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Kincheloe, Joe L. (2005). *Critical Constructivism*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

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In *Critical Constructivism* (Kincheloe, 2005), Joe Kincheloe sets out to “offer” the reader his take on critical constructivism. Kincheloe encourages the reader to enter into a discourse, stating that his goal is to write a bioptic view of critical constructivism. He promises to use accessible language, describe conceptual applications within practice and to “maintain the integrity and complexity of the topic” (p. 2). Kincheloe exposes his own subjectivity for crystallizing and reshaping language, concepts and ideas in his writing that he will “offer some complex ideas” (p. 1) in the forthcoming pages of this primer. Kincheloe identifies the key concepts of critical constructivism under 12 points related to teaching and knowledge production. Bringing his edgy and critical voice to play in this book, Kincheloe reminds us that the topic is complex as he sets out to make this “every persons” book.

Kincheloe’s take on Critical Constructivism offers a compelling argument. one that puts forth issues and pulls the reader directly into the heart and soul of the synergistic nature of the critical constructivist way of viewing the world. As much as Kincheloe contends that he is laying it out in “plain language” for the novice reader, critical constructivist writings is almost a visceral experience. Kincheloe offers the critical constructivist view in an ever challenging, changing, critically connected view – grounded in “critical constructivist epistemological and cognitive theories” (p. 7).

Kincheloe calls for the reader to partake in a “conscious outing” of prevalent sociocultural-political influences and forces in order to step into the realm of critical constructivist thought. He seeks to create an intimate space within this book for novice readers to try on the critical constructivist perspective. Kincheloe recognizes the challenges, the complexities, and the forces inherent and acting for and against change within a charged socially constructed environment. Kincheloe contends that the disempowered vanilla landscape that is currently prescribed to teachers by the political power elite is destructive and insulting to the educational community. Using robust language, Kincheloe pushes the reader further through the pages of this book towards an understanding of critical constructivism. Within a dynamic writing style, Kincheloe offers a vital perspective focusing his thinking on 12 points from which he offers a multi-entrance

excursion into the key features of critical constructivism in relation to teaching and knowledge production.

To be critically constructive in the world, questions need to be asked, nuances and complexities must be recognized, and the influencing political and social forces must be acknowledged in order to operate within a broadly informed and highly sensitized view of what influences – and what matters. At the heart of Kincheloe's writing are questions and a deep culture of change. The need to be broadly informed, to develop deep understandings of multi-perspective theoretical knowledge, and to rethink, resort, reinvent, reorganize, redefine, and reify form the foundation of critical constructivist thinking. This describes the thrust of Kincheloe's message. Throughout, Kincheloe leaves no descriptor of a critical constructivist unsaid. At times, Kincheloe's purpose of his writing steps over the line; making use of language which elevates "the notion of experience to almost ethereal heights, we are left with an inadequate sense of how to judge such experiences" (Giroux, 1983, p.134). Kincheloe's voice comes through so determined and powerfully that he leaves little room for dialogue and inclusion of others thoughts.

Joe Kincheloe In his opening argument, Kincheloe situates the reader by defining several prevailing assumptions in the field today. To be sure that his writing is not hindered by language while he introduces us to possibly new words, usage and deep definitions Kincheloe provides running key word definitions parallel with his writing - a helpful sidebar tool for any novice reader to this pluralistic and multiperspective theoretical view. These author sidebars aid the reader in formulating and defining the epistemological nature at the base of the critical constructivist construction of knowledge. In the context of a first read into Critical Constructivist theory, the reader will find much to consider, be challenged by and some to integrate as they work through these timely and critical points that seek to infuse and transcend our current theories and practice in teaching.

Throughout Kincheloe's book he presents the application of critical constructivist theory and practices within today's classroom using reflective vignettes offered to position the reader within the critical constructivist theoretical framework. Kincheloe challenges us to imagine and place ourselves within these vignettes, asking: What might a critical constructivist experience in education look like? How can I advocate for these learning environments? What is meaningful for my students?

The informed reformulation of educational theories, histories and practices characterizes Kincheloe's writings. The current transmission-based political thrust of educational reform within the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiatives is notably labeled by Kincheloe as 'insulting to the teaching profession and designed to ultimately destroy the concept of public education itself' (p. 5). He calls for teachers to be critically aware that "people accept many statistics because they lack the tools to think about them critically" (Mathews, 2006). He argues that rather than be herded by the political push of "scientifically proven" qualifiers, teachers must employ critique. Explicitly, Kincheloe maintains that instead of being lead to the "concrete pudding" (p. 55) we can get to the critique how we choose, based on our constructed knowledge and not "what dominant groups of humans perceive it to be" (p. 8).

