Joe Kincheloe was always ahead of the curve; he seems to have seen and thought beyond what we experience in the present. Joe saw so far ahead of the curve that the curve became a circle, or rather a cycle that he saw strengthening as it spiralled out of control. In his 1991 chapter “Exposing the Technocratic Perversion of Education: The Death of the Democratic Philosophy of Schooling” in James J. Van Patten’s *The socio-cultural foundations of education and the evolution of education policies in the United States*, Kincheloe recognized the same cycle of technicalization in education and society that envelops us today. Technocratic society imposes technique-centered policies upon education, which then feeds technocratic-minded citizens back into the society to perpetuate the cycle. Kincheloe engages dialectically with recent historical and current educational and cultural dynamics in anticipation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which threatens to be the centerpiece of the societal technocratic overtaking of teaching. Although NCLB was not enacted until 2002, 11 years after the publication of Joe’s piece, in it he demonstrates his ability to foresee “the subtle and insidious ways that technicalization invades our workplaces, our schools, and our assumptions about human nature and education” (1991, p. 194), which he believed would be created by a laser-pointed, unconsidered focus on one-size-fits-all standardized testing.

Kincheloe’s philosophy is grounded in a participatory, critical theory of democratic education—one that promotes the interests of the people and practices social equality. At the conclusion of the Van Patten chapter, in a section called “what is to be done,” Kincheloe lays out what are some of the guiding principles of his argument. On page 220, he insists that the “continuing drift toward technicalization” in education “conflicts with the various goals of education in a democratic society.” Referencing John Dewey, the father of American progressivism, Kincheloe maintains that we should be in a constant state of creating “the most democratic society possible.” He asserts that the truly democratic society “would serve the best interests of as many individuals and groups as possible.” Furthermore, democratic schools would be committed to passing along learning and knowledge to prepare and empower individuals and groups who would serve the ideals of democracy. His model school would not assign students social roles or career goals, but rather would teach learners to think deeply, critically, and freely and to attempt to understand all dimensions of the human experience, so that they would be capable of choosing their own best-suited career paths. These schools would be liberatory for students, “free[ing] [them] from ignorance” (1991, p. 199). He says, “Education should begin with the
assumption that every person desires to be occupied in work which will make the lives of others better worth living” (1991, p. 222). What Kincheloe exposes is the technicalization in education which he predicts will tempt teachers to teach to tests at the cost of context and meaning and thus manipulate students to perpetuate the status quo. Students (and teachers) shaped in this way cannot possibly serve as citizens who would further the aims of a free, constantly improving, lively, democratic society. “To avoid the dehumanization that such over-emphasis of technique brings about,” Kincheloe believes, “educators must first recognize that there is a problem” (1991, p. 194). Recognizing the problem, however, requires a breaking of the technique-focused mindset and, thus, the technocratic cycle. Kincheloe’s prediction has been borne out, perhaps beyond even his expectations. In 2005, after witnessing the effects of the first few years of NCLB, Kincheloe decries that “[i]n the twenty-first century, the idea that teachers understand the complexity of the educational world is a radical proposition in and of itself,” with “many educational reformers see[ing] no need for teachers to be rigorous scholars” (2005, p. 5). “Indeed,” Kincheloe continues, “the No Child Left Behind reforms require disempowered teachers who do what they’re told and often read pre-designed scripts to their students” (2005, p. 5). The disempowerment of the citizenry thus begins with the disempowerment of the public school teacher—the focal point of education for the majority of our young people and the leaders in the classroom.” [S]uch actions” as the NCLB reforms “are insulting to the teaching profession and are designed ultimately to destroy the concept of public education itself,” Kincheloe concludes (2005, p. 5). In his 1991 article Kincheloe outlines the subversive, perverting effects of technicalization that find their logical conclusion in NCLB. In the 14 years between his first article and Kincheloe’s 2005 critique, he watched NCLB insult the teaching profession, as well as individual teachers themselves, and begin the process of destroying the credibility and functionality of public schooling if not the notion of public education itself. One of the most devastating consequences of high-stakes testing is the phenomenon of cheating by teachers. A series of *Dallas Morning News* stories in 2004 reports finding extensive test cheating on the elementary school level in Texas (Benton and Hacker, 2004). A state investigation identifies 22 teachers and other educators in poor, urban schools in Dallas and Houston as improperly assisting students on the TAKS test, including distributing answer keys in some cases. The false “Texas miracle” stands as the most infamous but just one of many cases of principals and teachers knowingly participating in academic fraud. (See also Grow [2004] for an overview of nationwide NCLB cheating by teachers.) In this extreme case, teachers were pressured by the educational and political systems, as well as their principals, to demonstrate that students could achieve passing (or improved) test scores—even if they did not, or could not. The stakes in the standardized test score game range in severity depending on many different factors, perhaps most importantly the amount of local funding of the school. If a loss of federal funding represents a significant piece of the school’s financial pie, the test results weigh that much heavier on a teacher’s mind. Disempowered, dehumanized as Kincheloe predicted, and perhaps unconscious of the long-term consequences,
these lost and desperate educators discredit their profession and insult their students and themselves by buying into the power of the test rather than questioning its validity as a measure of the worth of their professional efforts. Moreover, teachers infected with such thought-destroying fear and confusion could never provide rich, challenging, and intellectual curriculum to their students. They would not have the mental freedom to focus on such a project.

