PAULO FREIRE

A critical encounter

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EDUCATION IS POLITICS
Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy

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LIBERATING VERSUS DOMESTICATING EDUCATION

‘To be a good liberating educator,’ Paulo Freire wrote to literacy teachers in Chile in 1971, ‘you need above all to have faith in human beings. You need to love. You must be convinced that the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people, never their domestication. You must be convinced that when people reflect on their domination they begin a first step in changing their relationship to the world’ (Freire 1971: 62).

Freire’s passion for justice, for critical knowledge, and for social change stand out when you meet him or read his work. For Freire, teaching and learning are human experiences with profound social consequences. Education is not reducible to a mechanical method of instruction. Learning is not a quantity of information to be memorized or a package of skills to be transferred to students. Classrooms die as intellectual centers when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Instead of transferring facts and skills from teacher to students, a Freirean class invites students to think critically about subject matter, doctrines, the learning process itself, and their society.

Freire’s social pedagogy defines education as one place where the individual and society are constructed, a social action which can either empower or domesticate students. In the liberating classroom suggested by Freire’s ideas, teachers pose problems derived from student life, social issues, and academic subjects, in a mutually created dialogue.

This pedagogy challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge. His critical methods ask teachers and students to question existing knowledge as part of the questioning habits appropriate for citizens in a democracy. In Freirean critical classrooms, teachers reject the methods which make students passive and anti-intellectual. They do not lecture students into sleepy silence. They do not prepare students for a life of political alienation in society. Rather, Freirean educators pose
critical problems to students, treat them as complicated, substantial human beings, and encourage curiosity and activism about knowledge and the world.

PROBLEM-POSING: THE KEY TO CRITICAL DIALOGUE

A Freirean critical teacher is a problem-poser who asks thought-provoking questions and who encourages students to ask their own questions. Through problem-posing, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions. In this pedagogy, students experience education as something they do, not as something done to them. They are not empty vessels to be filled with facts, or sponges to be saturated with official information, or vacant bank accounts to be filled with deposits from the required syllabus.

Freire's famous metaphor for traditional education, the 'banking' method, focused on the stifling of creative and critical thought in mass education. In 'banking'-style classrooms, Freire wrote that:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. . . . In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. . . . The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world.

(Freire 1970: 58, 60)

Instead of banking education which domesticates students, problem-posing offers a search for knowledge. In this mutual search, the teacher and students develop 'co-intentionality,' that is, mutual intentions, which make the study collectively owned, not the teacher's sole property. This mutuality helps students and teacher overcome the alienation from each other developed year by year in traditional banking classrooms, where a one-way monologue of teacher-talk silences students. Co-intentionality begins when the teacher presents a problem for inquiry related to a key aspect of student experience, so that students see their thought and language (subjectivity) in the study.

Knowing, to Freire, means being an active subject who questions and transforms. To learn is to recreate the way we see ourselves, our education, and our society. 'We wanted a literacy program,' Freire wrote in Education for Critical Consciousness (1973), 'which would be an introduction to the democratization of culture . . . a program which itself would
be an act of creation, capable of releasing other creative acts, one in which students would develop the impatience and vivacity which characterize search and invention' (p. 43).

Searching and inventing, the liberating classroom is a politics for cultural democracy. In *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987), Freire said:

This is a great discovery, education is politics! 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? . . . The teacher works in favor of something and against something. Because of that she or he will have another great question, How to be consistent in my teaching practice with my political choice? I cannot proclaim my liberating dream and in the next day be authoritarian in my relationships with the students.

(Shor and Freire 1987: 46)

Freire insists on consistency between the democratic values of this critical pedagogy and its classroom practices. The critical teacher must also be a democratic one. If the critical teacher criticizes inequality and the lack of democracy in society, and then teaches in an authoritarian way, she or he compromises her or his credibility. The empowering education Freire suggests is not a new data bank or doctrine delivered to students; it is, instead, a democratic and transformative relationship between students and teacher, students and learning, and students and society.

