



On Being a Scholar/Activist: Personal History and Acquired Wisdom

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Introduction

Requests to publicly think about what one has learned over time are always interesting to me. They require that authors reflect back on a trajectory that may not be totally clear even to the writers themselves. They ask writers to construct an historical narrative that is simultaneously both personal and intellectual/political. In this “acquired wisdom” essay, I want to engage with this combined task, to reflect on some of the political/intellectual/educational history of the development of my work over time, on some of the most important things I have learned, and on the situations and processes that made this more likely. At the same time, I want to situate this development in some of the more

personal groundings that might explain how and why the work I’ve done came about.

Let me begin with some general points that bear on my later comments about my grounding in politically engaged educational efforts. There are two fundamental motivations behind such critical work. The first is understanding the complex dynamics of exploitation, domination, and subordination that all too often structure our societies and their constitutive relations inside and outside of education. Yet, while understanding is absolutely crucial, it is not sufficient. Emerging out of such understandings is a commitment to interruption. Both understanding and interruption have their basis in a set of ethical and political commitments that are simultaneously collective and personal (Bourdieu, 2003). And both are crucial to me.

Getting There

An account of the ongoing development of these commitments and how they affected both my political and educational work and my writing can perhaps be best seen by starting with a personal story.¹

It was late in the evening and I had just come home after a day of elementary school teaching, filled with the combination of exhaustion, tension, and

¹ Parts of the following essay are drawn and revised from the autobiographical account in Apple (2013).

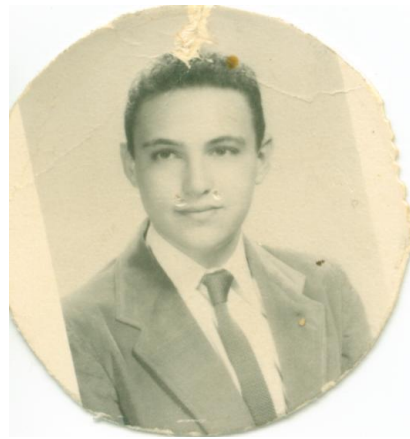
sometimes pure joy that accompanies working in schools. There was something waiting for me, a letter from Teachers College, Columbia University. I opened it with much trepidation. But the news was good. I was admitted to the Philosophy of Education program there. I had been accepted elsewhere, but this was the 1960s, and in my mind “TC” was the place to be if one was deeply interested in challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices of schooling.

To tell the truth, I was surprised that I had been admitted. I was among a very small number of relatives who had finished secondary school and the first person in my family to go to college. I had gone to two small state teachers colleges at night for my undergraduate degree, a degree that was not yet finished since I had to complete some required courses that summer. And while working full-time as a printer before my part-time undergraduate career was interrupted by the army, my grade point average was, to be honest, pretty low. Luckily, Teachers College focused on my post-army last two years of college work. It’s also possible that my history of anti-racist and labor activism that began in my teenage years, along with my time spent teaching in some very challenging inner city and rural schools, may have helped TC decide to take a chance on me.

The army had “trained” me to be a teacher and many urban schools were facing a very serious teacher shortage. Thus, I began teaching without a degree in the inner-city schools of Paterson, New Jersey, schools I had attended as a child,²

² If you have ever seen the popular film *Lean on Me*, the much romanticized account of how a principal supposedly changed a “failing” inner city school, this was based on Eastside High School in Paterson, New Jersey. This is the high school I attended and one of the

and then moved to teach for a number of years in a small rural and strikingly conservative town in southern New Jersey where I predictably had some serious conflicts with ultra-conservative and racist groups in the community (see Apple, 1999). (This experience may partly account for some of the reasons I focused on the growth in power of conservative social and religious movements in education and the larger society in a good deal of my later writing.)



First year teacher.
(Courtesy of author)

I had also been a president of a teachers union, a continuation of a family tradition of political activism.³ I loved teaching; but I was more than a little distressed by the ways teachers were treated, by curricula that were almost

schools in Paterson at which I taught. It may also be of some interest that during the Red Scare days in the 1950s, many of my family’s radical books and journals were wrapped in plastic and buried under a chicken coop at my grandfather’s small farm. The books were dug up during the time I was at Columbia and given to me as a gift, signifying that I was carrying on the family tradition.

³ I was what has been called a “red diaper baby,” the child of a communist mother and a socialist father. Needless to say, family discussions about politics were always “interesting.”

totally disconnected from the world of the children and communities in which I worked, and by policies that seemed to simply reproduce the poverty that surrounded me. Having grown up poor myself, this was not something that gave me much to be happy about as you might imagine. Taken together, all of this pushed me toward applying for a master's degree, with the aim of returning to the classroom. But something happened to me at Columbia. I found a way, a "vocation," that enabled me to combine my interests in politics, education, and the gritty materialities of daily life in schools. I ultimately continued on for a doctorate.

Going to Teachers College in New York City during the late 1960s was a remarkable experience in many ways. It treated intellectual work seriously and pushed me and others to the limits of what was possible to read and understand. For me, although I was already grounded in an intense family tradition of radical literacy, this was one of the first times in my formal educational career that I had been treated as if I could deal with some of the most complicated historical, economic, conceptual, political, and practical issues surrounding education. I was devoted to it and was dismayed by it at the very same time. The reason for the dismay was because TC (and Columbia University as a whole) was basically next to Harlem and yet its relations with impoverished schools and with the Black and Latinx communities nearby were often deservedly tense given its policies toward these communities. This fact provided students like me with a bit of kindling for the gritty anger that many of us already felt. This of course was complemented by the reality that Columbia was a deeply politicized environment at the time. The fact that I had already been an activist in anti-racist, anti-corporate, and anti-war movements

meant that the pressure cooker of studying at Columbia had to be balanced with the demands of political action.

