Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Jacie Paulk

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Dr. Don Quick
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Lifelong Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is known for his conscientization (translated from conscientizacao, which is the process of developing a critical awareness (Institute, 2011)) and transformative learning theories used in his praxis. “Born in…Recife [Brazil], the center of one of the most extreme situations of poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World” (Shaull, 1970, 1993, p. 30), Freire’s middle-class family was redeployed into destitute during an economic turn in 1929. His experiential education in poverty, and the pains of hunger and lethargy bound to this social condition, succeeded him to be a lifelong educator. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his most popular work, came from his study and observation of laborers and the middle-class. This was his second book published, and the first translated into English. It is a deeply insightful and passionate look into education used as a tool to keep the oppressed in a state of oppression; education is used either for the integration and domestication into society, or the transformation and empowerment of society (Shaull, 1970, 1993). Although Freire’s insights were written to address social conditions that the United States is fortunate enough not to share, even in 1970 Shaull could see ‘certain parallels…that should not be overlooked’ considering the technological advances found in the United States (Shaull, 1970, 1993, p. 33).

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* philosophically addresses humanization as ‘humankind’s central problem’ and explores if it is a ‘viable possibility’ when the oppressors use dehumanization to dominate and rob others of their personal power (Freire, 1970, 1993, pp. 43-44). In education, as in politics, is accomplished by what Freire refers to as the banking concept. This method, which is exempt of teacher-
student dialogue, enlists the teacher as the knowledgeable authority who grants students deposits of information that the teacher owns, leaving them lacking ‘creativity, transformation and knowledge in this … misguided system’ (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 72). The banking method, which is controlled by the oppressors, works by ‘mythicizing reality to conceal certain facts which explain human beings [existence] in the world’ (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 83). The oppressors fear that if the oppressed students were to engage in an education based on reflective thinking and conscious liberation, they would engage in action to change their suppressed status, reducing the power the oppressors hold. Contrary to the banking concept, Freire proposes problem-posing education, which deploys teachers and students to process reality collectively with the teacher merely acting as director/facilitator as they ‘reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection’ (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 83). Freire held ‘that every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence’ he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others’ (Shaull, 1970, 1993, p. 32). Through problem-posing education the people learn how to transform themselves and society. The caveat is that transformation can only be happen with the people and not for the people. To act for the people and not with the people would be a contradiction to liberation and a tactic of oppression.

True dialogue, as Freire discusses in chapter three, is the praxis of humanization and liberation. Furthermore for dialogue to be liberating, it must be backed with humility and love from both parties, otherwise it is destined to become an oppressor-oppressed dynamic. Humility is needed from the timid to have the courage to contribute and not
assign the task only to the elite, and from the bold to eliminate thoughts and actions of arrogance. Love must exist because ‘love is an act of courage, not of fear, [and] is a commitment to others’ (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 89). Antidialogue is the contradiction to the act of liberation and used for domination. Those who claim they are for the people yet proceed without dialogue with the people have conflict ‘between their methods and their objectives …[because] their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others… [otherwise it is] manipulation, sloganizing, ‘depositing’, [and] regimentation…’ (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 126).

Freire suggests that there cannot be freedom where the oppressor-oppressed social structure exists, as that would be a contraction to humanization and liberation. The actualization for change must be a mutual process, using transformational education methods that lend to critical consciousness and lead to lifetime praxis of courageous action. This action must be outside contradiction to personal and social freedoms and seize the responsibility to participate in the critical thinking and dialogical process of social development and change. Each person needs to resist the urge to give ones dialogical power to another and must act from the intent not to infringe on that of others.

Freire knew that his ideals were radical and would be rejected by the dogmatically inclined, but hoped this work would open dialogue for the practice of freedom through education to create change in his country. To read more about Freire and his work visit www.freire.org.

Freire’s theories are still applicable today in the United States. As our world becomes smaller and technology advances, we are at risk of increasing the social class
gap. Today education methods must be implemented to provide learners the ability to problem-solve through critical, creative, and reflective thinking. Education through “banking deposits” no longer serves humanity. In Daniel Pink’s book *A Whole New Mind* he addresses the issue of education focused on left brain characteristics of ‘sequential, literal, functional, textual, and analytic’ thinking leaving the right brain deprived and under-developed in ‘simultaneous, metaphorical, aesthetic, contextual, and synthetic’ thinking (Pink, 2006, p. 26). Pink is not an educator or socialist, he is an author of books about the changing world of work. His ideas expressed in *A Whole New Mind* correlate in part with Freire’s theory of oppression.

Pink depicts how our society has evolved from agricultural, to industrial, to informational, to the emerging conceptual age (Pink, 2006). Living in a culture of abundance in which our needs are easily met and exceeded has created a demand for visual appeal to accompany utility. Businesses are outsourcing labor to countries that can do it cheaper, and computers are taking over the logical tasks they can do faster. Information and fact checking is at our fingertips through the World Wide Web. Companies are regarding the value of teamwork and one’s capacity to work productively in a team; assessments are no longer only about individual contributions. Altogether, this produces a need for a workforce with the capability to collaborate with others using transferable skills of critical reflection, creative thinking and problem-solving.

Pink distilled that there are ‘six essential aptitudes… on which professional success and personal satisfaction increasingly will depend; design, story, symphony, empathy, play and meaning’ (Pink, 2006, p. 2). However, his book can be summed up
to this; to succeed in today’s world one must incorporate praxis of lifelong education that includes dialogical problem-posing methods to exercise the whole brain on creative, critical thinking. Without it we become our own oppressors.

Resources


