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Teachers as Cultural Workers

Letters to Those Who Dare Teach

EXPANDED EDITION



PAULO

With New Commentary by Peter McLaren,
Joe L. Kincheloe, and Shirley Steinberg

Author of
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Bahan dengan hak cipta

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Foreword

DONALDO MACEDO AND
ANA MARIA ARAÚJO FREIRE

Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach reaffirms Paulo Freire's place in history as the most significant educator in the world during the last half of this century. This insightful book represents an important answer to the capitalist "banking model" of education that has generated and continues to generate greater and greater failure. As one reads the letters to teachers contained in *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, it becomes clear why many North American liberal and neoliberal educators are looking to Paulo Freire's pedagogy as an alternative. No longer can it be argued that Freire's pedagogy is appropriate only in Third World contexts. For one thing, we are experiencing a rapid "Third-Worldization" of North America, where inner cities more and more come to resemble the shantytowns of the Third World, with high levels of poverty, violence, illiteracy, human exploitation, homelessness, and human misery. The abandonment of our inner cities and the insidious decay of their infrastructures, including their schools, make it very difficult to maintain the artificial division between the First World and the Third World. It is just as easy to find Third World misery in the First World inner cities as it is to discover First World opulence in the oligarchies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and many other Third World nations. The Third-Worldization of North American inner cities has also produced large-scale educational failures that have created minority student dropout rates that range from 50 percent in the Boston public school system to over 70 percent in the school systems of larger metropolitan areas like New York City.

Conservative educators have by and large recoiled from this landscape of educational failure in an attempt to salvage the status quo and to contain

the “browning” of the United States. These conservative educators have attempted to reappropriate the educational debate and to structure the educational discourse in terms of competition and the privatization of schools. The hidden curriculum of the proposed school privatization movement consists of taking resources from poor schools that are on the verge of bankruptcy to support private or well-to-do schools. “Private school choice” is only private to the degree that it generates private profit while being supported by public funds. What is rarely discussed in the North American school debate is the fact that public schools are part and parcel of the fabric of any democratic society. In fact, conservative educators fail to recognize that a democratic society that shirks its public responsibility is a democracy in crisis. A society that equates for-profit privatization with democracy is a society with confused priorities. A democratic society that believes (falsely—one need only consider the savings and loan debacle and the Wall Street scandals, for example) that quality, productivity, honesty, and efficiency can be achieved only through for-profit privatization is a society that displays both an intellectual and ethical bankruptcy of ideas. If we accept the argument that “private” is best, we should once again consider Jack Beaty’s question “Would we set up a private Pentagon to improve our public defense establishment?”¹ Would the private-is-best logic eradicate the ongoing problems in the military, problems that range from rampant sexual harassment to expenditures that are both outrageous (over \$600 for a toilet seat) and wasteful (billions of dollars for airplanes that don’t fly)? Most Americans would find the privatization of the Pentagon utterly absurd, claiming that a strong defense is a national priority. But we contend that instead of dismantling public education further, we should make it a national public priority. We also contend that the safeguarding of U.S. democracy rests much more on the creation of an educated, smart citizenry than on the creation of smart bombs.

In the face of market notion of school reform in the United States, many liberal and neoliberal educators have rediscovered Freire’s ideas as an alternative to the conservative domestication of education that equates free-market ideology with democracy. However, part of the problem with some of these pseudocritical educators is that in the name of liberation pedagogy, they reduce Freire’s leading ideas to a method. According to Stanley Aronowitz, the North American fetish for method has allowed Freire’s philosophical ideas to be “assimilated to the prevailing obsession of

North American education, following a tendency in all human and social sciences, with methods—of verifying knowledge and, in schools, of teaching that is, transmitting knowledge to otherwise unprepared students.”²

This fetish for method works insidiously against the ability to adhere to Freire’s own pronouncement against importing and exporting methodology. In a long conversation Paulo had with Donaldo Macedo about this issue, he said: “Donaldo, I don’t want to be imported or exported. It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without reinventing them. Please tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to re-create and rewrite my ideas.”

Before problematizing the reduction of Freire’s leading philosophical ideas to a mechanistic method, we must comment on the “Paulo Freire Method,” first, because it is still widely used today, with some adaptations, all over the world. Second, often when one speaks of Freire and literacy, one reduces Freire’s thoughts on literacy to a mere set of techniques associated with the learning of reading and writing. It is necessary to clarify, especially for the sake of those who are new to Freire’s thinking.

Freire’s “invitation” to adult literacy learners is, initially, that they look at themselves as persons living and producing in a given society. He invites learners to come out of the apathy and the conformism—akin to being “dismissed from life”—in which they often find themselves. Freire challenges them to understand that they are themselves the makers of culture, leading them to learn the anthropological meaning of culture. They are shown that the popular classes’ lower status is the result not of divine determination or fate but, rather, of the economic-political-ideological context of the society in which they live.

When men and women realize that they themselves are the makers of culture, they have accomplished, or nearly accomplished, the first step toward feeling the importance, the necessity, and the possibility of owning reading and writing. They become literate, politically speaking.

As they discuss the object to be known and the representation of reality to be decoded, the members of a “culture circle” respond to questions generated by the group coordinator, gradually deepening their readings of the world. The ensuing debate makes possible a rereading of reality from which may well result the literacy learner’s engaging in political practices aiming at social transformation.