In philosophy of education, I worked with Jonas Soltis, a fine analytic philosopher and teacher and someone who recognized that there might be something worthwhile in my rough and not yet polished conceptual abilities. But Jonas also recognized that whatever my growing conceptual talents (and they were growing since he was indeed a good teacher), I was chafing at the lack of connection between the world of analytic philosophy and the struggles over curricula, teaching, and community participation in schools. While I was clearly influenced by the analytic work of Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin, and especially Ludwig Wittgenstein, and by the historical treatments of the growth of significant philosophical traditions such as that of John Herman Randall, Jr., Jonas knew almost before I did that my real interests were centered on the politics of curriculum and teaching.

Near the end of my first year at TC, he sent me to see Alice Miel, the Chair of Curriculum and Teaching and someone whose contributions to democratic curriculum have not been sufficiently recognized. And Alice sent me to see Dwayne Huebner. Her suggestion had a profound impact on all that I have done.

Very few doctoral students had finished with Dwayne. He was exceptionally demanding (of himself as well as his students) and he was among the most creative critical curriculum scholars in the history of the field.⁴ He said that we needed to rethink all that we thought we knew about society, about schooling, about nearly everything (see,

⁴ For more on my relationship with Huebner, see Apple (2010).

e.g., Huebner, 1999). Dwayne sent me away with a list of more than 50 books to read—in philosophy, social theory, literature and literary theory, and curriculum history. For some this would have been off-putting. But for some reason, I took up the challenge and we met again—and again and again. I immersed myself in the books. It was a bewildering array and yet I began to see a pattern, a set of ways in which our “accepted wisdom” and common sense must and could be challenged. My political and pedagogic commitment to understanding and interrupting “uncritically accepted” common sense that was so much a part of my earlier political and educational activity became the central focus of my work as a scholar/activist throughout my career. If this was a test, I guess I passed it. Dwayne and I spent hours discussing the material. He questioned me; I questioned him. And a mutual bond was built that has lasted for a very long time.

There are specific reasons that I did not reject the challenging readings that Dwayne demanded that I read. When I was being trained as a teacher (I again use the word trained consciously) and went to one of those small state teachers college at night, nearly every course that I took had a specific suffix—“for teachers.” I took “Philosophy for Teachers,” “World History for Teachers,” “Mathematics for Teachers,” “Physics for Teachers,” and so on. The assumption seemed to be that since I had attended inner-city schools in a very poor community and was going back to teach in those same inner-city schools, I needed little more than a cursory understanding of the disciplines of knowledge and the theories that stood behind them. Theory was for those who were above people such as me.

There were elements of good sense in this. After all, when I had been taught

particular kinds of theory, both at that small state teachers college and even at times later on in my graduate studies, it was all too often totally disconnected from the realities of impoverishment, racism, class dynamics, gendered realities, decaying communities and schools, cultural struggles, and the lives of teachers and community members. But the elements of bad sense, of being intellectually marginalized and positioned as “less than” because of my class background, were palpable. For me and many others who grew up poor and who wanted to more fully understand our own experiences and why schooling, the economy, and indeed the world itself, looked the way they did, the search for adequate explanations became crucial. Learning and using *powerful* theory, especially powerful *critical* theories, in essence, became a counter-hegemonic act. Getting better at such theories, employing them to more fully comprehend the ways in which differential power actually worked, using them to see where alternatives could be and are being built in daily life, and ultimately doing all this in what we hoped were non-elitist ways gave us two things.

First, all of this knowledge made the realities of dominance both sensible, and at times, depressing. But, second, it also provided a sense of freedom and possibility, especially when it was connected to the political and educational actions in which many of us were also engaged. These same experiences could be spoken of by members of many other groups who have been marginalized by race, by sex/gender, by class, by colonialism, and by an entire array of other forms of differential power.

Thus, working with Dwayne Huebner was a deeply formative experience, as was becoming his teaching assistant. Dwayne sent me to The New School for Social

Research, a center for radical intellectual work and home to the most influential figures in critical philosophy and social theory, to take courses in phenomenology and critical social and cultural theory. My grounding in critical theory and the work of Karl Marx, Jurgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and others in that complex tradition can be traced to those experiences at The New School, as can the influences by the sociology of knowledge of Alfred Schutz and the radical phenomenological positions embodied in figures such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. At the same time, I began to read the work of two authors who had truly major influences on me later on—Raymond Williams (see Williams 1961, 1977) and Antonio Gramsci (1971)—both of whom stressed the crucial nature of the politics of both knowledge and common sense.

Dwayne insisted that I get to know Maxine Greene as well, a feminist and humanist literary theorist who also had a major influence on me. In essence, I did a joint degree in curriculum studies, philosophy, and sociology under the direction of Dwayne, Jonas, and Maxine. This combination led to a dissertation that brought these traditions together, “Relevance and Curriculum: A Study in the Phenomenological Sociology of Knowledge,” and provided the foundation and many of the guiding questions for much of my later work on the relationship

among education, knowledge, and power. Speaking honestly, in many ways being open to and recognizing the necessity of later lessons, of later “acquired knowledge,” had its basis in these formative political, theoretical, and intensely personal experiences.

Coming to Wisconsin

Dwayne Huebner had done his PhD at Wisconsin. He and his close friend, the noted curriculum theorist James MacDonald, told stories of Wisconsin and of their experiences there, compelling stories that documented its excellence, its political traditions, and the ways in which it provided a space for critical work. As I was finishing my degree in the spring of 1970, a curriculum studies position opened there. Dwayne and Jim’s major professor, Virgil Herrick—originally a colleague of Ralph Tyler at Chicago and one of the leading curriculum scholars of his time—had died and his position needed to be filled. Herbert Kliebard was the other curriculum studies person at Wisconsin. Herb had studied at TC under Arno Bellack, a person with whom I too had taken a number of courses, in the generation before mine. Herb’s work on curriculum history had already made a significant impression on me and others. When he called and an interview was arranged, I was more than a little happy—and filled with a bad case of nerves. I had other possibilities, but this was WISCONSIN.