In this theory of learning, Freire argues that the *whole activity of education is political in nature*. Politics is not one aspect of teaching or learning. All forms of education are political, whether or not teachers and students acknowledge the politics in their work. Politics is in the teacher–student relationship, whether authoritarian or democratic. Politics is in the subjects chosen for the syllabus and in those left out. It is also in the method of choosing course content, whether it is a shared decision or only the teacher's prerogative, whether there is a negotiated curriculum in the classroom or one imposed unilaterally.

Politics also resides in the discourse of the classroom, in the way teachers and students talk to each other, in the questions and statements from teachers about the themes being studied, in the freedom students feel when questioning the curriculum, in the silences typically surrounding unorthodox questions and issues in traditional classrooms. Further, there is politics in the imposition of standardized tests, in grading and tracking policies, in the physical conditions of classrooms and buildings which send messages to students about their worth and place in society. Moreover, politics also resides in the punitive attitude of the curriculum towards everyday speech and non-standard English spoken by students, in the diminished role of art, dance, and music in lower-income schools, in the 'partnership' between local schools and businesses without partnerships
between schools and labor organizations, in the way schools are unequally funded depending on the economic class of students served, and in the unelected bureaucracy running most institutions.

‘Education is politics’ suggests that the entire school experience has political qualities and consequences. In schools and colleges governed from the top down by administrators, new generations of people develop. Schools construct people year by year, developing the way they think about the world and act in it. Traditional education orients students to conform, to accept inequality and their places in the status quo, to follow authority. Freirean critical education invites students to question the system they live in and the knowledge being offered them, to discuss what kind of future they want, including their right to elect authority and to remake the school and society they find. Education is politics because it is one place where individuals and society are constructed. Because human beings and their society are developed in one direction or another through education, the learning process cannot avoid being political.

Underlying Freire’s definition of education as politics is a critique of domination and a commitment to challenge inequality and injustice. From a democratic point of view, Freire sees society controlled by an elite which imposes its culture and values as the standard. In schooling, this imposed standard is transferred by required syllabuses, mandated textbooks, tracking, and standardized exams. Freire wrote that, ‘Any educational practice based on standardization, on what is laid down in advance, on routines in which everything is predetermined, is bureaucratizing and anti-democratic’ (Freire and Faundez 1989: 41). For Freire, curriculum is controlled from above as a means to impose the dominant culture on each new generation of students. Knowledge is not neutral. Rather, it is the expression of historical moments where some groups exercise dominant power over others. That domination in school includes a traditional curriculum which interferes with the democratic and critical development of students. After years in passive classrooms, students do not see themselves as people who can transform knowledge and society.

INTERFERENCES TO TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Democratic dialogue in a critical classroom often faces resistance from school authorities, from students, from teachers, and from parents, who may defend traditional methods for complex reasons which cannot be examined fully here. The problem of student resistance to critical pedagogy is the most fascinating interference and the one faced most often by teachers experimenting with critical–democratic methods. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren have written brilliantly on this problem in a number of works. Marilyn Frankenstein has placed student resistance into the context of maths education in her pathbreaking book Relearning Mathematics (1989).
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I discussed it in some detail in Critical Teaching and Everyday Life (1987). Paul Willis explored the phenomenon of student resistance to schooling in a remarkable book on British working-class boys, Learning to Labour (1981). Briefly, in a school system devoted to banking pedagogy, students internalize values and habits which sabotage their critical thought. They develop as alienated and anti-intellectual adults after years in mass education and mass culture, where they are treated as objects filled with official ideas and supervised by authorities. Uncritical citizens who deny their own intellects and blame themselves for their own failures are the easiest to control, so it is understandable for the mass education system (invented decade by decade by authorities) to under-develop most students.

In traditional classrooms, students develop authority-dependence; they rehearse their futures as passive citizens and workers by learning that education means listening to teachers tell them what to do and what things mean. Freire points out that if a liberating teacher asks students to co-develop the class with her or him, the students often doubt that this is ‘real’ education. (‘Real education’ is something done to students, not something they do; ‘real education’ means the teacher telling students what to think and what to do instead of dialoguing and negotiating with them.) Or, in a liberating classroom emphasizing self-discipline and collaboration, students often think that no discipline is functioning because the teacher is not an authoritarian, giving them license to ignore the work or misbehave. Or, they sense that the democratic process and critical problems challenge the authoritarian, dominant values they have learned before, and they reject the invitation to question their internalized ideas, official knowledge, and the mainstream politics of their society.

