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**Education,
Literacy, and
Humanization**

Exploring the Work of Paulo Freire

PETER ROBERTS

Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series
Edited by Henry A. Giroux

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roberts, Peter, 1963–

Education, literacy, and humanization : exploring the work of Paulo Freire / Peter Roberts.

p. cm.—(Critical studies in education and culture series, ISSN 1064–8615)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0–89789–571–1 (alk. paper)

1. Freire, Paulo, 1921– 2. Education—Philosophy. 3. Popular education.
4. Critical pedagogy. I. Title. II. Series.

LB880.F732R62 2000

370'.1—dc21 99–055889

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 99–055889

ISBN: 0–89789–571–1

ISSN: 1064–8615

First published in 2000

Bergin & Garvey, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.greenwood.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National Information Standards Organization (Z39.48–1984).

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been “wounded.” His attempt to deal with criticism openly and honestly applied, by his own account, to all his dealings with others—even if he was not always as successful as he would like to have been in this. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, he says:

I have never been afraid of being criticized by my wife, by my children, or by the students with whom I have worked down the years because of my profound conviction of the value of freedom, hope, the word of another, and the desire of someone to try and try again as a result of having been more ingenuous than critical. (Freire, 1998c, p. 98)

Constructive criticism, for Freire, represented a positive invitation to examine hitherto accepted ideas afresh and to engage in dialogue—written or verbal—with others holding contrary positions (compare, Freire, 1985, pp. 151–152).

This book aims to make a modest contribution to this tradition of critical scholarship while also providing an introduction to some of Freire’s major ideas. It does not claim to cover all dimensions of Freire’s thought, nor does it deal comprehensively with a number of ongoing theoretical difficulties and important new lines of critique. Although Freire would have insisted that some readings of his work might be better than others, there can be no complete or final account of his theory and practice. The themes, events, and issues highlighted in these pages seem to me to be of enduring importance in attempting to understand Freire’s philosophy and pedagogy. It is recognized, however, that many other interpretations of Freirean ideas are possible, and that a great deal of further work remains to be done.³

After brief biographical comments, this introduction discusses the question of how Freire’s work might be approached by educationists from the First World. I argue that if we are to avoid the danger of domestication, both Freire’s writings and his pedagogical practice must be properly contextualized. There are good reasons, I maintain, for studying Freire’s ideas in a holistic and critical manner. In applying Freirean pedagogical principles, an antitechnocratic stance toward educational questions, issues, and problems is necessary. The introduction concludes with a summary of the structure and content of the book.

FREIRE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born in Recife, Brazil, in 1921. He came from a middle-class family of four children. He retained fond memories of his childhood despite experiencing a number of significant hardships. As Freire notes in *Letters to Cristina* (1996, p. 21), he was connected to



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and other emergency sources to satisfy basic human needs. Unemployment and underemployment are now seemingly permanent features of most industrialized societies. While at one end of the social scale a growing underclass emerges, at the other multinational corporations seek to gain a stranglehold over the production and circulation of essential goods and services. Legislative moves to lower wages and crush the power of unions—the Employment Contracts Act in New Zealand, for instance—have exacerbated existing disparities between the rich and the poor.

Paulo Freire speaks of both a Third World within the First World and a First World within the Third World. From Freire's point of view, the notion of a Third World is ideological and political, not (merely) geographic: "The Third World is in the last analysis the world of silence, of oppression, of dependence, of exploitation, of the violence exercised by the ruling classes on the oppressed" (1985, p. 140). These conditions are clearly evident in Western countries, just as within so-called "underdeveloped" nations elite groups enjoy a life of luxury and opulence. It could be suggested, moreover, that given the continuing growth of global networks of trade and communication, and the breakdown of the Cold War, the very categories of "Third World" and "First World" are now highly problematic. There can be little doubt that the world is changing (rapidly and dramatically), yet the manifestation of gross inequities between nations is, I believe, still sufficiently self-evident to retain certain distinctions. Hunger, exploitation, and oppression are rife throughout the First World, but the difficulties endured by millions of people in the Third World (widespread malnutrition, diseases almost out of control, alarming rates of infant mortality, appalling housing conditions, staggeringly low or nonexistent wages, etc.) are, in both scale and severity, of a magnitude few in Western societies could imagine. Freire changed his terminology in some of his later works, adopting the "North/South" nomenclature in discussing relations between groups of countries (see Freire, 1996, pp. 179–180), but remained opposed to narratives claiming the disappearance of structural inequalities between nations. The Third World, despite all the recent talk of globalization, is still a *different* world, and any attempt to apply theoretical frameworks, methodological principles, or innovations in practice from that world to the First World must proceed cautiously.

