



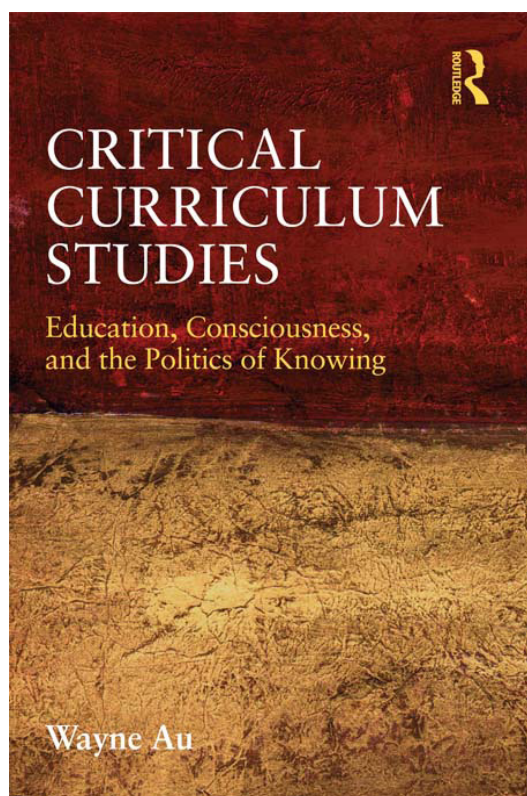
Book Review

Restoring the Critical Power of Curriculum Studies to Transform the Society

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Curriculum Studies has evolved for years and already gain its very honorable place in the heart of education studies. Most education scholars said that curriculum is important, curriculum is the heart of education (Priestley & Philip-pou, 2019), as does curriculum studies. But, how this very important field of studies survive and evolve in this vulnerable and unpredictable era which are neoliberal agendas dominating almost educational field around the world? We are witnessing how the culture of positivism, competition ideology, New Managerialism, and even racism and hatred, poisoning and deflect the aims of education. On the other hand, there is also a crisis in curriculum studies in which curriculum seems only struggling and focusing on theoretical discourse without any significant influences on the material world.

Right in this very difficult position of curriculum studies, the work of Wayne Au is significant. He wrote a very important book entitled "Critical Curriculum Studies: Education, Consciousness, and the Politics of Knowing" in 2012. Which Michael Apple in the series editor introduction of this book said that this work is ambitious and provocative because it seeks a theoretical and epistemological foundation of critical curriculum studies that challenges many basic assumptions about curriculum (Au, 2012, p. xv). I agree with what has Apple said and through this book review I would say that Au's work has a huge contribution to the development of curriculum studies in this contemporary era, espec-

Book title	: Critical Curriculum Studies:
	: Education, consciousness,
	: and the politics of knowing
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ally in order to become a tool to change or transform the society to be more democratic and just.

In this very interesting book Au dividing his critical work into five chapters. In chapter 1 he reveals some crisis and contradiction in curriculum studies, then he laid strong epistemological basis of critical curriculum studies in chapters 2, 3, and 4 by proposing several basic concepts, i.e. the dialectical conception of consciousness, curriculum as complex environmental design, and standpoint theory. In chapter 5 he gives some examples of critical curriculum studies in practices and in chapter 6 he concludes his work by make a brief explanation on how curriculum and consciousness are interrelated ones each other. Au's work is full of critical theoretical discourse by referring to several critical scholars such as Apple, Allman, Bernstein, Lukacs, Vygotsky, Huebner, and of course Freire.

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Au starts his work by illustrating such a crisis in curriculum studies in the 1960s and its responses. At least there are two responses, e.g. (1) critical and (2) pragmatic. Au proposes several works from prominent critical scholars as examples of the first response, i.e. Anyon, Apple, Rosenbaum, Slattery, Pinar, etc. Interestingly, there are not only employed critical perspectives from Marxian intellectual tradition—including neo-Marxism—but also post-modern perspectives such as feminism, post-structuralism, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. Therefore, such topics like power relations, ideologies, and the politics of knowledge in the schooling system become the main headline of this movement (Au, 2012, pp. 4-5).

The second seems like a mere response to the first response than focusing to answer the crisis of curriculum studies itself. Au calls this response as pragmatic because it is emphasizing the curriculum in practice by refusing the ideological, political, and critical notions of the curriculum studies. Such scholars like Wraga and Hlebowitsh posing their criticism that the critical turn in curriculum studies in the 1970s has much attention to the theory, over-politicized, and avoid the practical side of curriculum design (Au, 2012, pp. 5-6). Actually, this criticism has the same nuance with such criticism toward critical pedagogy (i.e. McKnight, 2010). In my opinion, these two criticisms toward critical perspective on curriculum studies and pedagogy failed to offer a better solution to overcome the

real and existing problems around the education system throughout the world.