What? Why? How? To what end? For whom? Against whom? By whom? In favor of whom? In favor of what? These are questions that provoke literacy learners to focus on the substantiveness of things—that is, their reasons for being, their purpose, the way they are done, and so on.

Literacy activities require research into what Freire calls the “minimum vocabulary universe” among literacy learners. It is through work on this universe that words become chosen to integrate the literacy program. These words, about seventeen of them, called “generative words,” should be phonemically rich words and necessarily ordered in increasing phonetic difficulty. They should be read within the widest possible context of the literacy learners’ life and of the local language, thus becoming national as well.

Decoding the written word, which follows the decoding of a coded existential situation, implies certain steps that must be strictly followed.

Let us take the word *tijolo* ‘brick’, which Freire used as the first generative word in his work in Brasilia in the 1960s. This word was chosen because Brasilia was a city under construction at the time, in order to facilitate the reader’s understanding.

1. The generative word *tijolo* is presented, inserted in the representation of a concrete situation: men at work at a construction site.
2. The word is simply written: *tijolo*.
3. The same word is written with its syllables separated: *ti-jo-lo*.
4. The “phonemic family” of the first syllable is presented: *ta-te-ti-to-tu*.
5. The “phonemic family” of the second syllable is presented: *ja-je-ji-jo-ju*.
6. The “phonemic family” of the third syllable is presented: *la-le-li-lo-lu*.
7. The “phonemic families” of the word being decoded are presented:

ta-te-ti-to-tu

ja-je-ji-jo-ju

la-le-li-lo-lu

This set of “phonemic families” of the generative word has been termed the “discovery form,” for it allows the literacy learner to put together

“pieces,” that is, to come up with new phonemic combinations that will necessarily result in words of the Portuguese language.

8. Vowels are presented: a-e-i-o-u.

In sum, the moment the literacy learner is able to articulate syllables to form words, he or she is literate. The process, obviously, requires deepening, that is, a postliteracy component.

The effectiveness and validity of the “Method” lie in using the learners’ reality as the starting point, in beginning with what they already know, from the pragmatic value of the things and the facts of their daily lives, their existential situations. By respecting and starting from common sense, Freire proposes overcoming it.

The “Method” follows methodological and linguistic rules but also goes beyond them, for it challenges men and women who are becoming literate to take ownership of the written code and to politicize themselves, to acquire a view of language and the world as a totality.

The “Method” rejects mere narrow-minded and mind-narrowing repetition of phrases, words, and syllables as it proposes that the learners “read the world” and “read the word,” which, as Paulo Freire emphasizes, are inseparable actions. Thus he is against “*cartilhas*,” or literacy workbooks.

In short, Paulo Freire’s work is more than a method for literacy education; it is a broad and deep understanding of education that has its political nature at the core of its concerns.

We would conclude these comments on the “Paulo Freire Method” by saying that the literacy education of the Brazilian people (for when Freire created the “Method” he never expected it to spread around the world) was, in the good sense of the phrase, an educational tactic designed to achieve a necessary result: the politicizing of the Brazilian people. In this sense the “Method” is revolutionary, for it can lift those who do not yet know the written word out of their condition of submission, of immersion and passivity. The revolution as Freire envisioned it does not presuppose an inversion of the oppressed–oppressor poles; rather, it intends to reinvent, in communion, a society where exploitation and the verticalization of power do not exist, where the disenfranchised segments of society are not excluded or interdicted from reading the world.

Paulo Freire was in exile for almost sixteen years precisely because he understood education this way and because he fought to give a large number of Brazilians access to an asset traditionally denied them: the act of reading the world by reading the word.

As becomes abundantly clear, Freire's method of teaching peasants how to read was designed to be a method not as an end in itself but as part of a larger goal of politicizing the Brazilian peasants so that they could also read the world and connect the world with the word. For this reason, Freire's main ideas about the act of knowing transcend the methods for which he is known. In fact, according to Linda Bimbi: "The originality of Freire's work does not reside in the efficacy of his literacy methods, but, above all, in the originality of its content designed to develop our consciousness"³ as part of a humanizing pedagogy. According to Freire: "A humanizing education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others."⁴

Freire developed students' ability to be aware of their presence in the world through the dialogic model for which he is also known. Unfortunately, many educators who embrace his notion of dialogue mechanistically reduce the epistemological relationship of dialogue to a vacuous, comfortable, feel-good zone. Reduced in this way, the dialogic model loses its clear view of the object of knowledge under study and reduces dialogue to a mere conversation about individuals' lived experiences.

With that said, we can begin to understand why some educators, in their attempt to cut the chains of oppressive educational practices, blindly advocate the dialogic model, creating, in turn, a new form of methodological rigidity laced with benevolent oppression—all done under the guise of democracy with the justification that it is for the students' own good. Many of us have witnessed pedagogical contexts in which we have been implicitly or explicitly required to speak, to talk about our experience as an act of liberation. We all have been at conferences where the speaker was chastised because he or she failed to locate himself or herself in history—because, in other words, he or she failed to give primacy to his or her experiences in addressing issues of critical democracy—regardless of the fact that the speaker had important and insightful things to say. This is tantamount to



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