My first experience of Madison, Wisconsin, in the Spring of 1970 was arriving in the midst of a large anti-war demonstration. The power of the demonstrations (and they continue today), the intellectual and political openness of the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies, the quality of the students there, the progressive political traditions of the

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state and the community, all combined to make me feel that I had found a home. No place is perfect, and despite the growing authoritarian populist movements in the state, the University of Wisconsin continues to be a special place, an institution where I have spent more than five decades. Even though I have been a Visiting Professor at many universities nationally and internationally, few have that rare combination of a critical core, an expectation of the organic joining of excellence and political/ethical commitment, and a democratic and participatory ethos that characterize the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Of course, like many places, neoliberal pressures and the too-often largely rhetorical acceptance of a powerful commitment to face the racial structuring of U.S. society are a constant threat to this combination of characteristics. But, though not impossible, it may at times be harder to permanently transform Wisconsin in largely rightist directions than other institutions of higher education. But of course, this is not automatic. It continues to require constant vigilance and action.

Knowledge and Power: First Steps

As I noted above, Wisconsin provided the space for truly serious critical work, work that could be *engaged*. It was an ideal place to be a “scholar/activist.” In the early 1970s, in addition to writing I was doing on teacher education, on critical studies of curriculum and evaluation, and on student rights, I began the initial work on a volume that would take nearly five years to complete, *Ideology and Curriculum* (2019/2004/1990/1979).⁵ (Luckily, I had

⁵ Many of my books have gone through multiple editions, with revisions to the original arguments and the inclusion of what is often a good deal of additional material. I’ve employed the “/” symbol to indicate the

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gotten tenure in 1973 after only three years at Wisconsin, and was promoted to full professor after only three more years, so the pressure was off.) The aim of that early book was not only to revitalize the curriculum field, but also challenge both “liberal” educational policies and practices and the reductive and essentializing theories of the role of education that had become influential in critical analysis (see, e.g., Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In *Ideology and Curriculum*, I argued that education must be seen as a political act. I insisted that in order to do this, we needed to think *relationally*. That is, understanding education requires that we situate it in both the unequal relations of power in the larger society and the relations of exploitation, domination, and subordination—and the conflicts—that

varying dates of each edition, with the newest editions listed last in the reference list. The reader should understand that each edition may have very significant changes. Paying attention to the earliest dates of these multiple editions gives a clear understanding of the year the first edition of the book was published and of the genesis of my arguments. When a new and expanded edition has been published by a different publisher, I have listed it separately. In addition, I have edited a large number of books in multiple languages that have also been important to the development of my arguments. But in the interests of space, I haven’t listed all of them here.

generate and are generated by these relations.

Others had said some of this at the time, but I wanted to focus on the connections between knowledge and power, since in my mind—and in that of many others such as Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci—cultural struggles were crucial to any serious movements for social transformation. Thus, rather than simply asking whether students have mastered a particular subject matter and have done well on our all-too-common tests, we should ask a different set of questions: Whose knowledge is this? How did it become “official”? What is the relationship between this knowledge and how it is organized and taught and who has cultural, social, and economic capital in this society? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge and who does not? What can we do as critical educators and activists to change existing educational and social inequalities and to create curricula and teaching that are more socially just?

During the writing of *Ideology and Curriculum*, I came into contact with a number of people in England who were doing similar critical work on the relationship between knowledge and power. The “New Sociology of Education” in England had nearly exactly the same intuitions and used many of the same resources as critical curriculum studies did in the United States (see, e.g., Dale et al., 1976; Young, 1971). As my analyses became popular there, international connections were cemented in place. This led to my first lectures in England in 1976 and created a set of intellectual and political bonds that continue to this day. I am certain that *Ideology and Curriculum* would not have been seen as such a major contribution without the political and academic influences of these colleagues in England,

in particular Geoff Whitty, Roger Dale, Madeleine Arnot, Basil Bernstein, and Paul Willis. The Institute of Education at the University of London became something of a “second home” for me with my appointment as World Scholar and Professor there (see Apple, 2022). Current and past colleagues at the Institute of Education, especially David Gillborn, Deborah Youdell, Stephen Ball, and the late Geoff Whitty, kept the tradition of intense debate and friendship alive and well. In this case, “acquired wisdom” was a deeply collective and ongoing process.

Ideology and Curriculum enabled me to synthesize a considerable number of the influences that had been working through me for many years. Let me note them here, since many people see such early work as simply an expression of neo-Marxism. It is this, but it was so much more. It rested on such traditions as the following: cultural Marxism and Marxist theory; phenomenology and in particular social phenomenology; the sociology of knowledge; analytic philosophy inside and outside of education; European critical theory; the philosophy, sociology, and history of science; aesthetics and the philosophy of art; political economy and studies of the labor process; the new sociology of education in England and France; and last but certainly not least, the critical and literary traditions within education and curriculum studies. “Wisdom” was generated by making multiple disciplinary boundaries porous.

Thus, *Ideology and Curriculum* was meant to speak to a much larger array of educational, social, cultural, and political issues than some might have realized. I fully recognize that *Ideology and Curriculum* bears the mark of its time. It devotes most of its energy to unpacking the role that curriculum and pedagogy play in cultural reproduction. It is part of a tradition of

critical analyses of the “reproduction of dominance” that sits side by side with the work of others such as Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein. It spends much less time than it should on a more dialectical understanding of knowledge and power, and because of this, it is not as adequate in understanding transformations and struggles (see Weis et al., 2006). But this is taken up in the many books, and a continuing commitment to political/educational activism, that followed and in additional material included in the newer editions of *Ideology and Curriculum*, especially the fourth edition (2019). Yet, even with its limitations and silences, the fact that it has gone through multiple editions and revisions, and has been translated into a large number of languages, means that I must have gotten something right.

Expanding the Dynamics of Power

Ideology and Curriculum was the first step on what became a long journey, for other books regularly followed as I understood more and as I was taught by the criticisms of other scholars and activists throughout the world, and certainly by my doctoral students at Wisconsin. There is a reason I regularly thank the Friday Seminar in each of my books. The doctoral and master’s students in that group and the visiting scholars and activists from multiple nations and movements who have spent time with both me and the group at Wisconsin have been more than a little influential in my development and keep me honest.

