CRITICAL ONTOLOGY AND TEACHER AGENCY

POSTFORMAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND ITS IMPACTS ON 
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Know Thyself γνῶθι σεαυτόν (Temple of Apollo at Delphi)

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment [épreuve] of their possible transcendence [de leur franchissement possible]. (Foucault, 1987, p. 174)

In light of a critical knowledge of power, we are pursuing a key dimension of critical ontology — a way of being that is aware of the ways power shapes us, the ways we see the world, and the ways we perceive our role as teachers (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 53).

Joe Kincheloe’s 2003 article, “Critical Ontology: Visions of Selfhood and Curriculum,” in the Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, argues for the importance of understanding identity construction in teacher education and, in so doing, advances a notion of critical ontology for teachers and teacher educators. He wrote, “Too infrequently are teachers in university, student teaching, or in-service professional education encouraged to confront why they think as they do about themselves as teachers — especially in relation to the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical world around them” (p. 47). This notion of critical ontology is more deeply philosophical and political than the more commonly used terms: self-study or autoethnography. As such, critical ontology demands a deeper engagement with philosophical questions about the self as well as a more focused attention on the socio-historical situatedness of the individual. Such ontological investigations require an examination of how power intersects with the ways educators make meaning of ourselves and the contexts in which our teaching and our identities are embedded.

In this essay, I will discuss the key ideas advanced in Kincheloe’s JCT article, how they relate to other similar schools of thought including self-study of teacher education and Pinar’s currere. I will conclude with a discussion of how this article has shaped my own interpretations and applications of Joe’s work in postformalism and critical pedagogy.

The concept of self-study, or deeply reflecting on one’s experiences, ideas, and beliefs is not a new one. Socrates declared “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and most proponents of forms of self-study can trace the roots of their philosophy.
to this ancient statement. More recently it has been popularized in the work of Parker Palmer in his book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (1998). In the first chapter of this book he writes, “teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge — and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject” (p. 2). However, much of the discourse around self-study and teachers doesn’t challenge formal ways of understanding the self, nor does it address the key tenets of the critical ontology Kincheloe outlined in his article.

**KINCHELOE’S CRITICAL ONTOLOGY**

As noted above, Kincheloe was not the first to argue for a greater emphasis on understanding oneself and one’s ongoing evolution in the process of becoming a teacher; however his critical, historical, and philosophical approaches to making sense of the world distinguish his approach to self-study. He is best known for his work in postformalism (Kincheloe, & Steinberg, 1993) and contributions to the field of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2005b) including the establishment of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy (www.freireproject.org). Critical pedagogy is often critiqued for being dominated by white male scholars who often ignore or misrepresent issues related to race, gender, and sexuality in their work (Ellsworth, 1989; Tan, 2008). However, in Joe’s writing and publications, he explicitly includes discussion of and works by scholars in the fields of: critical multiculturalism, critical race theory, post-structural feminism, indigenous knowledges, and queer theory. He explains the importance of exposing the impacts of colonial White male heterosexual hegemony on teacher education by asserting that, “the rigorous study of cultural and historical context alerts prospective teachers to the ways dominant myths, behaviour, and language shape their view of the teacher role and the curriculum without conscious filtering” (Kincheloe, 2003 #1864) (p. 52).

In his article, Joe identifies 23 basic ideas that clarify his proposed notion of critical ontology. I’ve made an attempt to distil this long and complex list of demands into the five categories of thought and action based on the five aspects of “Postformal Intrapersonal Intelligence” Kincheloe advanced in an earlier piece (1998, pp. 137–141) which include:

1. Meta-consciousness-expanding the capacity for self-reflection and the analysis of identity formation (#1–4, 17, 18, 20)
2. Transcendence of ego-centrism- the difficult journey outward (#6, 12, 22, 23)
3. The creation of integrated knowledge- understanding ourselves in relation to the way we make sense of the world, integrating personal knowledge into secular knowledge and vice versa (#8, 10, 14, 15, 16)
4. Recognition of non-hierarchical difference - connecting intrapersonal development with an understanding of other individuals (#5, 7, 9, 11, 13)
5. Developing self-reliance in the transcendence of authority dependence-confronting the culture of ethical and political passivity (#19, 21, 22)

Each of these five overarching categories is embedded in the theoretical approaches that Kincheloe identifies as providing the foundation for critical ontology: complexity
theory, enactivism, critical theory, critique of Cartesianism, and poststructural feminist analysis. In his deeper excavation of the concept of critical ontology, he relies heavily on Maturana and Varela's concept of enactivism which he explains as the "concept that living things constantly remake themselves in interaction with their environments" (Kinzelco, 2003, p. 58), and this demonstrates the importance of recognizing our interconnectedness in constructing a "new inner world." Enactivism is related to critiques of Cartesianism by situating the self as the author of one's reality as opposed to "reflecting an external one already in existence" (Kinzelco, 2003, p. 61). Kinzelco explains that "Cartesianism has separated individuals from their inanimate surroundings, undermining any organic interconnection of the person to the cosmos...human beings lost their belongingness to both the world and to other people around them" (p. 49). Enactivism cultivates a sense of self that is deeply connected to others and thus requires a transcendence of ego-centrism that allows a deeper humility to develop, "without which wisdom is not possible" (p. 61). This complex, critical, and philosophical approach to self-study is different on many levels from other theorists who have also addressed the importance of self-study in teacher education.