Kincheloe presents an activist road for the reader. He uncovers issues and reminds the reader to be cautious of objectivism and reductionism when living within complex times. Again and again, Kincheloe prods the reader to ask questions – to problematize the event. Varela's (1999) Buddhist concept of "crazy wisdom" is one that Kincheloe describes as a vehicle which may allow our formative thinking to reflect within an "all knowing" stance. Kincheloe describes "crazy wisdom" as an improvisational tool for thinking in and around and out from an idea, concept or theory. The production and development of "self" becomes a dynamic factor in the place of "crazy wisdom". This "process operates to create new social, cultural, political and economic relationships ... the self is infinitely more malleable, more open to change ...this dimension of selfhood can be

mobilized for great benefit or manipulated for great harm” (p. 57). Kincheloe’s point here is that we have available the tools to construct our own involvements and futures, owning, even for short periods of time, our own perspectives constructed, or enacted, in the moment from an informed place of “crazy wisdom”.

Kincheloe challenges teachers to be aware, to know “that no teaching, curriculum development or knowledge production is value free, no language is politically neutral, and no meaning-making process is objective” (p. 59). This does not mean that we have no agency within this construct. Rather, Kincheloe is saying that we have agency to create a new way of being within the sociocultural political environment. This is the important restructuring that Paulo Freire describes when critical perception enables our human practice (Freire, 1987). Dominant power groups, such as those represented in twenty-first century media, become less of a threat when we seek to critically understand the power groups involved. Ideologies presented within emotional and politically charged environments have less of a manipulative impact when the critical constructivist is empowered and striving towards “an emancipatory curriculum” (p. 66).

Kincheloe makes a strong argument for implementation in regards to teacher scholarly activity, professional development and classroom practice as an emancipatory act. He calls for a research-based model which collaboratively allows teachers to “have the opportunity to reflect on their skills and pedagogical practices, to engage in research in their subject areas and in the community surrounding their schools” (p. 69). These are radical school improvement goals in today’s school context with far reaching implications for teacher education programs within universities. Kincheloe’s conception calls for a rigorous transformation of the existing colonial education structures heralding a multifaceted teacher education which includes scholarship, research ability and development of social and pedagogical skills.

The subsequent role of teachers as the new holders of knowledge, “taking responsibility for student learning” (p. 67), diagnosing students’ “academic needs, talents, and personal concerns” (p. 69), analyzing “educational and cognitive psychology” (p. 70), “experts in pedagogical methods” (p. 71), understanding “the genesis of educational policy and purpose” (p. 72), and with all “of these expanded abilities and higher expectations, teachers become evaluation experts” (p. 72). This depiction of teachers as experts is unsettling to me. I hope that Kincheloe is not suggesting that critical constructivist teachers are akin to ‘the Great and Powerful Oz’! Educational settings are most often at their best when viewed as environments where knowledge and learning is co-constructed. Kincheloe’s presentation here of teacher as expert stands in contrast to the ontological and epistemological roots of critical constructivist theory (p. 7 & 8) where knowledge and learning is a co-constructed experience.

The later section of Kincheloe’s book sidesteps from the theoretical perspective of his mentor, Antonio Gramsci. Whereas Gramsci’s theory of hegemony is “not a political struggle framed within the polarities of an imposing dominant culture and weak or authentic subordinate cultures” (Giroux, 2005) Kincheloe clearly positions teachers within a highly charged and political struggle. Unlike Kincheloe’s inscribed and value laden position, Gramsci suggests that the dominant power can only work towards a critical change that is responsive to the subordinate group if it can find affinity with these groups. In the rocky relational setting of today’s educational climate, I caution against such a powerful critical constructivist push as proposed by Kincheloe. Another mentor of Kincheloe’s offers wise words to be mindful of here; Freire speaks about the importance of flexibility in having the “capacity to renew ourselves everyday. It prevents us from falling into what I call “bureaucratism of mind” (Freire, 1985). In contrast to Kincheloe’s edgy “calling to arms” Freire recognizes the teacher’s role as a path balanced between freedom and authority. Freire speaks of patience and impatience, tolerance and humility and love. All of these virtues allow the teacher to enter into a critical view as a learner, not so much the expert, but, as a learner with much to learn.

Once again, a shift of metaphors as Kincheloe propositions the reader to understand “blue knowledge” – this is when we get a glimpse of the natural curiosity and personal subjectivities of Joe Kincheloe. His love of the blues style of music serves as a metaphor for his own powerful struggle as a child out and beyond a subordinated group. This personal expose is a powerful example of the forces and influences that shaped and inscribed Kincheloe’s identity. It is clear that Kincheloe gained much from his subjugated childhood experiences, he chooses to use his perspectives to challenge the dominate powers and look critically at the injustices that prevail. “Blue Knowledge” is Kincheloe’s lens on the world.

The epistemology of “blues knowledge” stems from the improvisational essence of blues music. The blues as a form has its roots in African American culture, recalling life in a raw, heart rending, and soulful way. Blues lyrics lay out relationships and events in a mournful lyric, but always with hope of another day. Kincheloe says that this “impassioned spirit has appealed to me and shaped my life since I first comprehended it” (p. 161) and that even though there are the ever existing dominant powers that serve to subjugate there is a another day. So “we can celebrate, have a good time, and even get down” (p. 161). This expose may be uncomfortable for some, but this is where we get to really live Joe Kincheloe’s take on critical constructivism.