Two other books followed—*Education and Power* (2012/1995/1982) and *Teachers and Texts* (1986). That set of books formed what somehow came to be known as the first “Apple trilogy.” The two additional volumes both corrected some of the errors and spoke to some of the silences in *Ideology and Curriculum* and

expanded the dynamics of power to include gender and race (see also Apple & Weis, 1983). They focused not only on the interactions between the economic, political, and cultural spheres and the complicated dynamics of reproduction, but the power and contradictions of resistance and struggle both inside schools and in larger society. They critically examined what was happening in curricular content and form and in teachers’ labor through a process of deskilling, reskilling, and intensification. They illuminated the political economy of the “real” curriculum in schools—the textbook. And they analyzed the spaces where possible counter-hegemonic action could take place. Understanding and interruption were increasingly joined.

A good deal of these gains speaks to a debt that I also owe to groups such as the Boston Women’s Teachers Group that was a key part of the Boston Teachers Union and other groups of activist educators who consistently reminded me of the gendered specificities of the history and current realities of teachers’ work. And this confirmed for me that crucial insights can and do come from below, from real people involved in local struggles over the realities of education on the ground.

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At the same time, I was influenced as well by my interactions with colleagues working at the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. “Wisdom” again came from comradely criticism and reminders that U.S. understandings of the world were often very limited. The path I was on now was

even more involved and the relations and realities I was trying to understand were even more complex. These issues demanded more attention. But looking back on the first set of volumes, I can now see more clearly that they led me from a largely neo-Marxist analyses of social and cultural reproduction that were influenced by Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Luis Althusser and by concepts such as hegemony and overdetermination (see also Apple, 1982a) to an (unromantic) emphasis on agency and the politics and economics of cultural production and treatments of teachers' work and lives. This enlargement of political and cultural struggles complemented (without abandoning) my original focus on class, and more recent critical analyses of how powerful movements and alliances can radically shift the relationship between educational policies and practices and broader social relations of dominance and subordination in directions that are ethically or politically questionable. Once again, all of these efforts over the years have been grounded in a sense of the significance of cultural struggles and of the crucial place that schools, curricula, teachers, and communities play in these struggles. Movements of both the Right and the Left were involved in these struggles, and the lessons they both taught us became increasingly central to my work here in the US and in other nations.

Understanding and Acting Back against Conservative Social Movements in Education

Another series of books followed—this time four volumes—that focused much more directly on the ways in which power worked currently and on how we might interrupt these relations. In volumes such as *Official Knowledge* (2014/2000/1993), *Cultural Politics and Education* (1996), *The*

State and the Politics of Knowledge (2003), and *Educating the “Right” Way* (2001/2006), I spent a good deal of time showing that in many ways it is social movements, *not* educators, who are the real engines of educational transformations. And the social movements that continue to be the most powerful now are more than a little conservative. In essence, I have claimed that if you want to understand how to engage in a successful large-scale pedagogic campaign that changes people's common sense about legitimate knowledge, teaching, and evaluation—indeed about schooling in general—examine those people who have actually done it. I certainly hadn't abandoned my previous concerns with knowledge and power, but I now had better tools. And the politics were now even more pressing since educators all over the world were facing a set of conservative attacks that were deeply damaging to any education worth its name.

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I supported and often joined with movements mobilizing against these attacks—and increasingly felt that I again had to share in the risks involved in doing so. These movements became my teachers as well. All of this also had other effects, by raising crucial questions about the very basis of my tools. Among the most important of these questions was: Were the political and educational theories that I was using to understand the political and educational processes in which I was involved sufficient to deal with all of this?

In the process of engaging with these issues, I also had to enter debates over

postmodern and poststructural theories. I have been a consistent critic of the overstatements and loss of historical memory found within some postmodern and poststructural writings in education and the larger literature. However, concerns with identity, with the politics of language, with the multiplicity of power relations, with contingency—all of this clearly required that I take seriously some of the issues that this literature raised and that I integrate a number of poststructural elements into my conceptual apparatus.

As I have said elsewhere, I am not in a church, so I am not worried about heresy. But let me be very clear here. Postmodern and poststructural approaches are *not* total replacements for more structural understandings. As I came realize, it is where these traditions “rub against each other” in tense relationship that progress can be made (see Apple, 1999; Apple & Whitty, 1999). But any analysis that does not deal seriously with exploitation alongside its analysis of domination—what Nancy Fraser (1997, 2022) calls a politics of redistribution as well as a politics of recognition and representation—is deeply limiting. In each of the books I have written I have tried to keep that awareness in the forefront of my thinking.

It is this combination and the epistemological and at times political tensions that exist between and within these traditions that has allowed me to see more clearly the ways in which the politics of common sense operates. My Gramscian position and the critical edge it brings overlaps with a number of elements of poststructural understandings. This may be one of the reasons I have found Stuart Hall’s insightful analyses of cultural politics, of race, identity, and nation, and of the rise of rightist movements so useful (see, e.g., Apple 2008, 2019, 2020; Hall, 2017; Morley & Chen 1996).

However, I was not only engaged with the debate over “post” positions. As in my earlier work, and very much like Stuart Hall, I also wanted to distance myself from the return of economistic and essentializing—and overly rhetorical—positions. For example, there seemed to be a loss of many of the gains that had been made in our understanding of the complexities of class relations within the state and its educational institutions and between the state and civil society—as if people such as Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Bob Jessop, Roger Dale, and others had never written anything of importance. It seemed to me that we were facing a crisis of “historical amnesia.” The immensely productive material on the relationship between ideology and identity, on the relationship among culture, identity, and political economy, on the crucial impact of politics, and on the power of social movements that cut across class lines, as well as a number of other issues, was now seen by some to be either a rejection of key tenets of the Marxist and neo-Marxist traditions (the plural is absolutely crucial here). Or these advances are said to deal with epiphenomenal concerns. Similar things were (and are) said about such constitutive dynamics as race and gender.

On both sides of the Atlantic, a group of people had mounted attacks on these advances in the name of purifying “the” tradition from the taint of culturalism and from the sin of worrying too much about, say, gender and race at the expense of class. The British version of this simply does not understand the history of the United States and the salience of race as a relatively autonomous and extraordinarily powerful dynamic in the construction and maintenance of its relations of exploitation and domination and struggles against them. Nor did they understand the ways in which historically and currently

racial structures, processes, dynamics, and relations were and are fundamentally constitutive in their own realities as well.