This authority-dependence of students is matched by the authority-dependence of many teachers, who follow the traditional syllabus and resist democratic transformation, a problem Freire and I discussed in A Pedagogy for Liberation and which Giroux investigated in Theory and Resistance in Education (1983) and Teachers as Intellectuals (1988b). The transformation of teachers and students from authoritarian to democratic habits is a long-term project. After long years in traditional schools, teachers become conditioned to lecture, to assert their authority, to transfer official information and skills, as the proper way for professionals to do their work. It is not easy for them to share decision-making in the classroom, to negotiate the curriculum, to pose problems based in student thought and language, to lead a dialogue where student expression has an impact on the course of study, and to learn with and from students. ‘A major problem in setting up the program,’ Freire wrote about his literacy projects in Brazil, ‘is instructing the teams of coordinators. Teaching the purely technical aspects of the procedure is not difficult. The difficulty lies rather in the creation of a new attitude – that of dialogue, so absent in our
upbringing and education' (Freire 1973: 52). Freire referred impatiently to
the 'instilled certainty' teachers learn, that to teach means to lecture, to
maintain a one-way monologue in the classroom.

The banking method is the model from which teachers and students
draw their instilled certainties about education. Not only does this method
reduce the students' ability to question authority, but it is also posed as
the high standards of a serious teacher. 'What I am concerned above all
to do,' Freire said in Learning to Question, 'is to resist, theoretically and
practically, two connections which are generally made.... The first is the
connection between a democratic style and low academic standards; the
second is that made between high academic standards and an authoritarian
style.... Democracy and freedom are not a denial of high academic
standards' (pp. 33, 34). His insistence on rigor and structure in liberating
education preoccupied an entire chapter in A Pedagogy for Liberation.

Inside a rigorous dialogue, the teacher poses problems and asks ques-
tions, while encouraging students to do the same. But, the critical teacher
who teaches for democracy and against inequality also has the right and
the responsibility to put forward her or his ideas. The problem-posing
teacher is not mute, value-free, or permissive. The democratic teacher in
this pedagogy extends the critique of domination beyond teacher-student
relations and the education system into a critique of the system at the root
of social conditions. This critique of economics is not a teacherly lecture
on good and evil. Dialogic teachers do not separate themselves from the
dialogue. The teacher who relates economic power in society to the
knowledge under inquiry in the classroom cannot impose her or his views
on students but must present them inside a thematic discussion in language
accessible to students, who have the freedom to question and disagree with
the teacher's analysis. This delicate balance between teacher and students
is a 'near mystery' of democratic practice, according to Freire, who
suggests that teachers have to lead the class with a democratic learning
process as well as with critical ideas. 'They must affirm themselves without
thereby disaffirming their students,' he concludes in Learning to Question
(p. 34).

MUTUAL AFFIRMATION: TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN
LIBERATING EDUCATION

In addition to a critique of domination underlying his pedagogy, Freire
also poses an 'anthropological' notion of culture. According to this idea,
culture is the actions and results of humans in society, the way people
interact in their communities, and the addition people make to the world
they find. Culture is what ordinary people do every day, how they
behave, speak, relate, and make things. Everyone has and makes culture,
not only aesthetic specialists or members of the élite. Culture is the
speech and behavior in everyday life, which liberating educators study anthropologically before they can offer effective critical learning.

The anthropological definition of culture – situated in the experiences of everyday life, discovered by observing the community life of students – democratizes pedagogy because the curriculum is built around the themes and conditions of people’s lives. Freirean educators study their students in their classrooms and in their community, to discover the words, ideas, conditions, and habits central to their experience. From this material, they identify ‘generative words and themes’ which represent the highest-profile issues in the speech and life of the community, as the foundational subject matter for a critical curriculum. These generative subjects are familiar words, experiences, situations, and relationships. They are ‘problematized’ by the teacher in class through a critical dialogue, that is, re-presented back to students as problems to reflect and act on. Inside problem-posing dialogue, students reflect on the lives they lead, asking questions to discover their meaning and value. They no longer live unreflectively in relation to these themes. Their experience now includes a self-reflective dimension because of problem-posing around generative themes from daily life. With dialogic reflection among their peers, they gain some critical distance on their conditions and can consider how to transform them.