Education is one area of human endeavor where the hazards of domestication have particular significance, and Freire's pedagogy seems to have been especially prone to this problem. As word of Freire's success in adult literacy work spread and his reputation as an educationist grew, the risk of distortion in conveying his ideas also increased. Among other problematic tendencies, failing to consider Freire's work in its social context, fragmentation in reading his texts, and reductionism in appropri-



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social inequities. Freire believed the alternative approach to education articulated in his books and embodied in his practice was based on a deeper understanding of human beings and the learning process than traditional systems of instruction in schools and other formal educational settings.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed became a bible for those dissatisfied with prevailing forms of pedagogy: “Banking education” emerged as an academic buzzword, and “problem-posing education” quickly joined conscientization and dialogue as one of the least understood constructs in Freire’s work. At seminar after seminar and in paper after paper, Freire was compelled to explain what these terms meant in his philosophy, yet confusion persisted. The frustrations he experienced in trying to clarify complex concepts may have contributed to the dramatic decline in Freire’s use of the most controversial of these terms, conscientization, in his writings from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.

Freire refined and reworked other key notions in his many publications following the release of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English. Yet many educationists and activists continued to base their understanding of his ideas on a reading of only very limited segments of his work. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is without doubt Freire’s most famous book; it also provides perhaps the best concise presentation of key dimensions of his philosophy—particularly his ontological distinction between humanization and dehumanization. In any major study of Freire, this book is bound (and ought) to feature prominently in discussion. Yet, in the years after the publication of this classic text, there were significant changes both in Freire’s own thinking and wider theoretical developments in education and other fields. By the early 1990s, Freire could call on the experience of extensive work in Guinea-Bissau, he had returned to Brazil and again become active in national politics, and he had continued—particularly via his coauthored “talking” books—to reflect critically on his earlier ideas. Whether agreeing or disagreeing with Freire, it is vital that readers address his work holistically. Freire’s influence has extended to a wide range of educational, political, and theological groups. From one point of view, this diversity is positive testament to Freire’s eclecticism and the broad appeal of his ideas. There is, however, also a danger that Freirean theory may be spread too thinly. Freire cannot be all things to all people. More importantly, still, his work should not be turned into something it is not. Distortions of the Freirean educational ideal have resulted not infrequently from superficial and selective readings of mere fragments of Freire’s work or, worse, from the passing of purportedly Freirean ideas from person to person in increasingly “watered-down” form. In some cases, those who declare themselves Freireans possess, at best, a “secondhand” knowledge of Freire’s texts. Any reasonably attentive reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ne-



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it is equally important that past contributions to educational theory and practice be accorded the recognition they deserve, and that ideas which masquerade as original or groundbreaking developments in pedagogical theory be placed in their proper historical context.

At a different level, reductionist tendencies in the application of Freirean theory are signified by the “watering down” of complex concepts to a point where they lose their original force. This phenomenon is not confined to adaptations of Freirean ideas. Dale has noted that

“the state” may be in danger of becoming an example of a vital concept drained of its original value through promiscuous use in exercises of theoretical painting by numbers, and consequently at risk of joining “resistance” and “critical” . . . on the shelves of theoretical banality. The danger is that, like them, “the state” has come to be used to *name* the space where theoretical work is needed rather than to fill that space, and worse, by such naming, to apparently preclude the need for more theoretical work. (cited in Lankshear and McLaren, 1993, pp. xvi–xvii)

The theoretical impoverishment of many contemporary discussions of “empowerment”—an ideal often associated with Freire’s work—has also been the subject of some attention. Lankshear (1994a, p. 59) argues that the notion of empowerment is “in danger of being trivialized through unreflective over-use and, consequently, of losing its semantic viability and persuasive force.” Freirean concepts seem to be particularly susceptible to the problems identified by Dale and Lankshear.¹³ The fate of conscientization has already been noted. “Dialogue,” too, has frequently been reduced to a shadow of its former self in (mis)appropriations of Freirean ideas in First World settings. Almost any form of discourse between two or more people now appears to count in some educational arenas as an example of Freirean dialogue in action. Yet, as I argue in later chapters, Freire is adamant that educational dialogue should have a clear purpose, a sense of structure, and a definite direction (see Freire, 1972a, pp. 61, 65; Freire and Shor, 1987, pp. 102, 109, 171–172). Freirean dialogue is *not* an “anything goes” affair; that is, it cannot be equated with (and indeed must be opposed to) mere “idle conversation.”

Finally, if Aronowitz’s (1993) appraisal of the U.S. education scene is accurate (and indicative of trends elsewhere in the Western world), Freire appears to have often been viewed through distinctly atheoretical lenses. By this I do not mean that the self-proclaimed Freireans to whom Aronowitz refers bring no theoretical assumptions to bear on their interpretation or adaptation of Freire’s work; this, Freire himself would have reminded us, is an impossibility. Rather, it is a case of forgetting “where Freire comes from” in not only the physical, social, and cultural



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beings and the world. It is possible to generate a set of broad pedagogical principles from a reading of Freire's work, but the development of appropriate methods for teaching and learning will vary from one context to another.