SELF-STUDY OF TEACHING PRACTICES (S-STEP)

In their book, Self-study of teaching practices, Samaras and Freese provide an introduction to and overview of the discipline from their perspectives. This primer explains that personal history self-study is "the study of the influence of one's culture, context, and history on one's teaching practices" (Samaras, & Freese, 2006, p. 7). The group of researchers that have built this self-study school of practice emerged in the early 1990s and is formally marked by the creation of the S-STEP Special Interest Group created at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (p. 33).

Samaras and Freese identify three main purposes of teacher self-study: personal renewal, professional renewal, and program renewal (2006, p. 14). They also name three research paradigms which influence self-study: teacher inquiry, action research, and reflective practice (2006, p. 23). According to these authors, education-related life history is "a self-study activity that involves reflection on critical or nodal moments in one's learning past that may help to inform one's teaching" (Samaras, & Freese, 2006, p. 8). The work of the scholars in this SIG seems to focus primarily on examining one's behaviours in the classroom and less on the critical and philosophical questions that critical ontology makes central. Self-study is defined in their text as: "teachers' systematic and critical examination of their actions and their context as a path to develop a more consciously driven mode of professional activity" (Samaras, & Freese, 2006, p. 11).

This text provides a lengthy list of books and articles in its references, however it does not mention the JCT article, but briefly refers to one of Joe's earlier (1991) works: Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment. They reference the epistemological concept he advances: that there is no knowledge without the knower, but do not explore this concept in-depth or interrogate their own conceptions of self-study through this deeper epistemological question (Samaras, & Freese, 2006, p. 44). Researchers who align themselves with the S-STEP approach...
to understanding the self and its impacts on the teaching act differ significantly from Kincheloe's notion of critical ontology in two important ways. First, although they acknowledge social and cultural influences and the impacts they have on the development of how an individual makes sense of their world, they don't explicitly examine the influence of hegemony: the roles that dominant discourses and systems of power play in shaping our understanding of and our relationships in this world. Second, since the methods described by S-STEP scholars don't include an analysis of power, there is little talk about agency and educators' roles in working to create an educational and social context that is more equitable and just. Examples of self-study projects presented in this primer focus more on micro-level changes to an individual's teaching practice such as classroom management and assessment strategies as opposed to macro-structural changes in how knowledge is constructed, or meta-conscious changes in how one understands teaching and learning and the way teachers and students make sense of themselves and their world (Samaras, & Freese, 2006). A second related approach to developing an understanding of the self that is more closely aligned with Kincheloe's critical ontology is William Pinar's currere.

PINAR'S CURRERE

In an earlier piece discussing Pinar's notion of currere, Joe advanced some ideas that he builds on in greater detail in the JCT article and others (Kincheloe, 2005a, 2006, 2008). He wrote, "Pinar, through currere is asking us to become action researchers of ourselves. Teachers and students begin to systematically analyze how socio-political distortions have tacitly worked to shape their world views, perspectives on education, and self-images" (Kincheloe, 1998, p. I 33). Kincheloe refers to currere as a form of postformal autobiography because it "involves individuals' attempts to disengage themselves from socio-interpersonal norms and ideological expectations" (2005a, p. 3; Kincheloe, & Steinberg, 1993). Currere is the latin root-word for curriculum which means "running the race course" and indicates ongoing activity and engagement. Pinar describes it as "a method focused on self-understanding" that is based in methodology borrowed from African-American autobiography (Pinar, 2004, pp. 4-5). Kincheloe builds on this definition by explaining that it "concerns the investigation of the nature of the individual experience of the public" and that this allows us to "loosen our identification with the contents of consciousness so that we can gain some distance from them. From our new vantage point we may be able to see those psychic realms that are formed by conditioning and unconscious adherence to social convention" (Kincheloe, 1998, p. 129). It is this psychic distancing from our constructed knowledge systems that allows for a more critical level of analysis and understanding as it takes the socio-historical context of our lives and experiences into consideration.

In a later essay, Kincheloe more explicitly acknowledges the influence of currere on his work by stating, "any notion of postformal autobiography is indebted to William Pinar's notion of currere" (Kincheloe, 2005a, p. 5). This action research method that has been introduced and refined through Pinar's work and writing explicitly asks educators to examine power relations and their impacts on our positionalities and perspectives on how we make meaning of ourselves and our
world. Pinar acknowledged that this work is difficult yet pedagogically very important by explaining, “for heterosexually identified white men, finding the seams, discovering the traces of rejected fragments, and creating interior spaces may well prove pedagogically useful, potentially self-shattering” (Pinar, 2004, p. 51). The links between critical ontology and currere as a postformal autobiographical method are made clear in the following statement:

Thinking about thinking in postformalism induces students to deconstruct their personal constructions of the purpose of their schooling... As a culture, we have little idea how our identities are shaped by power relations and the impact of such a process on how we define intelligence. Postformal thinking about thinking appropriates currere’s ideological disembedding, pushing cognition into the complexity of self-production. Transcending Piagetian formalism with its disembodied abstraction and its concern for disinterested procedure, postformal thinking about thinking encourages a running meta-dialogue, a constant conversation with self. (Kincheloe, 1998, p. 132)

It is clear that the links between currere and critical ontology are strong and that these two important educational theorists were able to refine and deepen their explanations of their approaches to self-understanding through this ongoing dialogue with each other. My own work has been heavily influenced by both of these scholars as well, and I will now discuss the impacts of critical ontology in the context of my own research in teacher identity and activism.

