementation were not informed by a dialogical interaction with the students, administrators, or broader community. Instead, the study was conducted to contribute to current theoretical debates within the field. While useful, as are many action-oriented research projects, this study cannot be categorized as public intellectual work. The insights from this study, however, informed my subsequent work as a curriculum developer for an after-school environmental education program (Hill & Bares-Johnson, 2008). Drawing from my own research, which critically examines the “stakes” of culturally relevant pedagogy (Hill, 2009b; Leonard & Hill, 2008), I co-developed an afterschool curriculum that was not only culturally responsive, but also anticipated the tensions and contradictions that emerge when curriculum is linked to students’ lived experiences. This project, which developed through a reciprocal intellectual relationship that included a local educational organization, community leaders, students, and teachers, provides a clear example of public intellectual praxis. Although the study reflected their interest and goals for teaching and learning, I was able to use the insights from my research to shape and challenge the project in ways that yielded richer and more favorable accounts.

Prophets Without Honor: Professional Resistance to Public Intellectual Work

Despite its benefits, many educational researchers resist engagement with public intellectual work. While some researchers merely elect to focus on more traditional forms of professional work, others reject public intellectual work as a legitimate vocation. As I explicate throughout this section, the latter position is largely undergirded by a broader, deeper set of ideological stances, cultural practices, and epistemological commitments within the American academy that construct public intellectual work in pejorative and ultimately dismissive terms. It is from this stance that public intellectual activity is viewed as a fundamentally inferior or completely nonviable form of intellectual production and practice. Consequently, academics who operate as public intellectuals are often perceived as professional heretics who violate the purist ethic of traditional intellectual work by engaging non-academic publics and real-world problems.

Scientific Rationality

A key factor in the professional marginalization of public intellectual work is the continued influence of scientific rationality within the field of educational research. Despite decades of epistemological turns that have challenged the hegemonic authority of science and contested the
notion of researcher objectivity (e.g., van Maanen, 1995), educational research remains strongly influenced by a scientistic ethos that advocates detached, ostensibly objective, empirical inquiry (e.g., randomized controlled trials) as the ideal means by which to produce and test knowledge claims (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Hess, 2008; McDermott & Hall, 2007; Stone, 1997). Proponents of this approach contend that ideology, politics, and researcher subjectivity should not play a role in the study of educational issues or the development of solutions to educational problems. As Cochran-Smith (2006) argues, it is within this context that public intellectual activity is constructed as subjective, biased, and ultimately incompatible with educational research.

The logic of scientistic rationality, both in the natural and social sciences, has been disrupted by a range of post-structuralist, feminist, and Afrocentric scholars who have persuasively demonstrated the ways in which science functions as a historically, politically, and ideologically constituted discourse, rather than a universal, neutral, and transhistorical court of intellectual appeal. Thus, all forms of intellectual inquiry (philosophical, empirical, etc.) and knowledge production are inevitably shaped by implicit and explicit assumptions, beliefs, truth claims, and configurations of power. From this anti-foundationalist posture underpinning this article’s conceptualization of public intellectual work, the pursuit of value-neutrality within the context of research is not merely elusive but impossible.

The Quest for Value Neutrality

The notion of educational researchers playing a participatory role in political deliberation, democratic exchange, and concrete social change is not uncontested by scholars. To the contrary, many researchers continue to advocate “value-neutrality,” or the belief in a “radical separation between what they do as intellectuals/scientists/scholars (the search for scientific/scholarly truth) and the uses public authorities or their opponents make of the knowledge claims of intellectuals” (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 170). This idea finds its intellectual roots in the work of Weber (1958), who argued that the social sciences should remain value-free rather than normative in order to protect the intellectual integrity of the disciplines and to avoid improper intervention in public affairs. This perspective is based on a belief in the distinction between “values” and “facts,” and the consequent irreconcilability of analytical and normative domains. From this stance, it can be argued that educational research cannot directly inform educational policy and practice, thereby rendering any researcher’s claims to intellectual authority among non-academic publics to be overstated, misguided, or disingenuous. While compelling, this argument not only rests upon a quixotic belief in value-free knowledge production, but the neglect of theoretical and empirical scholarship that collapses the falsely obvious distinction between values and facts.

Based on the anti-foundationalist epistemological stance articulated in the previous section, an engagement with public intellectual work thoroughly challenges the notion of an irremediable tension between analytical and normative domains. Following the theoretical model provided by Flyvbjerg (2001), who argues that the social sciences have been least effective when attempting to mimic the empiricist methods of the physical sciences, the viability of public intellectual activity rests upon a belief in phronesis, or “practical wisdom,” in social scientific inquiry. Rather than endeavoring to discover universal truths (episteme) or produce pure instrumentality (techne), the latter being insufficient and the former being unattainable, public intellectual activity promotes both instrumental rationality (i.e., “What are the best means to an end?”) and value-rationality (i.e., “What should the ends be?”). Such an approach, which is largely informed by considerations of value and power, not only promotes but also demands the syncretism of the analytical and normative domains (Bjola, 2008; Thacker, 2004).
A range of studies demonstrates the ways that educational researchers can draw from empirical research in order to play a prescriptive role in public life. Examples of this approach are becoming increasingly prevalent across professional fields and disciplines such as urban planning (Flyvbjerg, 1998) and organizational leadership, where researchers have drawn from empirical studies in order to determine both the means and the ends of institutional policymaking. Drawing from these and other studies, Thacher (2006) argues that the “normative case study,” which includes both quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method methodologies, can be used to help professional communities to “clarify, elaborate, or even fundamentally revise the way they define” policy-oriented ends (p. 1633). Within the field of education, similar demands for “use-inspired research” (Stokes, 1997) have become increasingly prominent within conversations related to policy and practice (e.g., Bulterman-Bos, 2008). It is within these spaces that public intellectual praxis can bridge analytical and normative domains in ways that produce concrete improvements on the ground.

