

The Dispositions of Teachers as Researchers: A Call to Action

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Background

Because of the steady and sure closing in on education from all sides—including policies by national, state, and local governments, ventures by capitalists, reactionary takeovers by far-right conservatives under the guises of American patriotism, accountability, efficiency, morality and the mandate to retain a world dominant position, teachers who dare to talk back to authority, who possess the audacity to not teach to the test, who have professional and moral imperatives as their professional compass and thus stray from the script, or who might dare to listen to the students, are a rare breed. Nonetheless, if every student has at least one of these teachers, glimmers of what Deweyian democratically informed education should be, make lasting imprints on citizens of next generations. I write this paper to discuss Joe Kincheloe's concept of teacher as researcher (1991) based on ten tenets he posited in *Toward a Critical Politics of Teacher Thinking: Mapping the Postmodern* (1993) and dedicate it to the spirit of critical education and critical literacy which are both possible if teachers develop their intellectual, political, and cultural capacities.

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Kincheloe's Ten Commandments of Critical Teacher as Researcher

A Humanist Critical/Hermeneutical Look at Joe L. Kincheloe and a Self-Reflection

I will cite the following ten precepts or commandments preached by Kincheloe and elaborate on each of them as I see them as outward signs of Joe's character and influences on me, commenting on practical applications of each of them to the holistic praxis of democratic pedagogy. Informed by critical, feminist, phenomenologist, humanist and democratic communitarianist theories, these ten commandments of postformal teaching include the following dispositions: inquiry orientation, power insights, commitment to world making, dedication to improvisational dialog, situatedness in social contexts, critical self- and social awareness, democratic self-direction, cognizance and responsiveness to multicultural educational perspectives, implementation of action, and priority given to human interrelationships. The following summation addresses each of these attributes and puts them into a Kincheloean and Agnelloean context—juxtaposing two regional experiences in the South—not identical, yet similar in the ways in which race, class, and gender determined who got the goods and who did not.

1. **Teachers as researchers are inquiry oriented:** Teachers can take action when they have information upon which to progress. They acquire such information as they observe their classrooms reflecting upon teacher and student behaviors informed optimally through problem posing about the curriculum, everyday life, and society in general. Joe knew through his own life how and why to question his observations. I too would disrupt authoritarian expectations of my behaviors by simply asking, "Why?" As the "why" of situations—both big and small—are addressed, a dialog ensues. Such a dialog opens the door to many possibilities that teachers create for curious students. Unfortunately the curiosity that all children have can be socialized out of students who realize it is a lot less trouble to do what one is told, rather than to complicate things by asking questions or be regarded as impudent for asking, "why?". Joe and we know from our experiences in education that real learning is often a lot of work or trouble. Yet, we embrace such inquiry oriented learning.
2. **Teachers as researchers realize that learning is socially contextualized and they are informed about power:** Teachers with sociological imaginations can see and observe who exercises power and how it is exercised over others. They recognize the degree to which power and resources are allocated equally or unequally in broad and local contexts. In Tennessee through his church experiences and his family's connections to school, Joe saw how power was exercised and by whom, as well as how people formed their social beliefs through educative processes. He was unafraid to protest the Vietnam War and suffered the consequences in his conservative college. Although not the South of Tennessee

that Joe described in much of his work, Texas provided me a socio-political state of mind where there was a hierarchy of power and influence that was visible in financial institutions and political exchanges in my small town outside of Houston. Brought up in a farming environment, I saw who worked and how people were regarded. I spoke out. I often got in trouble for it. Nonetheless, I tried to comprehend how the social interactions in which I was involved at school were related to many factors, most of them beyond my control. The knowledge of how power was exercised through acts of racism, classism, and sexism would serve to kindle Joe's critical spirit of researching teachers. Joe helped me articulate what I saw and experienced in classrooms as a teacher and as a student. Racism was clearly an aberration of power and Christian values, and I could discern it in my social contexts. However, classism and sexism were so tacit that they were difficult to distinguish in our omnipresent patriarchy. It was through my readings and work with Joe that I could name the sexism and classism I had experienced in education since the beginning, as well as in the schools where I taught.

3. **Teachers as researchers are committed to world making:** Teachers understand that they pass formal knowledge to students. However, more importantly, they comprehend how their students also produce knowledge creating a classroom world of idea exchange. In the current testing environment, researching teachers discover why their students are unable to perform on standardized measures of formal knowledge, as well as address their needs. Teachers as intellectuals also recognize the many kinds of knowledge that students possess embracing and accepting that knowledge as foundations for building future knowledge. Joe helped create learning worlds all around the globe through his interpersonal relationships and his scholarship. I currently work in a Japanese university environment where the community of students is seeking possibilities for transforming the world by becoming global leaders. I encourage university students who say of their ambitions, "I want to be a teacher, and so I do not see myself as a global leader." I tell them, "You want to be a teacher which is the most important global leader there is." I tell them this because I believe it. Joe believed it, and he helped me to believe in myself as a teacher who "makes the world".
4. **Teachers as researchers are dedicated to teaching as an art of improvisation:** Teachers are extemporaneous as they think, reflect, and teach in reaction to their students. They build trust in their classrooms so that students flourish in risk-free environments. Joe was a musician with a comedic personality who studied culture imitating and satirizing it, creating a pleasant environment in which people could advance their ideas. Joe was always prepared to move an audience with research that astounded. I have been told that I am dramatic. I do better sometimes than others in my improvisation of teaching. No matter what the outcome, my teaching improvisation is always best when I am prepared to teach and advance student learning from where it stopped during the last class. Students appreciate my ability to remember things they have shared in past classes in future contexts. I also try to ensure that some of the structure of class