Like Britain, in the United States there are indeed crucial reasons to deal absolutely seriously with class and the materialities of capitalist relations. Just witness the growth of educational marketization and commodification. However, let me speak very honestly here. As I have worried aloud elsewhere (Apple, 2006), at times this aim of purification feels a bit like posturing, almost as an attempt to situate oneself in a space that says “look at how radical I seem.” Yet such radicalism at times also seems to treat the realities of schools and other cultural and educational sites and the struggles over them simply rhetorically. It is as if this particular version of seeming radicalism floats in the air above the material and ideological realities of the object of its analysis—education. This is a deeply unfortunate phenomenon, for if the terms critical education and especially “critical pedagogy” are to have any substantive meaning and if they are to avoid becoming simply rhetorical, they need to have a dynamic and ongoing relationship with the actual practices, people, and institutions of education (see Apple & Au, 2015; Apple et al., 2009; Apple et al., 2010).

This situation is puzzling to me, since one would have thought that a truly radical epistemological and political position would be fully grounded in a fundamentally reflexive relationship with the institutions it is supposedly about. Certainly, this was Marx’s and Gramsci’s position, as it was for most of the radical tradition in education, cultural analyses, and political economy. Schools, teachers, students, parents, community activist groups, curricula, testing, and the list could go on—all of these are shunned as if they were forms of pollution that might

dirty the pristine discussion of the social relations of production and class antagonisms.

Let me again hasten to stress that critical discussions of the social relations of production and of class antagonism are crucial. But they should be directly connected to something—the specifics of such things as the labor process of teachers and its relation to class *and* gender *and* race as well as other powerful dynamics, the neoliberal and neoconservative restructuring of our institutions of education, the racialization of educational policy and practice, the politics of official and popular knowledge, the complex and contradictory effects of globalizations (there are different processes, not a single process, at work here) on the ground, and the actual hard and immensely important work of doing counter-hegemonic curricula and teaching in schools and other cultural institutions. Theory is best done when it’s about such things, not when it is waving one reading of not very carefully selected texts from the vast writings within these traditions like an iconic talisman floating above the actual struggles both inside and connected to education. It also needs to be stated that the latter is deeply disrespectful of the hard and committed work of so many critically engaged educators and community activists in so many nations of the world and can lead to cynicism and paralysis as well.

These intellectual and political debates, combined with the very evident and very powerful shift to the right in social and educational policy in so many countries, provided much of the background for this next series of volumes on conservative social movements. Thus, for exactly the reasons I have stated in the previous pages, during the past two decades I have engaged in a concerted effort to analyze the reasons

behind the rightist resurgence—what Roger Dale (1989/1990) and I call “conservative modernization”—in education and to find spaces for interrupting it. My aim has not simply been to castigate the Right, although there is a bit of fun in doing so. Rather, I have also sought to illuminate the dangers, and the elements of both bad sense and good sense that are found within what is an identifiable and powerful new “hegemonic bloc” (that is, a powerful set of groups that provides overall leadership to and pressure on the basic goals and policies of a society). This new rightist alliance is made up of various factions—neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious conservatives, and some members of the professional and managerial new middle class. These are complicated groups, but let me describe them briefly.

This power bloc combines multiple fractions of capital who are committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educational problems, neo-conservative intellectuals who want a “return” to higher standards and a “common culture,” authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists and religious nationalists who are deeply worried about secularity and the preservation of their own traditions, and particular fractions of the professionally oriented new middle class who are committed to the ideology and techniques of accountability, measurement, and “management.” While there are clear tensions and conflicts within this alliance, in general its overall aims are in providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the “ideal” home, family, and school.

I have had a number of reasons for focusing on the alliance behind

conservative modernization. First, these groups are indeed powerful, as any honest analysis of what is happening in education and the larger society clearly indicates. Second, they are quite talented in connecting to people who might ordinarily disagree with them. For this reason, I have shown in a number of places that people who find certain elements of conservative modernization relevant to their lives are not puppets. In my ongoing interactions with them, one of the things that that have made clear to me is that they are not simply dupes who have little understanding of the “real” relations of this society. My position is very different than one which sees them as simply being totally unaware and having “false consciousness.” Following a Gramscian perspective, I want to answer the question of *Why and how do people get convinced to accept the understandings and policies of dominant groups?* As I argue in the books written in the 1990s and 2000s and especially in *Official Knowledge* (Apple 2014/2001/1993) and *Educating the “Right” Way* (Apple 2001/2006), the reason that some of the arguments coming from the various factions of this new hegemonic bloc are listened to is because they *are* connected to aspects of the realities that people experience. The tense alliance of neo-liberals, neo-conservatives, authoritarian populist religious activists, and the professional and managerial new middle class works because there has been a very creative articulation of themes that resonate deeply with the experiences, fears, hopes, and dreams of people as they go about their daily lives. Worries about economic insecurity, about the destruction of communities, about feelings of powerlessness, about a lack of respect, about bureaucratic inaction and intransigence—all of these are based in real things that very many people experience in their daily lives.

I of course strongly disagree with many of the positions that are taken as a result of this. After all, it is strikingly clear that the Right has often been more than a little manipulative in its articulation of these themes. It has integrated them within racist nativist discourses (indeed “race” and the “Other” as a source of bodily and cultural pollution play crucial roles in the conservative imaginary). And it has connected these themes to economically dominant forms of understanding, and to a problematic sense of “tradition.” But, this integration could only occur if they were also organized around people’s understanding of their real material and cultural lives.



Seminar on the politics of commonsense in China. (Courtesy of author)

The second reason I have stressed the tension between good and bad sense and the ability of dominant groups to connect to people’s (at times deeply problematic) understandings of their lives—aside from the continuation of the profound respect for Antonio Gramsci’s writings about this that was so visible even in my early work—has to do with my belief that we have witnessed a major educational accomplishment over the past decades in many countries. The Right has successfully demonstrated that you need to work at the level of people’s daily experiences and at the local level, not only in central and official government policies.

