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RECONCEPTUALIZING EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

The Promotion of a Critical Consciousness

Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg’s (1996) concept of postformal thinking is essentially about the critical interpretation of reality—the dynamically ever changing process through which we socially construct the knowledge that mediates and informs our actions. Their critical confrontation with modernistic cognitive theory provides a critical cognitive alternative that is not only germane to but also essential in our confrontation with the global, local, and personal challenges of the 21st century. These challenges range from environmental crises on a planetary level, a state or region’s budgetary struggle to balance income/expenditures and the provision of basic human needs, to an individual’s struggle for self-identity. To critically engage these exigent challenges, Kincheloe (1999) states, “Moving beyond the certainty and authority of modernist formality is a central goal of a postformal approach” (p. 19). In opposition to the modernist/formal “focus on hidden assumptions, false notions of objectivity, and contextualization of scholarly disciplines historically and socially” (p. 19), postformalism adopts a self-critical stance that “leads to a search for new literacies that address the unique interpretive demands of hyperreality’s visual imagery” (p. 19).

An additional challenge that can be significantly informed by postformal thinking deals with the nature of democracy. As a social construct, the meaning of democracy is constantly renegotiated and contested by various ideologically driven interest groups. The social justice implications of this democratic process are significant for the arrangement of power and personal identity within a society. Questions that are indicative of this challenge include: What kind of democracy should be representative of society? What kind of democracy should schools promote? What would be the nature of a democracy whose project is social justice for all? How can oppressive ideologies and regimes of practice be resisted? Postformal thinking provides a meta-cognitive process that can engage the complexity of the meaning and practice of democracy through a critical interrogation of the socio-historical context in which the meaning of democracy is embedded.

THE NATURE OF POSTFORMAL THINKING

As conceived by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1996), postformal thinking provides a multi-faceted sociocognitive process through which complex problems can be effectively detected, critically interrogated, and potentially resolved while maintaining...
a critical concern for social justice, democratic participation, and an ethic of care. This multilogical process draws insight from a diversity of perspectives such as “critical theory, feminist theory, critical multiculturalism, cultural studies, ecological theory, postmodernist epistemologies, indigenous knowledges, situated cognition, and post-structuralist psychoanalysis” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 5). Kincheloe (1999) expresses the purpose behind this process:

Using ideas taken from this variety of discourses, my purpose here involves the tentative formulation of a democratic educational psychology that is ethically and culturally grounded and that supports a critical pedagogy. Such a psychology I will refer to as postformal thinking in its cognitive manifestation and as postformal educational psychology in a more holistic sciences-of-the-psyche expression. Such an holistic discipline would include the domains typically addressed by cognitive studies, psychoanalysis, and social psychology (pp. 5–6).

Postformal thinking promotes a body of pluralistic knowledge and a bricolage of methodology that acknowledge the inherent complexity of human activity. One way that postformal thinking departs from other modernistic processes in understanding reality is in its attempt to politicize and humanize—or as Kincheloe (2004a) characterizes, “contextualize humanness” (p. 14)—the process of problem detection, critical interrogation of the situational context, and the generation of potential egalitarian solutions. Another significant difference is that, as a socio-cognitive theory, postformalism “blurs boundaries separating cognition, culture, society, epistemology, history, psychoanalysis, philosophy, economics, and politics” (Kincheloe, 2004b, p. 863).

The complex nature of the challenges of our age, in relation to a desire for social justice, creates an added relevance and urgency for the promotion of postformal thinking. The processes used to detect and solve these challenges are fundamental to the successful and equitable resolution of these challenges. To a large degree, those who engage in serious attempts of problem detection and solution are now somewhat aware of the ecological nature of these problems, and of the inherent and dynamic interconnectedness and interrelationship of multiple problems and the components that comprise one specific situation. Also, some attention is given to the highly contextual nature of problems, including how the personal mediates and informs our deliberations, conclusions, and actions in relation to engaging a problem.

However, the “amoral technicism” (Kincheloe, 2004a, p. 30), systematic, procedure-based, and empirical decontextualized nature of these reductionist processes alone cannot result in a socially just resolution of a problem. Postformal thinking, as the foundation for a postformal educational psychology, provides the potential to critically interrogate the systemic and local context, the social and personal context, and the processes employed to address the issue. As this foundation, “Postformalism understands that intelligence, justice, emotion, activity, disposition, context, access, power, justice, tools, process, and ethics ad infinitum cannot be separated in the study of educational psychology” (Kincheloe, 2004a, p. 34).

Additionally, what is required is a meta-awareness that begins when “postformal thinkers are cognizant of the relationship between the way they themselves and