Applied to academic courses, problem-posing situates special knowledge inside the language, experience, and conditions of the students. The subject matter is not presented as academic jargon or as theoretical lectures or as facts to memorize, but rather as problems posed in student experience and speech, for them to work on. In problem-posing, in teaching subject matter dialogically, academic material is integrated into student life and thought. Students do not simply memorize academic information about biology or economics or nursing, but rather face problems from their lives and society through the special lens offered by an academic discipline. This reflective posture is what Freire calls an ‘epistemological relationship to reality,’ that is, being a critical examiner of your experience, questioning and interpreting your life and education rather than merely walking through them.

In contrast, traditional education invents its themes, language, and materials from the top down rather than from the bottom up. In the official curriculum, culture is defined scholastically as the Great Books, or as a Great Tradition of literature, music, painting, etc., or as the correct usage of the upper classes, or as the information and experience familiar to the élite. This culture and language are alien to the lives of most students. Faced with unfamiliar scholastic culture, denied an anthropological appreciation of their own culture, students become cultural deficits dependent on the teacher as a delivery system for words, skills, and ideas, to teach them how to speak, think, and act like the dominant élite, whose ways of doing these things are the only ones acceptable.
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QUESTIONING SOCIETY, POWER, AND KNOWLEDGE:
CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Besides the critique of domination in society, the rejection of ‘banking’ methods, and the anthropological notion of culture, Freire's pedagogy includes the goal of 'critical consciousness.' Freire outlines several stages in consciousness growth which culminate in critical thought. The lowest stage is the most dominated, 'intransitive thought,' where people live fatalistically, thinking that their fate is out of their hands. Only luck or God can influence their lives. They do not think their action can change their conditions. Disempowered, they are stuck in time, under the thumb of the dominant élite now and forever, as far as they can tell. The next level of thought is 'semi-transitive,' where people exercise some thought and action for change. Partly empowered, they act to change things and make a difference, but they relate to problems one at a time in isolation, rather than seeing the whole system underlying any single issue. Semi-transitive people may also naively follow strong leaders with populist rhetoric, in the hope that one strong man can set the world right rather than they themselves having to make the changes needed.

Those people who do think holistically and critically about their conditions reflect the highest development of thought and action, 'critical consciousness.' Freire refers to this group’s thought as 'critical transitivity,' to suggest the dynamism between critical thought and critical action. Here, the individual sees herself or himself making the changes needed. A critically transitive thinker feels empowered to think and to act on the conditions around her or him, and relates those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society.

Critical consciousness, the goal of Freirean education, could also be described as having four qualities:

1. **Power Awareness.** Knowing that society and history can be made and remade by human action and by organized groups; knowing who exercises dominant power in society for what ends and how power is currently organized and used in society.

2. **Critical Literacy.** Analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context.

3. **Desocialization.** Recognizing and challenging the myths, values, behaviors, and language learned in mass culture; critically examining the regressive values operating in society, which are internalized into consciousness – such as racism, sexism, class bias, homophobia, a fascination with the rich and powerful, hero-worship,
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excess consumerism, runaway individualism, militarism, and national chauvinism.

4 Self-Organization/Self-Education. Taking the initiative to transform school and society away from authoritarian relations and the undemocratic, unequal distribution of power; taking part in and initiating social change projects; overcoming the induced anti-intellectualism of mass education.

The Freirean pedagogy which tries to develop this critical consciousness is a student-centered dialogue which problematizes generative themes from everyday life as well as topical issues from society and academic subject matter from specific disciplines. An agenda of values for that pedagogy could describe it as:

1 Participatory. From the first hour of class, students are asked to participate in making their education by decoding thematic problems. The learning process is interactive and co-operative so that students do a lot of discussing and writing instead of listening to teacher-talk.

2 Situated. The course material is situated in student thought and language, beginning from their words and understandings of the material, relating the material to their conditions.