is relaxed so that there can be a dialog and exchange of ideas that is fluid and fun—yet serious and critically grounded.

5. **Teachers as researchers are able to cultivate and respond to situated participation:** Teachers set the stage with props, materials, media, discourse, and body language for students' words, concerns, and experiences. The researching teacher makes professionally informed decisions about how to teach students, as well as the kinds of lessons that will have the most impact. Joe cultivated his participatory skills and measures based on Appalachia, Native America, urban and rural schools, educational policy, popular culture, broad study across a spectrum of disciplines, and creativity situated in the present no matter where he was. Looking at Joe's experiences as an observer, mentee, and student, I see myself as inspired by unpretentious genius. For most of my career, I have worked in a very conservative environment which has its own set of barriers to participation, not the least of which is white privilege. Getting past my understanding of white privilege in the United States, I situated myself with my students who were mostly Anglo, and who work two and three jobs while enrolled in university classes. They too are trying to overcome their backgrounds and see themselves as meritorious. My job often became that of helping them to see how their future students from different and marginalized backgrounds have not reaped the benefits of many aspects of schooling from the literacy curriculum to the extra-curriculum which is not a lived democratic experience for many students. As critics of an undemocratic educational system, I model for students who assume that everyone starts at the same place in their quest for education, a critique of a system that does not include, inspire, or reward everyone fairly, equitably, or democratically. Helping future teachers and students understand the need to situate ourselves in the community where schools reside promotes an anthropological holism that ideally results in contextualized learning and that benefits students, rather than disadvantages them. Joe's research and theory both were the north star and a sign post to criticalist educators in this respect. Put simply, when we are in doubt, we need to ask our students.
6. **Teachers as researchers are professionally directed by critical, self-, and social reflection:** Teachers who are in constant dialog with themselves, their educational communities, and other professionals, in addition to students, understand that it matters how we speak to each other in classrooms. Working with students to see the world through various kinds of lenses and from several perspectives involves taking risks and being vulnerable. It means that we look at determiners of educational opportunities prior to and during students' schooling experience. Joe was a criticalist informed by feminists, the Frankfurt School, Marx, Foucault, and Freire, among other theorists (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994). He read the word and the world; he acted politically inside and outside the academy. His prolific scholarship embodied critical, self-, and social reflection. As I find myself in the midst of a professional wasteland with tenured faculty too afraid to speak, professionals protecting dishonest scoundrels in administrative roles because they want to be nice, and academic, as well as teacher knowledge diminished by rewritten and unspoken policies, I am spurred

to action. I will not be daunted in the face of adversity, and I know that I can be a better mentor to my students if I am constantly directed by critical, self-, and social reflection to enhance formal knowledge and scholarship. Joe walked the walk and talked the talk—bringing critique to the forefront as the place from which to transform ourselves, society, and the world. I am not nearly as evolved as Joe was in his ability to be a radical listener, but I have models who were inspired and mentored by Joe. Through critical self- and social- reflection, I can be a better person and educator. Joe modeled a relaxed sage who was quick to self deprecate and critique social and cultural practices that impede democratic ways of life.

7. **Teachers as researchers are concerned with and inspired by democratic self-directed education:** Teachers who are, first of all, informed about democratic classrooms, and second of all, embrace them, are promoters of their students' abilities and rights to speak, disagree, create, point out teacher errors, and most importantly to engage in their own education. Joe was driven by such democratic principles. With a foundations-of-education insight, he taught what he believed and in the manner in which he could provide students with the tools to be their own navigators of learning. He taught me as a doctoral mentor in this manner. A few educators dedicated to the vision of democratic and ethical education can make a difference in a great wasteland of educational challenges we see at every turn. I work very hard to inspire students to gear their learning to their interests. This might seem a simple task; yet it is difficult in a spoon-fed testing environment to give students such freedom because many of them have not experienced it before. The down side of allowing students to pursue their interests is a perception on the students' parts that the teacher is not well qualified or is somehow unprepared. Enriching students' learning reflects in many academic and cultural exchanges. Rigor of self and social analysis and relaxed "being" in the classroom are complementary as they inform democratic approaches to teaching and learning.
8. **Teachers as researchers are cognizant and responsive to multicultural educational perspectives:** Teachers who understand and value multiculturalism understand how dominant discourses, textbooks, testing curriculum, and unreflective education, in general, overpower marginalized perspectives in the classroom, school, and society. Joe was not willing to settle for educational experiences in which racism, classism, and sexism prevailed. My work with Joe had several effects on me: I learned how to articulate many kinds of ostracism, I was inspired to learn more about native knowledges, and I take every opportunity to participate in workshops on gender, race, and class, as well as the arts. I believe that my teaching and research are better for such participation—not only more informed, but also more metacognitive, creative, and driven by research. Joe was not willing to accept the racist, classist, and sexist curriculum as the focus of education, and showed us how to address its deficits multiculturally.
9. **Teachers as researchers are geared toward action:** Teachers who possess critical insights avert the forces of the educational hierarchy to overdetermine