Headline-grabbing stories of dishonesty such as those described in the “Texas miracle” rise as peaks in the new landscape of education under NCLB, but the general terrain is also destructive in a much quieter, “subtle and insidious” as Kincheloe put it (1991, p. 194), yet equally devastating way. Knowing that the standardized test waits, and dreading the consequences of failing scores, some teachers are resigned to aligning too strictly to the course set out for them. To teach for broad and deep understanding, to follow either their own interests or the interests of the students, seems a dangerous and ill-advised path when the allocation of time and resources can result in loss of funding for programs or schools. As Kincheloe argued in 2005, here is where “many educational reformers see no need for teachers to be rigorous scholars” (p. 5), because the “rigorous scholarship” has already been done for the teachers by those who set the curriculum. Teachers become mere technocrats, facilitators of the material and neutral conduits of an agenda-driven educational program. In these schools, we begin the process of removing students’ emotions from the learning environment. We dehumanize them. “The more ‘dehumanized’ a bureaucracy becomes,” Kincheloe warned, “the more ‘success’ it attains,” with “success” defined as the creation of a place where “rules and regulations can work more predictably” (1991, p. 198). The “successful” teacher thus becomes one who simply reads the assigned script designed to shape a new generation of passive citizens and workers. Certainly subject content needs to be conveyed to the student, but that content is too often fragmented by the technocratic method rather than integrated meaningfully, as Kincheloe desires. Instead of opening up new worlds to students by way of expansive lesson plans that teach students to link complex ideas together, teachers narrow their teaching and deny their students the possibility of meaningful learning. When young people are deprived of learning to think, what is the significance of passing scores on a standardized test? When young people cannot take a position on a complex issue, and compose an argument supporting that position, what is the value of achieving the targeted score on a standardized test? If we are not asking (and attempting to answer) in public schools the most difficult questions that life and society pose, what becomes of the abilities of the more than 2,649,594 students who graduate from our public schools each year (Stillwell and Hoffman, 2009)? What can we expect from them as citizens and parents?

It should be no surprise that the consequences of a steady diet of prescribed learning can have a serious impact on prospective teachers. Since the implementation of NCLB in January 2002, a large cohort of students who experienced only that mode of education through secondary school and higher education now stand poised to become the next generation of educators. Ironically,
another component of the NCLB Act is focused on providing a “highly qualified teacher” for every classroom. What can that mean in practice? In a recent graduate-level course at the very beginning of the program cycle, an exercise focused on the uses of active listening in facilitating group discussion became a snapshot of the effect of NCLB on what students think about learning and teaching. (See Gordon and Burch, 1974, pp. 90-94, for the original script.) A scripted role-playing scenario was acted out in which a high-school level teacher asks an open-ended question about a reading on the Spanish-American War. The teacher’s objectives for the lesson are not stated, but the students inquire as to the role of girls and the perspectives of the Spanish people at the time of the war. Eventually the discussion focuses on whether or not history books can be (should be) accepted as accounts of truth—actual, partial, or biased—and what standards one should use when reading history books. The teacher allows the students to engage in the discussion for some time and at the end of the script, she incorporates the students’ interests in assigning tasks to be accomplished in a future class.

After the role-play ended, the professor initiated a debriefing session on students’ assessments of the teacher’s handling of the discussion. The majority of the graduate students disagreed with the teacher’s approach—in fact, they called it a digression—because the students did not spend enough time on discussing the war. They said that you must “teach to the test” or else NCLB will “cost you your job” and cost the students their school. The pre-service teachers labelled such rich discussions risky and irrelevant because they could lead students off the task of memorizing information that would be regurgitated on a standardized test. These graduate students initially resisted the counterargument that such digressions, such discussions, although requiring an investment of time away from the narrow conception of the mandated curriculum, could serve as a significant and valuable perspective-taking activity, enlarging students’ perceptions of a complex social reality as it existed during the Spanish-American War period. Even before facing any real possibility of lost jobs or funding, something they may never actually confront, these pre-service teachers allowed propagandized fear and dread to limit their thinking. We would argue with Kincheloe, as he did decades ago, that indoctrination into the NCLB mode, in which the teacher relinquishes her responsibility to create complex and meaningful curriculum compels new and old teachers alike to steer a straight path along a fixed curriculum and to avoid any “detours” no matter what benefits (i.e., interest, inspiration, and motivation) might accrue to students because of them.

