

PAULO FREIRE

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Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator and pedagogical theorist. His work constituted a theoretical core for the educational approach known as critical pedagogy. This brief paper draws on two of Freire's writings – his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2010) and his later retrospective *Pedagogy of Hope* (2014) – as well as secondary reflections on his work (Beckett, 2013; Darder, 2002; Gottesman, 2010; Rozas, 2007; Shyman, 2011; Webb, 2010) to provide a general overview of the perspective of this influential theorist. Out of his life of profound difficulty and struggle emerged an approach to education which came to have far-reaching impact and lasting relevance.

A native of Recife in northeast Brazil, Freire began his educational career at the University of Recife, where he developed a program of literacy education which became quite influential and effective among poor and marginalized communities. When a military coup overthrew the Brazilian government in 1964, Freire came under fire for his alleged promotion of communism and was eventually arrested and then exiled. During his 16-year exile, he solidified his pedagogical thinking into the 1970 publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and did extensive international travel to engage in a global dialogue about this educational theory. He was ultimately able to return to Brazil, where he continued to have a prominent role in the educational sector while retaining ongoing international influence (Darder, 2002).

Educational Theory

In order to understand Freire's approach to education, it is necessary to appreciate his view of the world, to see the world through Freire's eyes. Freire understood one of the most fundamental problems of the world to be social injustice, where inequity allowed some people to oppress others. Freire drew heavily on critical Marxist analysis (Gottesman, 2010), and so he primarily viewed this system of oppression in terms of economic class. It is important to note, however, that class was not the only mode of oppression considered by Freire. Especially in his later work, Freire (2014) noted that his understanding of oppression and liberation applied to other systems of domination and privilege, such as those driven by gender or race. Still, it was capitalism, as promoted within the framework of neoliberalism, which consistently drew his attention.

Within such systems of oppression, both the oppressors and the oppressed are reduced to less than the fullness of their humanity. Freire believed that the oppressed have become so enmeshed within the system of dominance/oppression that they have internalized their oppression and as a result have a "fear of freedom" (Freire, 2010, p. 46). However, the oppressors are dehumanized by the very nature of oppression itself, and thus are inherently unable to lead the task of liberation toward a full experience of humanity. Instead, it is the oppressed who have the task "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (p. 44).

Freire believed that education was foundational to overcoming this system of oppression. For Freire, education was an inescapably political act (Darder, 2002). Education could either replicate and reinforce the prevailing system of oppression, or it could work to oppose and dismantle it. It could never be neutral. Given this essentially political aspect of the educational process, Freire insisted that education must be oriented toward facilitating the oppressed in attaining freedom from their oppression rather than reinforcing it.

To this end, Freire rejected what he termed the "banking" approach to education (2010, p. 72). In the banking approach, the teacher is regarded as the possessor of true and legitimate knowledge, which he then deposits into the learners, who are passive recipients. This approach to education, which we may recognize as all too familiar, reinforces the status quo of the existing power structure through reducing the learners' creative energy and leading them to trusting acquiescence. Instead, Freire wanted an educational approach aimed toward

conscientização (consciousness-raising). This development of critical consciousness was fundamental to the implementation of revolutionary praxis, which Freire defined as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (2010, p. 51).

Freire indicated that this development of critical consciousness within the educational space happened through a “problem-posing” (2010, p. 79) approach through the modality of dialogue. For Freire, it was important that the teacher not be seen as the sole authority and repository of knowledge, a view more consistent with the banking approach to education which only served to reinforce existing power dynamics. Instead, it was important to begin with the learners’ own perspective on reality, rooted in their lived experience. This is not to say that the teacher was turned into a passive facilitator. Freire does not deny the directive nature of education. The teacher has a perspective which she is obligated to communicate. However, Freire insists that the instructor’s perspective be presented as one way of viewing the world, with the openness to alternative perspectives on reality. Freire’s approach to education is thus one of directed dialogue. This dialogue is oriented toward “problematizing” (Darder, 2002, loc. 2875) the world and involves a dialectic process of a “reading of the word” combined with a “reading of the world” (Freire, 2014, loc. 712-713). In this process, the learners become “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 2010, p. 81) and both parties become at the same time instructors and students of the other. This process of dialogue builds the mutual trust which is foundational to radical social change.

In one sense, Freire can be situated within a humanistic educational paradigm, because he explicitly defined his goal of education as helping people to become “more fully human” (Freire, 2010, pp. 47, 66, 84). Freire’s approach viewed people as whole persons, as “integral human beings” (Darder, 2002, loc. 1126). This journey of humanization is one which would lead ultimately to people becoming subjects of history rather than its objects. As the oppressed united in solidarity (despite different categories of oppression such as class, gender, or race) and when they became active subjects working cooperatively with one another, Freire was optimistic that the world could indeed move toward a vision of social justice which Freire does not hesitate to call utopian. For Freire, that utopian dream is one of democratic socialism.

Indeed, in connection with this commitment to dreaming about a utopian future within history, one word consistently linked with Freire is “hope” (Freire, 2014; Webb, 2010). Despite the enormous personal difficulty he endured, he remained confident in an optimistic hope for progress and transformation within history. More broadly, it is important to note the general positive emotional atmosphere which seems to permeate Freire’s vision of education. Freire viewed study as something which could be both rigorous and joyful, as a serious discipline but imbued with profound pleasure. Such a positive attitude is reflected in the *joie de vivre* which is inescapably evident in Freire’s personal reflections. He speaks in terms filled with religious/spiritual significance: love, hope, and joy.

Impact on Education

Freire’s presentation of critical pedagogy, at least in the works examined for this brief summary, is truly one of a seminal theory. The presentation is occasionally quite abstract, and undefined enough that different writers seem to see different things in Freire’s work (note, for example, the contrasting views of his relationship to Dewey in Beckett, 2013; Shyman, 2011). More specifically, those looking for specific prescriptions for instructional technique may be disappointed. While there is certainly some element of technique present in his work, it initially feels a bit obscure, involving a unique vocabulary of “untested feasibility,” “limit situations,” “generative themes,” and “codification,” and in general there is not an abundance of practical prescription. However, this may be by design. Proponents of Freire’s approach expressed concern over the danger of “reifying” Freire, and Freire himself acknowledged the need to continually “reinvent” him (Darder, 2002, loc. 1793, 2483).

Freire’s contribution to education, then, was not a package of methodological prescriptions to produce a given outcome. Rather, his impact came in casting a renewed vision for the nature of education itself. In a nearly

prophetic mode of communication, Freire did not tell us how to do education better; he challenged us to question what education actually is. The Freirean vision of education is not one of mere transmission of information, but one in which education empowers learners as subjects to transform social and historical reality in the direction of the utopian dream of democratic equality. This happens through a mode of instruction characterized as directed dialogue rooted in a problem-posing orientation.

Freire's vision of critical pedagogy would be carried forward by many others, including Henry Giroux, Donaldo Macedo, and Peter McLaren. This pedagogical vision is in many ways unique because of its profoundly political nature, where instruction in any subject cannot be divorced from the social, political, and economic context in which that instruction takes place. Freire insisted that due attention must be given to those contextual realities, and that the educational process must explicitly address them through a pedagogical pattern which enables informed and empowered critique, resulting in social transformation. Those who wish to follow in his footsteps must be willing to ask the hard questions of whether they are willing to challenge the status quo, acknowledge the often-invisible links between knowledge and power, and open themselves up to new ways of thinking and being with their students. In a world of undeniable injustice, such difficult questions deserve at least some honest consideration.

References

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