Critical Praxis Research
EXPLORATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE

Volume 19

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Joe Kincheloe (1950–2008)

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Series Scope

In today’s dominant modes of pedagogy, questions about issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, and other social dynamics are rarely asked. Questions about the social spaces where pedagogy takes place – in schools, media, and corporate think tanks – are not raised. And they need to be.

The Explorations of Educational Purpose book series can help establish a renewed interest in such questions and their centrality in the larger study of education and the preparation of teachers and other educational professionals. The editors of this series feel that education matters and that the world is in need of a rethinking of education and educational purpose.

Coming from a critical pedagogical orientation, Explorations of Educational Purpose aims to have the study of education transcend the trivialization that often degrades it. Rather than be content with the frivolous, scholarly lax forms of teacher education and weak teaching prevailing in the world today, we should work towards education that truly takes the unattained potential of human beings as its starting point. The series will present studies of all dimensions of education and offer alternatives. The ultimate aim of the series is to create new possibilities for people around the world who suffer under the current design of socio-political and educational institutions.

For further volumes:
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Critical Praxis Research

Breathing New Life into Research Methods for Teachers
Preface

For the past 2 years I have felt as if I am perpetually sitting still in front of my computer screen, trapped in existential musings. Much has happened to the world around me during that time. Education has shifted from No Child Left Behind to Race to the Top. The United States embraced its first Black president. Global capitalism began to spiral downward and was “rescued” by bailouts. The wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan continue to rage on. In my little corner of the world, I have come to the sometimes comforting, sometimes disconcerting realization that I am and will always be a critical theorist. I have seen the joy of births and new relationships, the heartaches of death and loss, and I have shared ideas with many wonderful critical allies. Through all this, existential questions weigh heavily on my brain and my heart as much as I try to ignore them.

Throughout my life I have been prone to asking existential questions. I distinctly remember when I was 9 years old, driving across Canada to Alaska with my family. I asked my father as we sat at the fold-out table in our mobile home, “How do you know what’s real?” He didn’t respond right away, so I rephrased my question, “I mean, sometimes, life feels like a dream and dreams feel like life. So, how do you know what’s real?” I don’t think he answered me, or if he did, I don’t remember what his answer was, but I can only imagine how strange it must have seemed to hear that type of questioning coming from a 9-year old. That was 25 years ago, and I am still asking the same types of questions. What is the nature of reality? What is our purpose here? What is the purpose of research? What is the purpose of education? Who am I in this great big confusing world? I realize now that I was then and will continue to be a philosopher and critical pedagogue.

When I first came up with the idea for this text in early 2008, I had recently begun working with doctoral students at the University of Massachusetts Boston. In my individual conversations with my students, I was beginning to see a pattern in how they would approach their research. Conversations invariably would go something like this:

**Tricia:** Tell me about your research topic.

**Student:** I’m interested in studying {insert topic about urban education here}.

**Tricia:** How did you come to that topic?
Student: I’ve been reading about {topic X} and a lot of the research says {Y}, but I’m seeing that there may be something else going on based on what is happening in my {insert context; school, home life, other work setting}, and I really want to find a way to do something about this.

Of course, the students would change, their settings would change, and their topics would change, but what remained the same for most of them was how much their Selves, their work settings, and their desires to improve something were reflected in the research they gravitated toward. The pattern I saw was this interplay between identity, context, and purpose as the impetus for research.

To appease my existentially questioning brain’s need to understand what was going on, I called up my mentor and friend Joe Kincheloe, and we had a jovial conversation about this interesting revelation I had. Joe’s matter of fact assertion, “Tricia, that’s wonderful! You’re developing a methodology,” was the catalyst for this textbook about what is, essentially, an existential philosophy of teacher research that I have named Critical Praxis Research. Tragically, Joe passed away about 8 months later, and I was never able to share with him the fruits of his mentorship and encouragement. I was just putting the finishing touches on Chapter 1 when I heard the news.

Since then, I have done much reading, writing, thinking, grieving, and growing, and I have come to the understanding that Critical Praxis Research was not so much me developing a methodology, but rather me naming, identifying, and theorizing a kind of methodology which many practitioners (myself included) already embraced. I won’t be so bold as to assume that I have created something entirely new here. On the contrary, I believe this text surfaces what Critical Praxis Researchers already know, feel, and do. True to the ideas in this text, my purpose here is inextricable from my identity as a Critical Praxis Researcher who often feels outnumbered or alone in the “too cold” academy. By writing this text and identifying Critical Praxis Research as a methodology, I hope to provide existing and future Critical Praxis Researchers with a space to ponder their existential questions while feeling connected to, thinking with, grieving, and growing alongside others who do this type of work.

Boston, Massachusetts Tricia M. Kress
I would like to express my sincerest thanks to the people who have supported me through this very long and sometimes painful process. Thank you to my husband Corey who has been way more patient with me than I probably deserved. Thank you to my family and friends for your encouragement and love. Shout out to AN for keeping me sane and making me laugh. Thank you to Roser Giné who helped me with my editing. A special thanks to Melissa Winchell who helped me through the last leg of the work. Your contributions are so greatly appreciated; I could not have done this without you. Thank you to my UMass colleagues, especially Donna DeGennaro and Patricia Paugh. Thank you to my students and graduates for being your wonderful, joyful, inspirational Selves, especially my Research Crew and Dr. Chris Avilés who let me test-drive this methodology with him. Thank you to series editors Shirley Steinberg and Ken Tobin for this opportunity and your patience with me. And finally, my eternal gratitude to Joe Kincheloe my mentor and friend whose voice continues to guide me through this critical adventure. In solidarity...
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