IMPACTS OF CRITICAL ONTOLOGY

Engaging with this piece of Joe Kincheloe's work has encouraged me to revisit previous work I have done on self-study (Meyer, 2008b) and teacher identity (Meyer, 2008a, 2008c, 2009). It is appropriate that my first published autobiographical project was written for an edited collection of graduate student reflections on our individual journeys towards engaging with critical discourses. The book project was edited by one of Kincheloe's graduate students and emerged from one of their many philosophical conversations. The reflection I did in my chapter, "I am (not) a feminist: Unplugging from the heterosexual matrix" was an exercise in critical ontology. I was able to write creatively and with emotion about the deep learning that occurred from my first-hand experiences with privilege and oppression, discrimination and injustice, and how these experiences shaped my personal and professional identities. I used an ongoing metaphor from the film The Matrix to illustrate the deconstruction and reconstruction of how I made sense of the world around me. I concluded my piece with a call to action for social justice activism:

It was my loss of heterosexual privilege that forced me to swallow the red pill and build a new understanding of the world. This is the language and the strength that critical theory has given me. I hope the story of my queer journey may help others to ‘unplug’ and work against oppression in all its forms.

Follow the white rabbit (Meyer, 2008b, p. 42).

The explicit recognition of privilege and power relations linked with a call to action directly relates to several of Kincheloe’s 23 basic tenets of critical ontology...
including: 5, 6, 7, 9, 18, and 22. The metaphor from The Matrix helps illustrate the concept of #18 that “the ontological process of cognition constructs the world rather than reflecting an external world already in existence” (p. 48). My closing challenge to “follow the white rabbit” encourages others to explore their agency as #22 states: “to appreciate that political empowerment, community-building, and the cultivation of both the individual and collective intellect require a constant monitoring of the relationships that shape us” (p. 48).

This exercise has also encouraged me to reconsider a theoretical model I developed to explain and illustrate the influences on teacher behaviours and agency that related to their own identities and school contexts (Meyer, 2007, 2008a). Upon rereading Kincheloe’s article, I realized there was an essential element lacking from this model: the broader socio-historical context in which the teacher’s life experiences and school culture were embedded. This revised diagram (Fig 1.1), gives an overview of the various factors that shape teacher agency. In the context of my research I was examining teachers’ perceptions of and responses to forms of gendered harassment (sexual, sexual orientation, and gender non-conformity).

In my work with eight secondary teachers, I developed a model that shows how the external influences are filtered through each teacher’s internal influences, like water poured through a coffee filter. The data indicated that both external and internal influences present barriers (in grey) and motivators (in white) to teachers’ interventions. These influences vary based on teachers’ identities and experiences.

---

**Fig 1.1. Factors influencing teachers’ critical ontological agency.**
in their school cultures, but in all cases in my study, the barriers outweigh the motivators for intervention. It was as if teachers’ eyes are covered by institutional and social barriers that tell them not to see gendered harassment and not to intervene. However, their internal motivators often encourage them to see and to act in spite of these strong external barriers. This imbalance creates a constant struggle for the teachers who are trying to take action to challenge sexism, transphobia, and homophobia in their classrooms and schools. The spotted circle in the back of the diagram labelled “socio-historical influences” is what I added while working on this essay. I reflected on my findings and recognized that although I discussed the role of culture and life experience in shaping teachers’ identities and school cultures, I hadn’t effectively presented it in the visual representation of the theoretical model. I continue to be grateful to Joe Kincheloe for the insights his writings offer and the ways they allow me to continue reflecting on and improving my own work.

CONCLUSION

Joe Kincheloe’s critical ontology demands a deep level of engagement with one’s self and community. This engagement goes beyond the self-reflection and “navel gazing” that some critics of self-study pronounce. The layer of empowerment, action, and human agency that Kincheloe writes about is an important distinguishing feature of this philosophy. He emphasizes that, “Critical ontology is obsessed with new and better ways of being human, being with others, and the creation of environments where mutual growth of individuals is promoted and symbiotic learning relationships are cultivated” (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 54). May we all be moved to new ways of conceptualizing ourselves and our relationships with others and be filled with the humility that made Kincheloe’s work so authentic and powerful. If we are to take up the project of investing in educational research and teacher development activities that aim to make the world a more loving, humane and socially just place, then we must find new ways to understand and transform ourselves and our work. As Kincheloe so eloquently reminds us “thinking in new ways always necessitates personal transformation; indeed if enough people think in new ways, social transformation is inevitable” (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 56).

REFERENCES