Chapters 4 and 5 address different dimensions of Freire's literacy work. Freire's experiences with Brazilian and Chilean adults in the 1960s are succinctly described in two of his early books, *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (1976) and *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1972b), and have attracted extensive comment over the last thirty years. Chapter 4 furnishes a summary of Freire's initiatives in these countries and comments briefly on other literacy programs with which Freire was involved in the 1970s. Chapter 5 attempts to integrate insights from Freire's later texts and earlier practical experiences via the notion of the multidimensional "word." The word, for Freire, comprises spoken, written, and active dimensions, and provides the pivot on which programs of literacy education turn. I argue that Freire's concept of literacy is considerably broader than the conventional view. From a Freirean standpoint, literacy is a political phenomenon, intimately related to personal and collective experience. Freirean *critical* literacy implies not merely engagement with printed texts, but the development of a reflective, dialogical, praxical mode of social being, grounded in a narrative of hope, an ethic of struggle, and a pedagogy of transformation.

Chapter 6 outlines and addresses some of the major criticisms of Freire's work from the past three decades. Several thinkers have focused on questions pertaining to Freirean pedagogical intervention: Bowers concentrates on cultural and linguistic issues; Berger attacks the concept of conscientization; and Walker identifies antialogical currents in Freire's politics. Others—Ellsworth and Weiler among them—argue that Freire relies on a universalist philosophical language and ignores the particulars of oppression and liberation. Taken together, these critiques ask searching questions about the very foundations on which Freire's pedagogy rests. I provide preliminary comments on some of these criticisms in this chapter, and develop my ideas further in chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 6 is concerned, in part, with Freire's responses to his critics. From the views he expressed on the different positions assumed by the Right and the Left in contemporary politics, the "fatalism" of neoliberal discourses, and the need for "unity in diversity," it is clear that although Freire accepted a number of postmodern insights, he remained a modernist thinker: a philosopher, educationist, and activist committed to what he called, in one of his last works (Freire, 1998c), a "universal human ethic."

Chapter 7 responds in more detail to the challenges Bowers poses for Freirean educators. Bowers sees Freire as a "carrier" of a highly problematic Western mind set: one that has a "cultural bias" toward progressive change, critical reflection, and intervention. Bowers maintains



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duced in this period is often ignored or downplayed. This, it is suggested, does not merely render readings of Freire incomplete; it also has a bearing on the way commentators interpret *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A holistic reading allows a more complex picture both of Freirean theory in general and the place of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in that theory in particular, to emerge.

FREIRE'S PUBLISHED WORKS

For the purposes of this discussion, three phases in Freire's writing career are identified: an early period (1965–1975), anchored by the release of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English in 1970; a quieter phase (1976–1986), where the only significant new work was a book based on Freire's experiences as an adult educator in Guinea-Bissau; and a prolific last decade (1987–), in which Freire, often in dialogical collaboration with others, wrote at length on the process of teaching, the politics of literacy, the administration of schooling in Brazil, higher education and intellectual life, and the importance of structure, direction, and rigor in liberating education, among other topics. (Several books have been published posthumously, and some of these carry publication dates of later than 1997. For this reason, the last period, while about a decade in length in terms of the commitment of Freire's writing time, remains open. It is possible that other partially completed works will over the next few years be edited and published under Freire's name.)

The Early Works (1965–1975)

When *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in English in 1970 it had a dramatic and almost immediate impact on the educational world. This famous text was the first of Freire's books to find a wide Western audience, but it was not his first published work. Freire started to gather his ideas into book form in the second half of the 1960s, reflecting on his adult literacy work in Brazil and Chile. *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (also published under the title *Education for Critical Consciousness*) was written before *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* but did not come to the attention of most readers in the Western world until the mid-1970s. The two books are, as a number of commentators (e.g., Mackie, 1980b) have noted, quite different in style and focus. *Education: The Practice of Freedom* (Freire, 1976) bears a stronger stamp of liberal ideas, whereas *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* gives evidence of a clear shift to the Left in Freire's thinking. In subsequent works, Freire extended and modified some of the pedagogical arguments introduced in these two early books (and another text, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, first published in 1970 and later released by



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directly with postmodern texts, Freire nonetheless confronts, in a preliminary way, a number of the deepest questions raised by poststructuralist and postmodernist authors over the past decade. *Pedagogy of Hope* is arguably one of Freire's most "readable," and certainly one of his most deeply personal, texts. It is, together with *Letters to Cristina* (1996) and *Pedagogy of the Heart* (Freire, 1997a), the closest we get to an autobiography of Freire. Freire provides a somewhat rambling history of events in his personal and intellectual life, adding to what Taylor (1993), Weiler (1996), and many others have seen as a certain kind of mythology, and he does not fully answer his critics. Few of his detractors are mentioned by name. The arguments advanced by Bowers, Berger, and others find some comment in the book, but Freire does not quite succeed in providing an extended, robust defense of his views against his harshest critics. Stylistically, Freire finds a comfortable register in this volume, moving with ease between different periods in his political and educational development. The book does not have a clear structure or set of guiding themes or chapter headings. Freire's expressed purpose is to reflect on—"relive"—*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and most parts of the book can be seen as consistent with this goal.