The accomplishment of such a vast educational project has many implications. It once again shows how important cultural struggles inside and outside of schools actually are. And, oddly enough, it gives us reason for hope. It forces us to ask a significant question. *If the Right can do this, why can’t we?*

I do not mean this as a rhetorical question. As I have argued repeatedly in this next set of four books, the Right has shown how powerful the struggle over meaning and identity—and hence, schools, curricula, teaching, and evaluation—can be. While we should not want to emulate their often cynical and manipulative processes, the fact that they have had such success in pulling people under their ideological umbrella has much to teach us. Granted there are real differences in money and power between the forces of conservative modernization and those whose lives are being tragically altered by the policies and practices coming from the alliance. But, the Right wasn’t as powerful 30 years ago as it is now. It collectively organized. It created a decentered unity, one where each element sacrificed some of its particular agenda to push forward on those areas that bound them together. Can’t we do the same?

I believe that we can, but only if we face up to the realities and dynamics of power in unromantic ways. And this means not only critically analyzing the rightist agendas and the effects of their increasingly mistaken and arrogant policies in education and so much else, but engaging in some serious criticism of some elements within the progressive and critical educational communities as well. Thus, as I argued in *Educating the “Right” Way*, the “romantic possibilitarian” rhetoric of a good deal of the writing on critical pedagogy is not sufficiently based on a tactical or strategic analysis of the current situation nor is it sufficiently

grounded in its understanding of the reconstructions of discourse and movements that are occurring in all too many places. The sometimes mostly rhetorical material of critical pedagogy simply is unable to cope with what has happened. As I noted earlier, only when it is linked much more to concrete issues of educational policy and practice—and to the daily lives of educators, students, and community members—can it succeed.

This, of course, is why journals such as *Rethinking Schools* and books such as *Democratic Schools* (Apple & Beane, 1995, 2007) that connect critical educational theories and approaches to the actual ways in which they can be and are present in real classrooms become so important. Thus, while I may have been one of the actors in building critical theory and critical pedagogy in education in the United States, I also have been one of its internal critics when it has forgotten what it is meant to do and has sometimes become simply an academic specialization at universities.

The story of how the book I mentioned above, *Democratic Schools* (Apple & Beane, 1995, 2007), came about may be a good way of showing what I mean here. This book is a response to one of the tasks of the “critical scholar/activist” that I develop in more recent volumes such as *Global Crises, Social Justice, and Education* (Apple, 2010), *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013), and *The Struggle for Democracy in Education* (Apple et al., 2019). Along with others (see, e.g., Au, 2023), I’ve argued that it is essential that critical educators not ignore the question of practice. That is, we must find ways of speaking to (and learning from) people who now labor every day within schools in worsening conditions that are made even worse by the merciless attacks from the Right.

The implications of such a position are significant. This means that rather than ignoring “mainstream” organizations and publications, it’s important whenever possible to also occupy the spaces provided by existing “mainstream” publication outlets to publish books that provide *critical* answers to teachers’ questions about “What do I do on Monday?” during a conservative era.

This is where *Democratic Schools* enters as an important collective success. One very large “professional” organization in the United States—the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)—publishes books that are distributed each year to its more than 150,000 members, most of whom are teachers, administrators, or other educational workers in elementary, middle, or secondary schools.

At first, I emphatically said “No” to their invitation to do a book for them—not because I was against such a project, but because I believed quite strongly that the best people to do such a book would be those practicing critical teachers and administrators who were now engaged in doing what needed to be done “on Monday.” In essence, I felt that I should be their secretary, putting together a book based on their words, struggles, and accomplishments. If ASCD was willing for me to play the role of secretary, then I would do it. But I had one caveat. It had to be a truly honest book, one in which these critically democratic educators could tell it as it really was.

After intense negotiations that guaranteed an absence of censorship, I asked Jim Beane, one of the most significant leaders of the democratic schools movement in the United States, to work with me on *Democratic Schools*. Both of us were committed to doing a book that provided clear practical examples of

the power of Freirean and similar critically democratic approaches at work in classrooms and communities.



Student teaching the author in Beijing.
(Courtesy of author)

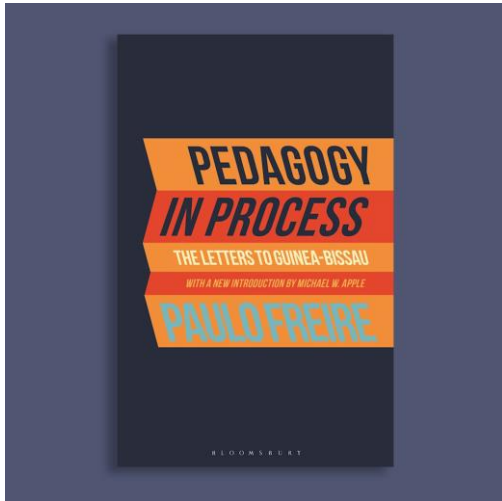
Democratic Schools was not only distributed to most of the 150,000 members of the organization, but it has gone on to sell thousands of additional copies in many nations. Thus, a very large number of copies of a volume that tells the practical stories in their own words of the largely successful struggles of critically-oriented educators in real schools are now in the hands of educators who daily face similar problems. The publication and widespread distribution of *Democratic Schools*—and the publication and translation into multiple languages of the first and then the enlarged 2nd edition—provides one practical and strategic instance of making critical educational positions seem actually doable in “ordinary” institutions such as schools and local communities. This commitment to documenting “doable” critical education in practice continues in a forthcoming volume, *Engaging Critical Pedagogy in Education: Global Phenomenon, Local Praxis* (Sanjekar & Apple, 2025). Not unimportant for me personally, these efforts keep me connected to the realities of curricula and teaching that sent me to Teachers College in the first place.

Learning from Others

My understanding of these political and educational issues, of the dangers we now face and of what can and must be done to deal with them, is grounded not only in my early political experiences, in the gritty realities of working with children in urban and rural schools, in the research I’ve carried out on the politics of knowledge and on what schools do and do not do in this society, or in my and Jim Beane’s work with practicing educators on building more critical and democratic curricula and teaching strategies. It also has been profoundly affected by the extensive international work in which I have been fortunate to engage in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and elsewhere.