The advocacy of public intellectual work, however, should not be understood as a fetishization of professional expertise in general or research knowledge in particular. An uncritical acceptance of public intellectual activity can lead to the privileging of pure ideology over informed analysis, professional status over relevant insight, and individual decision-making over democratic deliberation. Consider the following example: a well-known and professionally respected economist publicly argues in favor of school privatization policies in a popular newspaper op-ed. Under this circumstance, members of the general public may find it difficult to distinguish between legitimate intellectual authority and individual ideological commitment, particularly if the researcher does not clarify such distinctions. As a result, the economist’s arguments may appear to be buttressed by a particularly solid empirical foundation that renders them superordinate to other perspectives within the public sphere. While this may be true, particularly in light of the epistemological arguments made throughout this section, it is also possible that the economist’s value judgments are not informed by directly relevant and applicable research. Nevertheless, the economist may win unearned public approval for her argument based on the currency that is generated from her institutional affiliation, disciplinary orientation, and general expertise within a subject area. Such circumstances, though undesirable, do not undermine the fundamental legitimacy of public intellectual activity for educational researchers. To accept such a notion would be to concede the existence of a public that is incapable of intellectual discernment and unavoidably vulnerable to intellectual demagogy. Rather, they speak to the need for greater transparency, increased mechanisms of accountability, and deeper democratic deliberation from all members of the communities in which public intellectuals operate.

Modernist Elitism

While traditional methods of producing, disseminating, and consuming research knowledge remain restricted to highly exclusive professional communities, public intellectual work renders these activities accessible to traditionally excluded communities. Professional resistance to this shift is informed by modernist sensibilities regarding “high” and “low” culture. Within this elitist framework, high culture, which is created and shared by a select group of elites, is imagined as the sole refuge for intellectual ingenuity and socially transformative praxis. Conversely, low culture is viewed as the province of “ordinary” people, and therefore inherently lacking in intellectual integrity, sophistication, and rigor. Such a stance reflects a deep skepticism toward populist methods of knowledge distribution (e.g., television, trade books) and, more significantly, an implicit denial of the capacity of everyday people to engage in rigorous (i.e., highbrow) forms of
intellectual production (Giroux, 1992). Such a stance calls for an a priori rejection of any research knowledge that is constructed and/or comprehended by people outside of the academy.

The Logic of Late Capitalism

Academic wariness regarding public intellectual work is not only an outgrowth of 19th and 20th century modernist sensibilities, but also a reflection of the vocational expectations embedded within late capitalism. In particular, professional antipathy toward public intellectual work is underpinned by late capitalism’s focus on specialization over versatility, and narrowness over proteanism. Thus, the notion of the educational researcher as public intellectual, which demands the performance of a range of professional identities (e.g., author, pundit, activist) is viewed as counter to the ethos of the university, which has become increasingly organized around the values, structures, and profit-motives of multi-national corporations (Bok, 2003; Giroux & Searls-Giroux, 2006). This condition is further exacerbated by the forces of neo-liberal globalization and the consequent recoding of terms such as “public” and “private” (Hall, 2005; Harvey, 2005). In contrast to prior historical moments, where terms like public and welfare state were viewed positively, the current neoliberal state has helped to create a social disdain for all things public. As a result, the very notion of public has been reconstituted as pejorative, further indexing the public intellectual’s ostensible departure from significant intellectual concerns and rigorous academic work.

Professional Demerits

Professional resistance to public intellectual work is not merely ideological, but also produces tangible professional consequences for educational researchers. An engagement with work outside the traditional boundaries of the profession can also result in various forms of professional marginalization. Most significantly, such work can undermine collegial relationships, favorable funding decisions, and tenure and promotion decisions. To be sure, these professional penalties can be avoided or mitigated by not including public intellectual work within one’s professional dossier and producing traditional research output at comparable rates of professional peers. While potentially effective, such decisions force the public intellectual to work (at least) twice as hard in order to remain professionally buoyant. Additionally, such decisions do little to alter the collegial perceptions and relationships that are frequently undermined when educational researchers operate outside the traditional boundaries of the profession (Hill, in press). Within this context, public intellectual work not only remains undervalued as a legitimate form of intellectual production, but also becomes a professional demerit that effectively dissuades researchers from engaging non-academic communities.

Notes

1. A revised, longer version of this chapter will be published in the International Journal of Research and Method in Education.

2. I make deliberate use of feminine, rather than masculine or gender-neutral, pronouns. I do this in order to mark my own positionality as a “Black male feminist” (Neal, 2005), as well as to draw implicit attention to the ways in which notions of the public intellectual have historically privileged male identities (hooks & West, 1991).

3. I use phrases like “qualifies as” and “satisfies the conditions for” to mark the definitional boundaries of public intellectual work. It is not my intention, however, to suggest that more traditional (i.e., non-public) approaches are less authentic, important, or useful.
References