After eight years of NCLB, many former students now looking to become teachers themselves know no other model of education than that infected by NCLB. The “perversion of education” Kincheloe speaks of in his title comes to fruition as the fact-peddling educational system itself creates its own future fact-peddlers. NCLB has successfully socialized students to value isolated facts over narratives that string those facts together into meaningful wholes. “North American students are taught to attack problems as if they emerged in isolation,” Kincheloe writes, “detached from the dynamic social and political forces which bestow meaning” (1991, p. 215). Sadly, the idea that the Spanish-American War
might have been an imperialist war of choice (or any of the other implications or repercussions of the conflict) loses the battle with names, dates, and other trivia that are truly “trivial” in the sense of lacking relevance for today. “The subject matter is ready-made in the sense that it is presented as an end in itself,” Kincheloe warns (1991, p. 216). Rather than students learning to question, critique, and understand, a prescribed body of knowledge becomes the ultimate educational end as embodied by items on standardized tests. Instructors, including instructors-to-be, pass on the passivity of this approach to their students by thwarting active thinking, labelling it as wasteful digression rather than mind-opening and horizon-widening cognition.

The values of education thus become perverted to the point of being turned around almost 180 degrees, pointing the system, the students, and new generations of teachers in a counter-productive direction.

How then can education, as Kincheloe saw it, in the age of NCLB, be pointed back in the right direction? While he warns of “the implicit consequences of educational acts” (1991, p. 218) that serve the agenda of positivism and the creation of a passive, unquestioning citizen, he believes that the answer lies in the hands of the teacher and his/her ability to take a critical and creative approach in the classroom. “Critical thinking enables humans to ‘transcend’ their own histories or backgrounds so that they can escape the helplessness which comes from an unexamined heritage,” Kincheloe asserts (1991, p. 219).

To enable students to experience this transcendence, teachers must transcend prescriptive thinking through critical re-evaluations of their own. They must reflect and manifest a critical mindset in their dealings with young people and once that cognitive shift happens, critical and creative sparks begin to fly. “This emphasis on critical thinking with its analysis and questioning rubs against some basic fundamentalist assumptions [of NCLB and positivists] concerning learning,” Kincheloe argues (1991, p. 219). From this friction, generated when the positivist definition of learning rubs up against the critical theory definition of learning, emerge the human warmth and intellectual emancipation and enlightenment which are needed to cast off the chill and the emptiness of education as mere, disconnected facts. “Too often the critical thinking promoted by the schools is a diluted form of analytical thought,” Kincheloe argued, “presented without social or historical context emphasizing only technical academic skills” (1991, p. 217). Students are taught just enough critical-type thinking to be of service but not enough to pose a danger to the status quo either at work or of the government. “[E]ducation which does not promote [critical thinking] is an impediment to human self-determination,” Kincheloe believes (1991, p. 219).

Through critical mindedness, students themselves can ask for a better system of education and exercise their democratic right of self-determination. Teachers can inspire and guide students to question the educational system and participate in their own learning, thus becoming active agents, “responsible subjects… in the search for self-affirmation” (Freire, [1970] 1993, p. 18) instead of passive receptacles. In many schools, education conducted in the NCLB mode becomes the Freirian model of banking education (Freire, p. 53) which he, too, names
dehumanizing. No one has a bigger stake in education than students, although they may not be awake to that fact. Teaching students the importance of assuming their rightful role in the educational process and authorizing them to take up the power of agency prepares them for a lifetime of participating in the workplace and government. With empowered students, Kincheloe’s envisioned “modest” result of “a corps of American citizens capable of using their minds to identify, understand, and even offer solutions to problems created by the developing and ever-changing cultures of this planet” (1991, p. 224) could be realized. Society’s hope and the true education’s bonus will be the ever-questioning, critically-minded graduate. The downward spiral of the technocratic cycle could thus be reversed into an upward spiral, beginning with the foundation of education and then cycling out of technocracy’s control to the workplace, the voting booth, and the global community.

NOTES

1 Kincheloe wrote his 1991 article soon after Goals 2000, which some argue began the modern American fascination with accountability in schools. Standardized testing programs subsequently grew substantially after Goals 2000 to determine if U.S. students were meeting the goals.

2 This limited thinking of these pre-service teachers recalls Freire’s idea of “limit-situations,” i.e., obstacles that are more mental states than actual impediments ([1970] 1993, p. 80). “[I]t is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness,” Freire wrote, “but rather how they are perceived by women and men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers” ([1970] 1993, p. 80). These pre-service teachers exhibit “a dominated consciousness which has not yet perceived a limit-situation in its totality [and] apprehends only its epiphenomena and transfers to the latter the inhibiting force which is the property of the limit-situation” (Freire, [1970] 1993, p. 85). In this case, the student teachers hand over power to such “epiphenomena” as “teaching to the test” at the expense of disempowering themselves and their students. This transference of power reinforces the resistance to a liberated mindset, as displayed by the pre-service teachers after the exercise, and is predicted by Freire ([1970] 1993, p. 85). By casting off the “fetters” of technocracy that compel them to “teach to the test,” however, these future educators can liberate themselves and their students to greater opportunities for learning.

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