This book is a fascinating read and I would highly recommend it. Apple analyses the ongoing struggle within education regarding the curriculum, teaching and policy at a variety of levels. He describes school as an institution which organises a large part of our lives, and highlights the controversial debate which exists between those who see schools as a vehicle to social mobility and opportunities, and those who see it as an institution which controls us socially and embodies cultural dangers for those from minority groups who feel their own culture and identities are threatened within these spaces. Although he is critical, the book is thought provoking as it makes you sit back and think about different aspects of teaching and learning we might just follow, rather than critically reflect on and look for new possibilities. The text is concentrated upon the situation in the U.S. but Apple does draw on international comparisons, including the UK.

The book starts off by discussing the politics of official knowledge and common sense and from there Apple focuses on different examples of how knowledge is transmitted into classrooms. I have selected several chapters to focus on rather than provide an overview of the whole book, which would be too lengthy for a review. The first is the 3rd chapter which concerns ‘Cultural Politics and the Text’ where Apple considers the relationship between the texts used in school and political discourses of power. He reminds us that textbooks are ‘what people hold most dear and what society recognises as legitimate and truthful’ (p.49). He tells a very interesting story about the way in which ‘text book adoption committees’ in the US select the texts for use in schools in their own states and specific campaigns against certain textbooks. He suggests that for some, textbooks are essential classrooms tools which support teaching and learning, but for others they are a symbol of the loss of power or factorisation of education which de-skill teachers.

I personally found the 5th chapter most interesting as Apple discusses the captive audiences schools provide. In the US, as in the UK, there have been significant cuts to budgets and this is impacting on the resources schools are using; by default these are having economic and political influences on the students. For example, he explains that in the US, schools can receive free TV equipment for each classroom if they sign up to Channel One and agree to show 10 minutes of news and commercials every day for 3-5 years! Currently 7000 schools are signed up and the news and advertisements reach 5 million students per day. Apple suggests that this is an example of the school as a commodity – learners are the target of the marketing industry – schools are ‘selling’ students as potential customers of products. Moreover, students receive a very different learning experience. Watching a news report is very different from reading a text book: it reports on dramatic events, action and does not usually explain issues in any depth or cover all angles of the argument/case in hand.

As I suggested, Apple is deeply critical but at the same time does provide you with new ideas. My favourite idea is in the 8th chapter which concerns ‘The politics of pedagogy and the building of Community’, and is that of a ‘Friday Seminar’. This is an event
which Apple has run for many years himself for his doctoral students, as well as other educational activists. The seminar is an opportunity to read each other’s work, support each other’s research and help plan cultural and political action and discussions. The product of this event is that it maintains a sense of community among educationalists and scholars and offers a way for them to critically appraise what is going on in education, and consider how to address existing politics of official knowledge. This is important in my view as it enables us to hear and debate different views and work for improved mainstream education systems which are democratic rather than structured around political and economic initiatives. Apple is highly supportive of public education and his book concentrates on important issues; reading about these certainly makes you reflect critically on teaching and learning, and think about how you might improve your own practice.