For example, beginning in the mid-1980s, I began to go to Brazil to work with the progressive Ministry of Education in the southern city of Porto Alegre (the home of the influential and activist oriented World Social Forum and World Education Forum) and to give both academic and more popular lectures at universities and to teacher union groups. Most of my books had been translated there. Because of this, and because of similar theoretical and political tendencies in the work coming out of Brazil and my own, I developed close relationships with many politically active educators there. They too were and are my teachers. This meant that I developed not only an ongoing relationship with activist educators and researchers in the Workers Party throughout Brazil, but just as importantly, an even closer relationship with the great Brazilian critical educator Paulo Freire grew.

... I developed close relationships with many politically active educators there. They too were and are my teachers.



Paulo Freire's (2021) *Pedagogy in Process*

Oddly enough, unlike many critical educators in the United States, I actually had not been strongly influenced by Freire. While Freire's arguments were indeed poetic and powerful, they had less of an impact on me. I had already been formed as a critical educator by the critical labor education and anti-racist traditions in the United States, traditions that had very similar understandings and practices as those so compellingly articulated by Freire in his books. As we became friends over the years, our conversations were less those of teacher and taught—although I respected him immensely. They were more those of comrades who often agreed but sometimes disagreed. For example, I believed that Freire was too romantic about the question of content. He seemed too easily to assume that almost automatically oppressed people would discover what was crucial to know. I wanted much more attention to be paid to the *what* of the curriculum. It was only later that I realized that my ongoing public and private discussions with Freire had indeed had a lasting effect on me (Apple, 1999, 2013; see also my introduction to Freire's book *Pedagogy in Process*, Apple, 2021). Once again, “acquired wisdom” can and did come from specific comrades

and friends who engage with you in truly serious and substantive discussions.

These international connections were—and continue to be—crucial in the development of my work. Later on these were to be joined by intellectual and political connections and work in Japan, Korea, India, China, and elsewhere in Asia, in Spain, Portugal, Norway, Finland, and other nations in Europe such as Turkey, in Australia and New Zealand, and especially in Latin America where my academic and political work in Brazil and later, Argentina and Chile, intensified.

Thus, the international discussions, debates, and co-teaching, and the academic and political activity in which I engaged in these nations, always have had a powerful impact on me and have led me to develop what I hope are more nuanced understandings both of the ways in which context and history matter and of the multiple kinds and forms of dominance and politics that exist. They also have consistently taught me what actions that challenge these forms of dominance and politics are possible.

Thus, for example, I am now much better able to think through what roles different kinds of government/economy relations and histories (strong or weak, capitalist or state bureaucratic socialist, strong or weak labor and other social movements) play. I also am now much more aware of how different traditions of religious impulses and movements with their varying strengths and weaknesses operate. Furthermore, the significance of histories of racial subjugation and gendered realities—and similar dynamics—are now clearer than they were before, something that provided an important part of my critical analyses of authoritarian populist religious movements in *Educating the “Right” Way*.

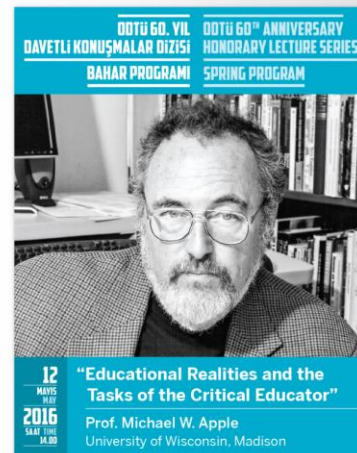
... sometimes one can acquire “wisdom” from some necessary actions that also involve “uncomfortable” consequences.

Finally, I have come to have an immense amount of respect for the creative resiliency and political and educational courage of people in what we in the North somewhat arrogantly call the “Third World” (see, e.g., Apple, 2010, 2013; Apple & Buras, 2006; Apple et al., 2019). Thus, words that we tend to treat as nouns—housing, food, education—I now even more than earlier recognize as *verbs*. They require constant effort, constant struggle and constant organized and personal action (Davis, 2006). What this kind of understanding means for education and what we can learn from the ongoing struggles by oppressed groups and critical educators in many nations are further developed in *Global Crises, Social Justice, and Education* (Apple, 2010) and more recently in *Can Education Change Society?* (Apple, 2013) and *The Struggle for Democracy in Education* (Apple et al., 2019; see also Verma & Apple, 2021).

These ongoing and deepening international relations and experiences provide some of the reasons that I have focused, for example, on such topics as the development of the Citizen School and participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre. They are more than a little significant in this regard (Apple, 2013; Apple et al., 2003; Apple et al., 2019).

Similar things could be said about my involvement with the struggles of the once banned, but now legal, independent teachers union in Korea. I have been rather hesitant to tell the story of these personal activities, since I clearly am not alone in taking such risks and in engaging in serious political work inside and outside the United States. But in *Can Education*

Change Society? (Apple, 2013), I use the story of my participation in these struggles and of my arrest in South Korea—and the ultimately partial successes that occurred—as a way of showing both the dangers and especially the progressive educational possibilities of such actions in identifiable emancipatory social movements. These kinds of experiences can have “interesting” effects. They remind me that sometimes one can acquire “wisdom” from some necessary actions that also involve “uncomfortable” consequences. Acting back can indeed have risks. And here too, mutual teaching and honest dialog about this is important.



ODTÜ
Kültür ve Kongre Merkezi, Kemal Kurdağ Salonu
Cultural and Convention Center, Kemal Kurdağ Hall



ORTA DOĞU TEKNİK ÜNİVERSİTESİ
MIDDLE EAST TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY



Lecture series in Turkey. (Courtesy of author)

But we need to be honest here. Many of us in education have been and are engaged in similar actions and mobilizations. With the growing authoritarian populist movements and neoliberal agendas in the US and elsewhere, success is not guaranteed, and even then can be temporary and have contradictory results. Given this, I want to make one final

political and academic—and “acquired wisdom” —point. We decidedly need more detailed research on the life of critically democratic movements and reforms over time, especially if we are to take seriously my earlier point that, collectively, critical work has a dual commitment of both understanding and interruption.