Some startling revelations emerge through these reflections. We learn, for example, that for a book that has been so influential, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was drafted in a remarkably short period of time. The first three chapters, Freire tells us, were written in a matter of weeks. Were it not for Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1967)—which Freire read and could not ignore—these three initial chapters would have constituted the whole book. After putting the (three-chapter) manuscript away in a drawer for some time, Freire, following his encounter with Fanon, added the important fourth chapter and thus changed the course of the book's history. It is difficult to imagine how the book might have been received and engaged over the next quarter of a century without this final chapter, but it seems certain that the text would not have influenced as many people as it eventually did. That fourth chapter provides a crucial reference point for many who turn to Freire for theoretical elaboration of principles already discovered through political action. This point applies, in particular, to indigenous groups involved in "First Nations" struggles across the globe, and has special relevance to acts of resistance by the Maori people of New Zealand against policies of colonization (cf. G. Smith, 1999).

Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work (Freire, 1996) acquired its name from a promise Freire made to his niece many years ago. For some time, he'd intended to set out some of his key ideas on pedagogy, philosophy, and politics in the form of a series of letters (to his niece). This format, he believed, would allow him to mix recollections of personal experiences with theoretical analyses of important concepts and



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pedagogy provides an especially telling example of what can go wrong when otherwise reputable theorists attempt to tackle domains of study they clearly know very little about. In construing Freire's educational ideal as "libertarian" (p. 202) and talking of what might happen when the Freirean model is "transplanted" on a North American campus (p. 204), Jay and Graff give ample evidence of having read next to nothing of Freire's work. (For a direct response to Jay and Graff, see Freire and Macedo, 1995.)

A holistic reading of Freire can also have a significant bearing on the way we interpret *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. There are dangers in ignoring other works even when *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides the main focus for a particular discussion. Where other Freirean texts have obvious relevance to an analysis of a theme or issue in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* we do Freire a disservice in neglecting them. A case in point is Kathleen Weiler's (1991) critique of Freire's theory of oppression, liberation, and education. Although Weiler would not have had many of the Freirean texts from the later period available to her at the time of writing, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Freire and Shor, 1987) and *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton and Freire, 1990) had certainly been published and indeed are cited in Weiler's footnotes. Yet, Weiler refers only fleetingly to these books in her essay. This is despite the fact that she clearly recognizes some of the differences between *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and later works:

Freire has repeatedly stated that his pedagogical method cannot simply be transferred to other settings, but that each historical site requires the development of a pedagogy appropriate to that setting. In his most recent work, he has also addressed sexism and racism as systems of oppression that must be considered as seriously as class oppression. Nonetheless, Freire is frequently read without consideration for the context of the specific settings in which his work developed and without these qualifications in mind. His most commonly read text still is his first book to be published in English, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (Weiler, 1991, p. 452)

Having noted this, Weiler then proceeds to virtually ignore what was at the time Freire's "most recent work," making only one other reference to *A Pedagogy for Liberation* and no further references to *We Make the Road by Walking*. No mention of Freire's coauthored book with Antonio Faundes, *Learning to Question* (1989), is made in either the text or the footnotes of Weiler's article. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* thus remains the principal focus for Weiler's critique, despite her acknowledgment that we do well to contextualize Freire's work. She admits, moreover, that Freire's later work offers something more on questions of oppression than a reading



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modes of understanding for Freire, as it is for Plato, but the modes of knowing implied by each theorist's conception of the dialectic are quite distinct. From Plato's perspective, dialectical reason is distinguished by its complete separation from worldly particulars; for Freire, dialectical thinking is defined by its focus on interrelationships between concrete particulars within a social totality. Goodness and knowledge are closely connected for Freire, as they are for Plato. But where Plato speaks of the good as the supreme form from which all particular acts of goodness in the world derive, these acts (i.e., those which are praxical), from Freire's point of view, *are* the supreme good, and it is through them that knowing occurs.

Freire is not an epistemological relativist. As McLaren and Silva (1993) point out, he does not believe all ideas are of equal merit. On the Freirean view, some ways of thinking, some theories, some appraisals of the nature of reality are better than others. As we see shortly, this line of argument applies to Freire's ethic as well: certain ways of living one's life, of acting toward others, of being in the world, are, according to Freire, superior—that is, morally preferable—to others. On the other hand, Freire's theory of knowledge is not absolutist in the Platonic sense: there are no static, unchanging, truths which transcend time and space. Instead, Freire argues that ideas "must be understood contextually as historically and culturally informed discourses that are subject to the mediation of the forces of material and symbolic production" (McLaren and Silva, 1993, p. 55). On the Freirean view, knowledge is *constructed* rather than derived or bequeathed: it is forged within particular social relations, is reflective of (and partially constitutive of) given ideological and political formations, and is always grounded—whether directly or indirectly—in human practice. Certain constructions of reality, though, are better than others: a dialogical and critical reading of the world, for Freire, affords a deeper understanding of the object under investigation than antidialogical or passive stances allow.