3 Critical. The class discussion encourages self-reflection and social reflection in terms of how we talk about issues, how we know what we know, how we learn what we need to know, and how the learning process itself is working or not working. The students reflect critically on their own knowledge and language as well as on the subject matter, the quality of their learning process, and the relation of knowledge to society.

4 Democratic. The classroom discourse is democratic in so far as it is constructed mutually by students and teacher. Students have equal speaking rights in the dialogue as well as the right to negotiate the curriculum. They are asked to co-develop and evaluate the curriculum.

5 Dialogic. The basic format of the class is dialogue around problems posed by teacher and students. The teacher initiates this process and guides it into deeper phases. By frontloading questions and backloading lectures, the teacher invites students to assert their ownership of their education, building the dialogue with their words. They are doing education and making it, not having education done to them or made for them.

6 Desocialization. Freirean dialogue desocializes students from passivity in the classroom. It challenges their learned anti-intellectualism and authority-dependence (waiting to be told what to do and what things mean). It interferes with the students' silence, submission, and sabotage which they learn in traditional classrooms. Freirean education also desocializes teachers from the dull and domineering teacher-talk they are socialized into, transforming them into problem-posers and dialogue-leaders instead.

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7 Multicultural. The class recognizes the various racial, ethnic, regional, age-based, and sexual cultures in society. It takes a critical attitude towards discrimination and inequality. It examines the cultures of dominant and non-dominant groups. The curriculum is balanced for gender, class, and race.

8 Research-Oriented. This critical pedagogy is based in classroom and community research by the teacher into the speech, behaviors, and conditions of the students, as well as into their levels of cognitive and affective development. It also expects students to be researchers inquiring into problems posed about daily experience, society, and academic material.

9 Activist. The classroom itself is active and interactive thanks to problem-posing, co-operative learning, and participatory formats. The critical dialogue also seeks action outcomes from the inquiry wherever feasible. Is knowledge power? How do people act on knowledge and from knowledge to gain power, to change things?

10 Affective. The critical, democratic classroom is interested in the broadest development of human feeling as well as the development of social inquiry and conceptual habits of mind. The problem-posing, dialogic method includes a range of emotions from humor to compassion to indignation.

This is one way to define some of the educational and political ideas which Freirean critical pedagogy offers to teachers and students. This educational terrain is still a frontier. There are many open spaces yet to be discovered. To be a critical, empowering educator is a choice to be what Henry Giroux has called a ‘transformative intellectual.’ Giroux’s notions of ‘civic courage’ and a ‘pedagogy of possibility’ invite teachers to become change-agents in school and society, for critical thought and action, for democracy, equality, ecology, and peace, against domination, manipulation, and the waste of human and natural resources.

Inside the frontier of critical education, Freire has provided guidance and inspiration. But in making his contribution, he denies that his ideas or methods should be followed as rigid models. We have to reinvent liberating education for our own situations, according to Freire. One superb example of this local reinvention of Freirean ideas is the Adult Learning Project (ALP) in the Gorgie-Dalry district of Edinburgh, analyzed and chronicled by Gerri Kirkwood and Colin Kirkwood (1989) after a decade of development. Cool, northern Scotland is some distance from tropical Brazil, and the Kirkwoods report how their local conditions shaped the limits and possibilities for liberatory learning:

It is important not to give the impression that ALP simply represents the uprooting of Freire’s ideas from their Latin American setting and their transplantation into the foreign soil of Gorgie-Dalry.
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Translation and adaptation are more appropriate metaphors, suggesting the need for sensitivity to the meaning of words in different cultures, and to changes of environment in the widest sense.

(Kirkwood and Kirkwood 1989: 26)

Our specific settings and conditions teach us the limits and openings for making change. These specific situations are the first and final arbiters of the methods we choose, the language we speak, and the ways we organize for change. About this challenge to adapt and reinvent his ideas, Freire observed:

That is exactly why I always say that the only way anyone has of applying in their situation any of the propositions I have made is precisely by redoing what I have done, that is, by not following me.
In order to follow me it is essential not to follow me!

(Freire and Faundez 1989: 30)

Freire has opened a frontier of liberating education which we will have to develop in our own places, on our own terms, in our own words.

REFERENCES

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