The distinction between “reformist” and “non-reformist” reforms is crucial here. There are many things in educational policies and practices that need our attention if we are to act on inequalities in schools. But as we have learned from years of experience, some seemingly worthwhile policies and actions often fail to lead to truly lasting interruptions. They are simply “reforms.” Non-reformist reforms are those that not only engage with current problems but also, just as importantly, open the doors for further counter-hegemonic actions in the long term. They *both* engage with current issues and lead to further fundamental transformations. This distinction is not always easy to predict at the outset. Thus, there is a need to follow the politics of these actions over time. As I was reminded by my initial experiences at Columbia, it also requires a substantive grounding in both established and newer critical cultural and social theories that offer important guidance on how we might understand these results and their histories. But there are guides that can assist us. The work of Erik Olin Wright (2010) in *Envisioning Real Utopias* is a powerful resource here if both understanding and interruption are to be key parts of our agenda.

Some Final Personal Reflections on Where Wisdom Has Come From

In the previous sections of this set of reflections, I tried to be honest about a

number of the complex issues that I’ve attempted to understand and about how much I have learned from others nationally and internationally. Of course, no person, and certainly not I, can ever be fully aware of what drives their intellectual and political efforts. What I do know is that it is more than a little important for me to remember how my work was formed out of the time I spent teaching in some of the poorest communities in the United States and then in a very conservative rural area. I think that this has acted as a reality check, as did my role as a president of a teachers union.

But this is not all. The fact that I had grown up poor, but in a strongly politically active family, was significant, as was my activity while still a teenager in anti-racist mobilizations. That I am the parent of a Black child is also crucial here, since the immense significance of the processes of racialization and minoritization and the ongoing struggles against this have been all too visible. Being married to Rima D. Apple, the noted historian of medicine and of women’s health, for more than five decades has also meant that I have been constantly taught about the lives of and politics surrounding gendered realities (see, e.g., Apple, R. D., 1987; Apple, R. D., 2006).

Added to this were the years I spent working as a printer before and then during part of the period of time I was going to night school for my initial college degree. Coming from a family of *printers*—that most radical bastion of working-class struggles over literacy and culture—meant something. It demanded that literacy and the struggles over it were connected to differential power. Theory and research in education, hence, were supposed to *do something* about the conditions I and many other people had experienced. Because of this, this has also meant for me that— even with the attention my critical work

has generated—I have never felt totally comfortable within the academy or with an academic life. Indeed, if I lose the discomfort, I fear I will lose myself.

What does this mean to those people who still want to affix an easy label to me and my work? To be honest, I am not one who responds well to labels. As I noted, I am not in a church, so I am not worried about heresy. I am not simply a “neo-Marxist,” a “sociologist,” a “critical curriculum scholar,” a “critical policy analyst,” or someone in “critical theory” or “critical pedagogy.” Nor am I someone whose roots can be traced simply to something like “phenomenology meets Marxism,” although there is some truth to that in much of my earlier efforts. As I showed in the list of my early influences, a commitment to the arts—written, visual, and tactile—and to an embodied and culturally/politically critical aesthetic, have formed me in important ways as well. It may be useful to know in this regard that the “W” in Michael W. Apple stands for Whitman—the poet of the visceral and the popular, Walt Whitman, who like me came from New Jersey. Furthermore, as a film maker who works with teachers and students to create aesthetically and politically powerful visual forms, this kind of activity provides me with a sense of the importance of the very act of creation, of knowledge being something people can *make*, not simply “learn” (see Apple, 2014/2000/1993).

When I look back over the most recent books I’ve written and the educational work in which I am engaged at this stage of my career, and the lessons I still need to learn, it now seems that I still am dealing with many of the same questions about the relationship between culture and power, about the relationship among the economic, political, and cultural spheres, and about what all this means for educational work, with which I

started more than five decades ago. And I still am trying to answer a question that was put so clearly by George Counts (1932) when he asked “Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?” Counts was a person of his time and the ways he both asked and answered this question were a bit naïve. (Counts, of course, was not alone in asking this question.) Indeed, as I demonstrate in much more detail in *Can Education Change Society?* it was asked and answered in quite eloquent ways by many educators and public intellectuals within oppressed communities both before and during the period in which Counts wrote his famous book. But the tradition of radically interrogating schools, of asking who benefits from their dominant forms of curricula, teaching, and evaluation, of arguing about what they might do differently, of asking searching questions of who is the “we” who would do this, and what would have to change in order for this to happen—all of this is what has worked through me and so many others throughout the history of education in general.

I stand on the shoulders of many others who have taken such issues seriously and hope to have contributed both to the recovery of the collective memory of this tradition and to pushing it further along conceptually, historically, empirically, and practically. If we think of critical democracy as a vast river, it increasingly seems to me that our task is to keep the river flowing, to remove the blockages that impede it, and to participate in expanding the river to be more inclusive so that it flows for everyone.

In this essay, much of my focus has been on personal biography and on the arguments and books that represent my attempts to navigate this river and to keep it on its path. But, like for all of us, it is important for me to remember that this is

a collective endeavor, one that involves a commitment to both teaching *and* learning. The issues surrounding us and the societies in which we live may be more than a little complex and difficult. But we swim on. Perhaps at the end of these reflections, it seems appropriate for me to return to someone who influenced me at the beginning, Raymond Williams. As he says, “We must speak for hope, as long as it doesn’t mean suppressing the danger” (Williams, 1989, p. 322). As he goes on to say,

It is only in the shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are

challenged, we can begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available discoverable hard answers, and it is these that we can now learn to make and share. This has been, from the beginning, the sense and the impulse of the long revolution. (Williams, 1983, pp. 268-269)

The hard political, cultural, and practical efforts of building and defending a critically democratic education are key elements in this “long revolution.” And yes, in the face of these challenges, we do swim on.

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About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their college careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in educational psychology and educational research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in educational psychology, educational research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers – how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions – and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free

to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.

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