‘Blue Knowledge’ applied to critical constructivism offers the novice reader an opportunity to view this theoretical structure in smaller pieces that may be easier to conceptualize and position oneself within. Borrowing the Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1962) approach here, “blue knowledge” takes us to a zone where “crazy wisdom” can exist to resort the ambiguous pieces of the sociocultural, political, psychological, economic and pedagogical dynamics and allow us to understand how the parts fit, break and work in a synergistic way. The blues idiom is about the “power of difference, subjugated knowledges and the importance of the view from below” (p. 162). Kincheloe offers up “blue knowledge” as kind of a “heh now” (Murray, 1996) way of approaching teaching and learning within the critical constructivist paradigm. In this lyrical analogy the critical constructivist paradigm becomes an affirmation of life (Murray, 2000) and a kind of “improvisational” readiness on the edges of our thinking (Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1962).

The reader may find Kincheloe’s final point of “blue knowledge” to be less of a problematized path into this complex topic of Critical Constructivism. For many researchers and teachers, the critical constructivist theoretical framework is fraught with edgy, ambiguous critique. Gramsci’s view of self-critique, as Kincheloe presents it, contextualizes the influences and forces to make sense of self and the world, as we are in it. As I have noted, this constant state of vigilance can be exhausting and counter-productive in many relational settings. Throughout the 12 points set out in *Critical Constructivism*, Kincheloe has aimed to deconstruct the complexities of critical theory for the reader. His use of “blue knowledge” as a metaphor of that same old blues lyric of being down and subjugated and “I gotta’ get strong and be the one – the one to get on” is the essence of Kincheloe’s thesis. Kincheloe wants this primer to serve as a way into the critical constructivist viewpoint.

Overall, this book would be a seminal introduction for any novice researcher or educator as well as an affirming read for those more seasoned in “seeing and constructing the world” (p. 4) through the lens of a critical constructivist. Kincheloe presents this book as a primer for the novice. But, while I read, I found myself more often than not sidelined, othered, and somewhat marginalized by the sheer force and domination of the critical constructivist “script”. The Joe Kincheloe that comes through in *Critical Constructivism* is edgy, purpose driven and somewhat “obsessed with a new and better way of being human” (p. 59). Kincheloe’s personable and layback nature just doesn’t come through as he attaches himself to major theorists, all of whom I noticed were from an international arena. Other than his group of scholarly counterparts (McLaren, Gee, Lankshear, Giroux, Fischman) here in the U.S. Kincheloe draws his “tomorrow” from afar (Freire, Foucault,

Gramsci, Maturano, Varela, Bakhtin, Derrida). I wonder how much this has to do with Kincheloe's personal journey to rise up and away from the subjugated years of his childhood.

In conclusion, if Kincheloe seeks to draw in and include those he has deemed subjugated then I question some of the powerful choice of language use in *Critical Constructivism*. Bracey (2006) reminds us that "(L)anguage that seeks to make up your mind for you or to send your mind thinking in a certain direction is not the language of research (p. xvii)". Kincheloe's powerful word choices, such as, stupid, judging, covertly, insidiously mold, hot lead enema of fixed meanings, tyranny of the official text, ignorant, confront obsessed, uncover conspiracies, on alert, cannot stomach, cannot withstand, disastrous, ego-greed, white supremacy, thwart our pursuit, indoctrination, and more, more, more – "do not impress one with their desire to reveal unvarnished truth" (p. xviii). Kincheloe's (2005) efforts to write a "smart and accessible" (p. 2) book may be somewhat thwarted by his zeal to serve out a dynamic and complex telling of critical constructivism and its relational characteristics to teaching and knowledge production. Readers must possess a rigorous ability and context to move beyond the language construct that Kincheloe chooses to frame his take on critical constructivism in order to get at the "integrity and complexity of the topic" (p. 2). I found it surprising that Kincheloe's efforts to offer an accessible and clear take on critical constructivism were at times sidelined by the sheer power and force of the language.

At its heart, Kincheloe's *Critical Constructivism* provides a serious deconstruction of what it *is* to be critically aware as knowledge is constructed. As a true bricoleur, Kincheloe has tinkered with the concepts within the Critical Constructivist paradigm and offered an engaging and edgy trek through this complex and dynamic terrain. And, in the end, Kincheloe celebrates human agency within all possible worlds, he challenging researchers and teachers to take a little from here and little from there, laugh a little and question – always question. In conclusion, this book describes Kincheloe's theoretical base, offers a well depicted research base in presenting theory and practice, and moreover, serves to stimulate further discussion and research in this area of study. However, there are critical issues with Kincheloe's presentation of the topic, and the reader is encouraged to keep the words of Paulo Friere close at hand:

"I just want to thank the readers for reading this conversation. I also ask them not to just accept what we said, but to think critically of what we said" (Freire, 1985).

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