Through this book, Au turns back these criticisms by laid strong epistemological foundation of critical curriculum studies and a plethora of its practices. But, first Au said that it is impossible to deny that curriculum—whatever its definitions—is always interrelated to ideology and politics. There is no neutrality, even the intention of the pragmatic response to keep the curriculum studies neutral will lead to the positivistic turn. By referring to several critical scholars, Au said that the critical turn of curriculum studies is more than appropriate because we face many social problems (i.e. inequality, neoconservatism, neoliberalism) in which need critical perspective (Au, 2012, pp. 6-9).

Au's arguments echoing what has been proposed by Apple (2004) previously that curriculum always in relation to politic and ideology. Moreover, Au said that without critical perspective on curriculum studies, such curriculum processes like curriculum evaluation and development will only doing business as usual and will lead all educational practices into merely reproducing the inequalities and social injustice. Through this book, Au proposes that curriculum studies should be critical, and it should have a strong epistemological basis in order to make it powerful to transform society. Au (2012, p. 7) argues that there is no negative effect on employing critical perspective on curriculum studies, moreover, throughout the world we could see that most of the curriculum development always involves the government and industrial world in which political and ideological in nature.

It is why in chapter 2 Au refers to the dialectical conception of consciousness as the epistemological basis to relates curriculum to the material reality. By referring to several scholars like Allman, Engels, Vygotsky, and Freire, Au said that "dialectical conception of consciousness is rooted in the idea that human understanding and knowledge of the world originates, develop, and grows from human interaction with the material world around" (Au, 2012, p. 18). It means the objective and empirical reality is important as a point of departure to develop someone's knowledge construction, therefore emphasizing the material world means that curriculum development should recognize the socio-cultural context where the student and learning practices took place.

But consciousness is not enough without

criticality, because only by this mode of inquiry human could reveal the problem they face and the possibility to change it (Au, 2012, pp. 24-26). This argument confirms that such learning methodology like contextual teaching & learning is not enough, because it is lack of political and critical consciousness. It can be said that: without critical perspective, all educational practices do not have any power to struggle against inequality and oppression, even cannot transform the educational practices and the society to be more just and democratic. In this sense, Au is in line with Freire's (1982, 2005) and other critical pedagogues works when he proposes critical consciousness as one of the most important aims of education besides social transformation.

Moreover, Au strengthening his dialectical conception of consciousness by proposing the concept of curriculum as a problem of complex environmental design and tools be referring to Huebner and Vygotsky (pp. 33-39). This concept conceived curriculum not only in the form of syllabus, lesson plan, textbooks, and the other forms of official knowledge enacted by the government or the school, but also the culture, values, and process inside and outside the school. Of course, this concept is not simply offering such technical method on how to design an appropriate learning environment, but also addresses its complexity, e.g. the cultures, values, economic status, political interest, power relations, status quo, etc. Subsequently, as a tool curriculum seems powerful enough to prevent or allow such knowledge can be accessed by the student or not. Au (2012, p. 40) said

When we look at the curriculum as a tool for the activity of accessing knowledge structured in educational environments, it allows us to see how this tool functions differently for teachers and students in educational environments. For the classroom teacher, the curriculum serves as the tool for the activity of shaping how knowledge is accessed on the whole: Teachers use the curriculum to structure the educational environment of their classroom in particular ways, to make particular knowledge and ways of understanding the world (epistemologies) accessible for student understanding, engagement, and potential action. In this sense, teachers use the curriculum as a tool for the development of certain forms of consciousness and praxis amongst students.

The quote above briefly stated that curriculum has a crucial role to perpetuate oppression or liberate it through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. In order to elucidate the

oppressive side of the curriculum as a tool Au (2012, pp. 41-45) refers to Bernstein's concept of classification and framing. For instance, Bernstein illustrates how curriculum design plays a crucial role in establishing inequality by dividing curriculum design into certain majors, department and the like. Additionally, Au also gives an example of how high-stakes testing—as a curriculum—decreasing the rich content of the curriculum because the student only learning to the test. Au shows that the structure of the environment in such way restrict and allows student to access certain knowledge.

In the Indonesian context, Bernstein's classification and framing theory will be useful to analyze the existing majors in senior high school, e.g. natural science, social science, and language/literature. Maybe most of us who had experienced such superior and inferior culture within the school could reflect that there were clear difference views, treatment, and chance of students who come from different majors. We could also illustrate how vocational school students in which most of them come from low economic status family entrapped within the system. They become powerless because they only learn such technical skills curriculum and then have limited chance to go to low-level works with low salaries. In another context, Shor (1987, pp. 1-45) illustrated the same problem in the U.S.A. in the 1980s.

STANDPOINT THEORY

Following chapters 2 and 3 when Au outlines the epistemology of critical curriculum studies on the dialectical conception of consciousness and curriculum as complex environmental design and tools, in chapter 4 Au looking for another grounded epistemology to legitimize the struggle against status quo and other social unjust problems. He uses standpoint theory from Lukacs to empower curriculum studies as a tool for the powerless and oppressed people to emancipate themselves from the status quo. What is standpoint theory? Au states that standpoint theory is a critical perspective from the oppressed, marginalized, and powerless social group in which socially situated. Social location, within the context of socio-economic relation are the key to conceive standpoint theory (Au, 2012, p. 69).