As humans, we have the capacity to reflect on the very process of knowing itself, on (our) consciousness and its relationship with the world. We not only can know, but know that we know (Davis, 1980, pp. 58–59). For Freire, the essence of human consciousness is intentionality toward the world. Humans can "stand back" from the immediate reality of their material existence and reflect on it. Freire speaks of this as a crucial moment in human evolution: what Teilhard de Chardin (1959) calls "homonization"—the shift from instinct to thought. Humans have the ability to problematize not only the object of attention but the process through which this problematization takes place. This, then, is a form of "meta-awareness"—an awareness of our conscious efforts to understand ourselves, others, and the world.



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not" (Fonseca, 1973, p. 96). The "I exist" does not precede the "we exist" but is fulfilled by it (Freire, 1985, p. 129). Knowing, on the Freirean view, cannot be a purely individual process but is only possible through dialogue—through a relationship with others, whether this is direct (face to face) or indirect (e.g., via texts), mediated by the objective world (cf. Buber, 1958, 1961).

In Freire's moral philosophy, praxis and dialogue are closely related: genuine dialogue represents a form of humanizing praxis. Dialogue is "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1972a, p. 61). Naming the world is the process of change itself: the human quest to understand and transform the world, through communication with others. This naming is a continuous process of creating and re-creating; that is, the world, once named, always presents itself afresh as a problem demanding a new naming. Freire claims that humans have a *primordial right* to "speak their word." It is in speaking a "true word" that human beings name the world and thereby transform it. A true word is an authentic, dialogical synthesis of reflection and action. Ultimately, "no one can say a true word alone" (p. 61). To speak a true word is to enter the historical process as a Subject, changing (objective and subjective) reality through consciously directed action, informed by critical discussion with others.

If it is to be humanizing, dialogical communication must involve a "love" of the world and of other human beings. This in turn demands a certain sense of humility. Faith in the ability of others to "name the world," together with trust between participants, and a hope that dehumanization can be overcome, are necessary. Finally, Freire stipulates that critical thinking is vital if dialogue is to become a humanizing praxis (pp. 62–65). When these conditions are satisfied, and where two or more people communicate with one another in seeking to understand a common object of study, there is, Freire argues, a true dialogue and an authentic, humanizing praxis.

THE POLITICS OF LIBERATION

Humanization through critical, dialogical praxis represents the ethical *ideal* for Freire. Frequently, however, the pursuit of humanization by some groups and individuals is impeded by the actions of others. Where this occurs, the situation becomes one of oppression. To prevent someone from engaging in praxis—either through limiting the range of possible actions open to that person, or through inhibiting that person's ability to think critically—is to dehumanize that person. Hence, oppression, as Freire sees it, is dehumanizing. This is what makes us *ethical* beings: our capacity "to intervene, to compare, to judge, to decide, to choose, to desist makes . . . [us] capable of acts of greatness, of dignity, and, at the



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you are exercising only an individualist attitude towards empowerment or freedom. (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 109)

In any given historical epoch in a given society, there will be a complex array of (often-conflicting) ideas, values, hopes, and challenges which, in their concrete representations, constitute the *themes* of that epoch (Freire, 1976, p. 5). Critical examination of these themes reveals a set of *tasks* to be carried out. Freire terms impediments to critical thought and transforming action "limit-situations." The tasks implied by limit-situations require "limit-acts" (Freire, 1972a, p. 73). Freire speaks, for example, of the economic dependence of Third World countries on the First World as a limit-situation: those countries subject to this relationship become "beings for others." In order to become "beings for themselves" (cf. Sartre, 1969), such societies require limit-acts directed toward revolutionary independence and political sovereignty (cf. Freire, 1970c; 1971b, p. 115).

Freire (1993a, p. 84) maintains that liberation is "the most fundamental task . . . we have at the end of this century." Overcoming domination or oppression (Freire uses these terms synonymously) entails negating those aspects of an oppressive reality which limit the oppressed. Hence, within a single society where the dominant theme is oppression, there will be whole range of limit-situations which characterize that oppression. In the Third World countries in which Freire worked, these might have ranged from the poor living conditions endured by peasants, to the payment of low wages to workers, to the broader limit-situation of national economic dependency. Although the ultimate task of the oppressed in such situations is liberation, the pursuit of this task calls for the negation of each of the limit-situations which (together) form an oppressive reality. Freire notes: "[E]pochs are fulfilled to the degree that their themes are grasped and their tasks solved; and they are superseded when their themes and tasks no longer correspond to newly emerging concerns" (1976, p. 5).

In times of transition, as in Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s, "[c]ontradictions increase between the ways of being, understanding, behaving, and valuing which belong to yesterday and other ways of perceiving and valuing which announce the future" (p. 7). In the Brazilian case, the movement was from a "closed" society to one in the process of opening. With this shift, such themes as democracy, popular participation, freedom, property, authority, and education were invested with new meaning. The transition from one epoch to another is a dynamic mix of "flux and reflux, advances and retreats," filled with confusion and uncertainty, but also the hope and anticipation of impending change (p. 9).