meanings for their students. The education process initiates with thought and moves to generate educative action through problem posing. Joe allowed his students, including me, to pose serious and academically articulatable problems. He guided but did not lead. He supported but did not coddle. He allowed his students to create meaning for themselves. I have taught action research, curriculum theory classes, teacher education, and foundations of education for two decades relying on Joe's approaches and scholarship. In all of my teaching, I work with students to ascertain actionable learning that they can implement in their own social or professional settings. Teaching in this manner is not always a smooth endeavor because many times students want to be told what to learn, what they need to do, and how many points they need to earn an A. They are not necessarily concerned with transforming society or the world. Yet, their projects often reflected transformation in their own contexts constituting their world.

10. **Teachers as researchers are guided by consideration for human interrelationships:** Teachers who practice feminist pedagogical strategies through nurturing networks motivate their learners by encouraging and valuing emotional reflection in action-oriented education. Joe was a promoter of feminist philosophy, theory, and research, as well as activism. He embraced feminism and its tenets. It is obvious in his caring and careful scholarship, as well as in the ways in which he comported himself with this students and protégés. Acting in a protective stance over his students who often were marginalized or doing work in the margins, Kincheloe promoted intellectual development with kindness and nurturing. Pursuing the scholarship that resulted in my dissertation a Peter Lang publication, *A Postmodern Literacy Policy Analysis* (Agnello 2001), the discourse analysis strategies that Joe shared with me inform all of my literacy and financial literacy research, policy considerations, and teaching methods.

Conclusion

The impact of Joe Kincheloe's work as an educator of teachers, philosophers and historians of education, as well as research methodologists is still flourishing in pockets. It is the kind of work that will not go out of style in a society that prides itself on democracy and democratic schooling. Empowering teachers to be contextually grounded researchers committed to creating a better world through improvised and situated participation informed by critical self- and social reflection dedicated to developing students driven by democratic self-directed, multicultural, humanistic, and action oriented values was a tall order (Kincheloe et. al 2011). But it was one that took Dewey's vision of democratic education to the next level, a transition needed in the sociopolitical and economic environment in which we find ourselves presently. Joe L. Kincheloe was a scholar and an activist – caring and driven. When I want to quit, thinking about Joe and Paulo, as well as the next generation influenced by Joe, keeps me going (Brock et al. 2011).

And so Joe, though I miss the Tennessee accent that characterized your preaching and would have preferred that you have articulated these guidelines that follow here. I have improvised the following ten commandments and dedicate them to a multicultural way of comporting ourselves as researching teachers in your honor:

- As teachers as researchers we shalt allow all to ask questions and not put ourselves, our questions, or our priorities into a position of superiority over those of our students.
- We shalt not put wealthy, elitist, or megalomaniacal behavior above honest democratic leadership in classrooms as democratic communities.
- We shalt not worship those who profit politically by preying on the downtrodden and destroying the planet because we are committed to world making.
- We shalt participate meaningfully in an artistic and spontaneous way of teaching and learning.
- We shalt remember to save some time for self, family, and spiritual renewal, as well as for communion with nature as we cultivate and participate in the life of the classroom, school, and community.
- We as researching teachers are inspired to exercise critical, self, and social reflection as we participate with our students to do the same.
- We recognize that democratic self-directed education is optimal and we should not abuse power, wealth, or position to belittle or disadvantage people, nor should we ever make others feel small as they pursue their own visions of education for social advancement, success, or credential.
- We teachers as researchers are knowledgeable about, recognize, value, and embrace multiculturalism and diverse perspectives and are always open to expanding our repertoire of understanding students' cultures as we experience them through schooling and education writ large.
- We teachers as researchers understand that literacy for praxis—reading the word and world—inform generative teaching and learning for taking action in transforming the world of classrooms, schools, and communities.
- We teachers as researchers love our students because they provide us the fire for engaging in productive human interactions and interrelationships that are the most valuable outcome of education, not only in our immediate circles, but also in the ever expanding networks of people and their projects—local and global.

Important to the success of teachers, we must model such behaviors for our students because they know when we are authentic and not.

Finally we should remember that faith, hope, and love are the most important human virtues and that teaching as Joe L. Kincheloe taught and advocated is an act of love. Teachers as researchers teach as an act of radical love if they follow these ten precepts he so carefully illustrated for us.

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