Au (2012, p. 62) stated that standpoint is not given by one's social location, even when the one comes from a marginalized or oppressed

social location. Standpoint arises from consciousness, resistant struggle against the prevailing and hegemonic forms of oppressive consciousness. It means that the active and reflective learning approach is a must for student because not all people/students conscious that they were oppressed and marginalized by the system. In this point, Freire's learning approach such as decoding and re-coding the student's daily life experiences is central to rise one's standpoint (see for example Landkammer, 2019; Shor, 1987), furthermore in learning practices setting Freire's (Shor, 1987) concept problem-posing learning approach will be powerful to raise student critical consciousness.

Standpoint theory also emphasizes the need of such "neutral" and relativism epistemology to stand on the powerless, oppressed and marginalized groups, for instance, multicultural education in which often passively accept all cultural phenomenon that exists as it is (Au, 2012, pp. 63-64). Making multicultural education more political by adding standpoint theory will lead the learning practice toward more critical and tend to take action to transform the society because the powerless and marginalized group—whatever their cultural background—have many and deep experiences as a fuel to seize critical consciousness and take it into action. If we back to the works of Freire (2005), the need for pedagogy of the oppressed is important as the need for the curriculum of the oppressed and marginalized. At this point, Au (2012, p. 65) said that

Standpoint theory and its explicit focus on social location establish the struggle over social and material reality as the basis for epistemology, and it is this struggle that provides the strongest grounds for progressive, social justice curriculum project.

Furthermore, I think Au was succeeded on developing critical curriculum studies through this book, because he not only laid a strong epistemological basis (e.g. dialectical conception of consciousness, curriculum as problem of complex environmental design and tools, and standpoint theory), but also gives several empirical stories of how to conduct critical curriculum within the school system. This story, of course, answering such criticism from several scholars who deride the critical turn of curriculum as does not has any practical and empirical evidence (Au, 2012, p. 5). In chapter 5 he gives many examples of the implementation of the curriculum of the oppressed. For instance Socialist Sunday Schools, the work of Carter G.

Woodson, Virginia Elementary Schools' course of study, and of course several publications by *Rethinking Schools* (Au, 2012, pp. 72-78).

Indeed, many of Au's experiences as a teacher in Middle College High School is more than enough to prove how he could develop and conduct critical curriculum into learning practices. In chapter 1 Au told how he taught students who had been push out from their previous regular high school. He contextualizes the curriculum and learning practices by first validating students' feelings about their previous curriculum that did not connect to their lives. Then they—Au and his student—develop a curriculum that recognizes the students' social, cultural, and economic material reality in which validating their experiences with the power relations in their lives (Au, 2012, p. 2). Au admits that critical curriculum studies grows along with his experiences in Middle College School.

According to Au, it is important that curriculum development should recognize the contextual dimension of the curriculum related to social, economic, cultural, and political problems faced by students in their daily life. This contextual orientation in line with many ideas such as contextual curriculum, contextual learning & teaching, and the like, unfortunately, most of that orientation are often without critical perspective and often trapped on its methodological side only.

What has been proposed by Au is a challenge to curriculum studies as a field of studies in this 21st century, although the conceptual foundation he brought is not new, i.e. from the works of Freire, Engels, Vygotsky, Huebner, etc. Many problems arise, i.e. terrorism, climate change, environmental problems, populism, New Managerialism, trade war, etc. We also immersed in a new world full of advanced digital technology in which refers to Selwyn (2011) it does not automatically broaden the access to knowledge and prosperity. In other words, old fashioned social problems remained and of course, need curricular intervention because it is related to the education realm. Does critical curriculum studies developed by Au could answer those challenges and problems?

Moreover, if we critically analyze the recent development of curriculum studies in this contemporary era, we could reveal that there is also a crisis in curriculum studies, but different from the crisis before the critical turn of curriculum studies in the 1970s as Au explained in

chapter one of this book. Furthermore, developing critical curriculum studies in the Indonesian context might not be easy as well as implementing the curriculum of the oppressed in the school context. The academic climate within the teacher college is poor despite the government policy for the lecturers to increase their number of publications in international publications indexed by Scopus and the like. There is no critical discourse on education studies as well as in curriculum studies. In school context teachers also facing overload tasks and policies in which restrict them to explore contextually and critically the curriculum design and its practices.

However, Au's work through this book is important to interrupt the pragmatic-business as usual of the curriculum development process in many countries, including in Indonesia. After reading this book I'm envisioning that many tasks should be done by critical scholars and curriculum expert in Indonesia, i.e. developing such curriculum development approach and methodology derived from critical curriculum studies for national and local context, and describing the national curriculum in school context into critical learning practices under the light of curriculum of the oppressed notions. Of course, this critical re-turn of curriculum studies is one among other orientations, e.g. pragmatic and post-modern responses to the 21st-century challenges. Not to mention that there also many trends and issues in education such as constructivism, connectivism, etc, so there are still many tasks that should be accomplished in the future.

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