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Ethics, Politics, and Pedagogy: Freire on Liberating Education

The distinction between “banking education” and “problem-posing education” is one of the best known aspects of Freire’s work. The second chapter of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972a) has become a classic reference point for scholars and practitioners investigating the nature of liberating education. Given its extraordinary influence, this dimension of Freire’s theory merits close attention. It is important, however, that this initial discussion of banking education and problem-posing education be studied alongside Freire’s other pedagogical writings.¹ Drawing on Freirean material spanning the last three decades, but concentrating in particular on Freire’s later books, the present chapter focuses on the significance of structure, direction, and rigor in liberating education. The propensity among some Western educators to reduce Freirean theory and practice to a “method” or set of methods is criticized, and an alternative view of Freirean education as a distinctive approach to human beings and the social world is advanced.

BANKING EDUCATION AND PROBLEM-POSING EDUCATION: THE CLASSIC ACCOUNT

In chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that education is suffering from “narration sickness” (1972a, p. 45). Whether inside or outside schooling settings, the relationship between teacher and students tends to be overwhelmingly monological: The teacher narrates the subject matter to students who are expected to passively receive, memorize,



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Education, Ethics, and Politics

Freire sees learning and teaching as essential to human existence. Humans, as unfinished beings, are “programmed” to learn. It is not possible to be human without engaging in certain forms of educational practice. “Education,” for Freire, does not apply just to schooling—which, as a mass movement, is a relatively recent historical phenomenon—but to the whole of life (Freire, 1998b, pp. 25–26). To live is to decide, to opt, to choose, to struggle. This confirms our existence as ethical and political beings, and signifies the crucial importance of education in social and individual formation (Freire, 1998c, p. 53).

Freire never tired of repeating that education cannot be neutral (see, for example, Freire, 1971a, pp. 1–2; 1972b, pp. 173–174; 1979, p. 28; 1987, pp. 211–212; 1998c, pp. 92–93). His recognition of the political nature of all pedagogical activity is arguably one of his greatest contributions to the field of education (Mayo, 1997, p. 365). Freire reminds us that learning never takes place in a vacuum. Whether in formal or informal settings, learning always builds in some way on the past and is necessarily shaped by the social structures and relations of the present. The socio-political context sets limits on what can be achieved by educators, but also leaves spaces for resistance (cf. Freire, 1998c, p. 110). Individual teachers or coordinators cannot but bring certain attitudes, values, beliefs, and predispositions to bear on the educative process. Whether recognized and acknowledged or not, the assumptions educators begin with structure and shape their pedagogical activities. Every decision, policy, or practice in an educational setting implies a particular conception of human beings and the world and a specific ethical position (cf. Freire, 1971a, p. 2).

Teachers do not need to have explicitly asked, “What *ought* I to do?” or “What political views do I support?” for their educational activities to be non-neutral; a certain ethical stance is already assumed in any consciously directed, deliberate action in an educative setting. Declaring oneself “neutral” is, Freire claims, a profoundly political statement. Those who purport to be “apolitical” often provide, either wittingly and unintentionally, support for the status quo. An educator, then, is always, in effect, “taking a stand,” whether openly or implicitly. Freire observes:

This is a great discovery, education is politics! After that, when a teacher discovers that he or she is a politician, too, the teacher has to ask, What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? That is, In favor of whom am I being a teacher? By asking in favor of whom am I educating, the teacher must also ask against whom am I educating. (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 46)



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dent, no one, from a Freirean point of view, has the right to insist that their understanding of reality is the only acceptable, legitimate, or defensible one. More than this, though, teachers have a responsibility to actively promote consideration of alternative views: to stimulate contrary discourses and invite critical appraisals of their own views (p. 78). Providing the necessary resources for investigating competing perspectives on controversial issues—via lectures, recommended readings, the posing of new problems and asking of new questions—thus becomes important in maintaining the sort of healthy debate Freire encourages.

Freire's discussion of the differences between authoritative and authoritarian approaches to education in later works is instructive here. A democratic teacher, Freire argues, "can never stop being an authority or having authority" (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 91). This authority derives from the educator's knowledge of his or her subject, and from the responsibility the educator has for coordinating, structuring, and facilitating the educative process. The teacher's authority is necessary for freedom to develop (Freire, 1997a, p. 90). This, for Freire, is only an apparent paradox. Where teachers renounce or deny their authority, freedom becomes license; where they forget the freedom of students altogether, authority becomes authoritarianism (see Freire, 1987, p. 212; 1997a, p. 90). The differentiation between "freedom" and "license" here is not a conceptual distinction but a substantive (normative) one. The key to understanding Freire's position lies in the *purpose* of exercising authority; namely, to promote the appropriate conditions for allowing others to liberate themselves. As Freire puts it in *Letters to Cristina* (1996, p. 150), "authority is an invention of freedom so that freedom may continue to be." If authority is completely relinquished, the structure, direction, and focus necessary for rigorous dialogical reflection on a common object of study is missing.

For Freire there is a close connection between authoritarianism and manipulation. A manipulative approach to pedagogy is one in which students are expected to believe X or Y without question, or irrespective of the evidence in favor of X or Y. One dimension of manipulation is the systematic impeding of a curious, interested, creative, questioning orientation toward the world. For Freire, asking questions is an essential part of the learning process. The liberating educator welcomes questions as a sign of the students' critical engagement with the object of study; the authoritarian teacher tends to regard questions as an attack on his or her professional authority (Freire and Faundez, 1989, p. 35). The defensiveness of the authoritarian teacher when faced with challenging questions springs from a fear of the answers such questions might give rise to (p. 36). The manipulative teacher has no intention of unveiling reality, or of penetrating surface appearances. Manipulation denies, distorts, and mythicizes reality. It represents an attempt to turn the world



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view, the tables should be turned here. Intellectual rigor, as Freire conceives of it, is absolutely fundamental—indeed, indispensable—to problem-posing education, while banking education systematically impedes rigor. Teachers, Freire argues, must be thoroughly conversant with the literature pertinent to their domain of study, and must seek to continuously “relearn” their subject. “Reading” for Freire implies the fullest possible engagement with texts, not simply a skimming of content matter (see Roberts, 1993, 1996a, 1998d). Studying for Freire is an inherently difficult and demanding, but also potentially joyous, process (Freire, 1987, p. 213). The joy of study arises precisely from the attempt to apprehend the object of study critically. As Freire observes in one of his last works, joy and rigor need not be viewed as mutually exclusive terms (Freire, 1998a, p. 4). Joy, Freire reminds us, “does not come only at the moment of finding what we sought. It comes also in the search itself” (1998c, p. 125). Study requires discipline, though this does not imply a *disciplinarian* stance on the part of the teacher. Rather, it is the self-discipline and collective effort of teachers and students investigating the object of study through purposeful, directive, structured, *critical* dialogue to which Freire refers. Study is *work*. It demands great effort and a mustering of intellectual energies such that learners transcend mere awareness and penetrate beneath the surface of the subject or object under investigation. In this sense, studying represents an extraordinary or *exceptional* state: a mode of being beyond (or at least in contradistinction to) that which typifies everyday conscious activity. In the process of studying, Freire tells us, we encounter “pain, pleasure, victory, defeat, doubt, and happiness” (1998a, p. 28).

Liberating education is thus a profoundly *serious* endeavor. This is in keeping with the seriousness of the situation the oppressed find themselves in. Teaching, for Freire, ought never to be reduced to a “feel-good” process. This does not mean that the liberating classroom should be somber or devoid of humor. In *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, Freire draws a distinction between humor and just laughing:

A humorist is not just a smile-maker, someone who makes people laugh. No! Even sometimes, good humor leads you *not* to smile or laugh. But, on the contrary, good humor does not make you laugh as much as it makes you seriously think about the material. Humor is Chaplin. He unveiled all the issues he tried to describe, to live with in the cinema. In the shows, he revealed what was behind the situations. (Freire and Shor, 1987, p. 162)

Problem-posing education is not a theater for superficiality, nor does it represent a mode of entertainment (p. 214). Nonetheless, where opportunities exist to incorporate humor into dialogue as a means for enhanc-



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in; certain methods of mathematical proof remain consistent over time; various quantitative systems of research can be duplicated in any number of different studies; syllogistic logic is the same for contemporary analytic philosophers as it was for Aristotle; and so on. In some spheres of human activity, it is assumed that methods must be duplicated in the same way regardless of the context. In such cases, it is believed that any deviation from the precise techniques or practices associated with a particular method will reduce its effectiveness. Certain methods of sports coaching, giving birth, and teaching skills to youngsters fall into this category.

If Freire's work is conceived purely or primarily in methodological terms, one implication is that his approach to literacy education in the Third World should be readily "transportable" to the First World as a "prepackaged" set of clearly defined techniques. An avowedly Freirean educator might concede that specific details of "the method" would have to be changed (e.g., aspects of the syllabic recombination process, in the light of the differences between Portuguese and English), but believe that apart from features clearly ruled out in particular contexts Freire's techniques should be adopted "to the letter."

Freire was vigorously opposed to this line of thinking, and in later works (1997b, 1998a) was disturbed to see it (re)emerging, under neo-liberal political conditions, in technocratic, prepackaged approaches to teacher education. From a Freirean standpoint, every educational situation presents a *distinct* challenge to be addressed. The first question an educator ought to ask is not "What methods should I use?" but "What human ideals do I (or we) wish to promote?" From this starting point, more specific questions follow: "What are the limits and possibilities in seeking these ideals within *this* situation (at this time, in this place, subject to these political constraints, given these social relations, within this structural framework, etc.);" and "What overall goals and strategies are appropriate in light of the ideal and the situation?" Only after these concerns have been addressed (that is, theorized—critically and dialogically) can the question "What methods would be best?" be authentically answered. Of course, this is not meant to imply some sort of lock-step, rigid, sequential procedure: the whole process of deciding what ought to be done in any educational setting should be thoroughly dialectical. But Freire is adamant that the first priority for an educator is to confront questions about human beings and the world, after which methodological problems can be addressed.

This suggests an important distinction for those commenting on or attempting to apply Freirean ideas. In his literacy education work in Brazil, Chile, and other Third World countries, Freire adopted certain procedures. He encouraged discussion and active participation rather than silent compliance and the mechanical repetition of words from the



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verses “adapted”; “liberation” versus “oppression”; “humanization” versus “dehumanization”, etc.), his later writings suggest there is no *single* antithesis to “liberating education.” For Freire, liberating education stands opposed to *two* pedagogical approaches: one authoritarian, the other laissez-faire. At one end of the scale, the teacher is granted total authority and exercises this in a disciplinarian and oppressive manner; at the other pole, the teacher relinquishes (or is stripped of) *any* authority, and students do as they please. Both are in tension with the ideal of humanization. Authoritarian education is blatantly antidialogical, whereas laissez-faire approaches diminish the *purposeful* character of education and human struggle.

There can be little doubt that Freire’s account of banking education and problem-posing education in the second chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* represents one of the best, and certainly one of most influential, concise statements of liberating education from the past three decades. Freire did not subsequently contradict or renounce any of the major principles discussed in that chapter, but he did *extend* and clarify many points from this classic early piece in later publications. In particular, and partly in response to repeated misreadings of his works, he stressed the importance of structure, direction, and rigor in his educational ideal. To be a liberating educator implies a certain clarity and conviction in one’s ethical and political position, coupled with thorough preparation and a willingness to work dialogically with others. The problems to be addressed in liberating educational settings must be continuously confronted afresh as the world—in its myriad social, cultural, and political dimensions—ever evolves.

NOTES

1. Discussion of Freire’s educational theory in this chapter is by largely confined to issues of pedagogy. Freire tends to use the terms “education” and “pedagogy” synonymously, though in almost all cases his references to the latter have or imply some connection with the theory and practice of teaching and learning. Even if teaching and learning are employed in the widest sense here (i.e., not restricted to schooling or institutional settings), there is arguably more to education than this. It is assumed throughout that it is *adults* with whom we are dealing when references are made to “students.” The terms “educator” and “teacher” are used interchangeably.

2. This notion becomes highly problematic if it is recognized that teachers often occupy contradictory social positions, oppressed in some senses but privileged in others (see Weiler, 1991). One way of responding to this is to see “class suicide” as an ideal teachers might strive for but not necessarily be able to attain (Mayo, 1993, p. 19).



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were also selected on the basis of their phonemic richness; specifically, an effort was made to find words that could be broken down into syllables, combined with vowels, and reformed to generate new words. Freire further stipulated that "the words chosen should correspond to the phonetic difficulties of the language, [and should be] placed in a sequence moving gradually from words of less to those of greater difficulty" (p. 51).

Phase Three was the creation of "codifications." These were pictorial representations of generative words. Frequently, the pictures would encapsulate situations from the daily lives of the participants. Generative words were embedded in the codifications, and graduated in terms of their phonetic complexity. A generative word might embrace the entire situation depicted in the picture, or it might be relevant to only one aspect of the situation (pp. 51–52).

The fourth and fifth phases of the investigative and preliminary stage of the program consisted in the explication of "agendas" (i.e., the style, methods, and content of the program) for culture circle coordinators, and the production of discovery cards with the breakdown of generative words into phonemic families (pp. 52–53). Six hundred coordinators were requested at the start of the program, and more than 30,000 applications were received. A two-page test was administered in a football stadium, and coordinators were selected on the basis of their answers to questions such as these: "Brazil is largely a marginal society. How shall we get out of this situation?"; "What do you think of the condition of education in Brazil at the present moment?"; "Why did you decide to apply for this job?" (see Fonseca, 1973, p. 95). Freire observes that as far as informing coordinators of the nature of the program was concerned, the difficulty lay not with instruction in the technical aspects of the method employed for teaching reading and writing, but with the inculcation of a particular orientation toward the learning process. Coordinators were called to abandon traditional narrative, "banking" approaches to education in favor of a pedagogical system based on the principle of dialogue (Freire, 1976, p. 52).

An Introduction to the Concept of Culture

After all the initial preparations had been put in place—the existential situation of the participants explored, generative words selected, posters or slides of codifications made, and coordinators given their agendas—the next stage in the program could commence. In Brazil, this second stage—an exploration of ideas about nature, culture, work, and human relationships—occupied up to eight sessions of the overall program. (Literacy groups met for one hour each week-night for a period of up to eight weeks [Brown, 1974, p. 32].) The conditions which prompted the



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