

Freire for today

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What can we learn from reading Paulo Freire today?

The educational philosophy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is rooted in his adult literacy teaching amongst dispossessed and disempowered communities in Latin America and elsewhere and was influenced by both Marxism and liberation theology. Does Freire have anything useful or universal to say to teachers working in very different settings today?

Pedagogy of Hope (1992) is part memoir, part reflective return to the key themes of his seminal earlier *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and the critical response to it. These core ideas are certainly transferable to the work of teachers today.

Understanding oppression and the need for liberation

Freire sees the key task of education as liberation and this starts from an understanding of oppression. Many of our social relations are based on inequality, exclusion or oppression and too often education reproduces these. Freire's use of the categories of oppressor and oppressed comes from settings where the reality of those categories was all too clear. Inequality, exploitation and oppression are still with us even if their patterns and configurations have evolved.

Liberation is not something teachers do 'to' their students - but 'with' them, and the starting point is always respect for the experience learners bring with them. No one can liberate others, people acting together liberate themselves. Emancipation needs to be collective, involving collective reflection and action:

'We invent the possibility of setting ourselves free.'

'A more critical understanding of the situation of the oppressed does not yet liberate the oppressed, but it is a step in the right direction.'

Freire sees exclusion and failure as forms of oppression:

'We need to move on from the idea that those who have 'failed' are to blame as individuals, rather than the social structures and the way they operate.'

Respect and challenge

We need to start from the culture and knowledge of our students and respect and understand it in its context. However, this should not prevent us from challenging and extending their experience:

'Starting out from students' knowledge doesn't mean circling around this knowledge for ever. It is a starting point in order to go beyond it.'

Education as work

Although Freire's dialogical methods draw on what students already know and think, he is certainly not advocating unstructured programmes which simply follow the learners' desires or a path of least resistance. From a starting point of mutual understanding and respect, teachers need to be able to take their students out of their comfort zone and this will be hard work:

'It is the teachers' duty to challenge learners and their certainties as well as to respect their cultural context.'

'Learning, teaching and knowing are not entertainment, neither are they insipid, boring busy-ness. They are difficult, demanding . . . and pleasant.'

'We cannot excuse ourselves from the hard, heavy work of serious, honest study.'

Learning is not 'banking' and teaching is not 'transmission'

Learning is an activity which is continuous with living rather than distinct from it and people need to be regarded as both shaping events and being shaped by them. Teaching and learning involve critical dialogue.

Learning is not the 'banking' of accumulated knowledge. Amongst other things, this also speaks to the commodification and marketisation of education which has taken off in the decades since Freire was writing. Qualifications, grades, types of education providers and students themselves are often regarded as commodities with assigned market value in the educational economy, and can be traded for economic and social advancement or 'social mobility'.

'Content cannot simply be transferred or deposited . . . the teacher cannot transfer knowledge, they can present it for discussion, analysis, exploration and development.'

'Teaching and learning are moments in a larger process of knowing.'

'Humans are both the subjects and the objects of their history and society.'

For Freire, to teach is to 're-learn' alongside the student - each time it happens it's a kind of renewal of knowing and this cannot be mechanical or predictable. Knowing is not a commodity which can be passed on without the critical engagement of both teacher and student.

'Teaching is not simply transmission. The teacher re-cognizes the object already cognized and remakes their cognition in that of the learner.'

and:

'Teaching is a creative, critical act and not a mechanical one.'

Education is never neutral

Neutrality is not possible for teachers, they have to choose whether to challenge or perpetuate exclusion and injustice. They need to take sides when it comes to equality, democracy, emancipation and solidarity as experienced by their students. Teachers should not indoctrinate their students by telling them what to think:

'The educator must defend a position rigorously and passionately while at the same time stimulating and respecting the contrary discourse.'

The possibility of change: reading the word through reading the world

Freire describes change-making as a kind of labour, shaped by our language, our own experience as well as our utopian imagination:

'Creating a better world is not a matter of idealism but of imagination and conjecture. Transforming reality is human toil and we have in mind a design of what we are about to make.'

'Changing language is part of the process of changing the world.'

Liberation is transformational and requires a sense that things can change and a different future is possible. Being resigned to things being 'as they are' is an obstacle to liberation and the 'dream' is a kind of pre-figurative practice:

'When the future is considered as a given, which will reproduce the present, there is no room for the dream, no room for education, only training . . . The dream is necessary for political action and is fundamental for the craftsperson projecting what they plan to make.'

Freire sees an organic link between language and the possibility of social change and human connection. Our understanding of the world can provide a way into the written word which in turn provides us with a fuller understanding of the world:

'Language is the route to the invention of citizenship.'

Freire argues that we become fully human through the dialectic between action and reflection. This praxis involves reading the world and reading the word.

Knowledge and curriculum: what should we teach?

For Freire, the aim of education is to help people shape their lives and the world. To achieve this students first need to 'name the world' and recognise that they can be subjects of their own life story as well as objects in the lives of others. Deciding what to teach is itself a way of defining value and exercising power and oppressing others and he suggests that we open up the full spectrum of various types of knowledge for scrutiny.

'Curriculum is not neutral . . . content is not property to be held or possessed . . . choosing content needs to be democratised.'

'We cannot train professional people without an understanding of ourselves as historical, social, political beings and how society works.'

'Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiring people pursue in the world, with the world and with each other.'

'We need to understand the links between popular knowledge, common sense and scientific knowledge.'

Freire's philosophy

Freire's philosophical framework recognises the wholeness of the world while acknowledging that, for us to make sense of it, we need to both 'break it down' and 'build it up'. Teaching is often about helping students understand the relationship between parts and wholes:

'We must understand the relationship between parts and wholes . . . respect the local without rejecting the universal . . . treat them as 'salt and seasoning'. It is a mistake to get stuck in the parts and lose our vision of the whole, just as it is wrong to float above the whole, renouncing the parts.'

Limit situations, generative themes and the awakening of critical consciousness

Freire's broad approach to dialogic pedagogy was not intended as a formulaic method and he was concerned when some practitioners treated it as a rigid method. Nevertheless, the adult literacy techniques he pioneered are worthy of study and development.

What Freire calls a 'limit situation' is one where people are stuck in a state of oppression which may appear to be inevitable or natural and which they cannot imagine going beyond. Today, we might call this a 'teachable moment'. Getting beyond the limit situation requires learners to understand more about underlying causes so that through some transformative action they can create a situation where greater humanity is possible.

The work required includes building up a 'vocabulary universe' of 'generative words' to match the 'thematic universe' of learners' current situation. This can become their language of social and political discourse and action. This critical decoding or 'naming of the world - and the word' is the start of a praxis of critical reflection, 'conscientization' and ultimately emancipation.

This approach has some similarities to community organising, with its emphasis on identifying current needs, articulating winnable demands and working out what needs to be done to win them.

Understanding what education can, and can't, achieve

While celebrating the transformational potential of education, Freire makes no claim that critical literacy in itself is enough. We cannot expect education on its own to do all the heavy lifting and, ultimately, we need a certain humility about the power of learning to bring about change in the world.

'We need to avoid both the idealism that claims a power for education which it doesn't have, and the objectivism which denies it any power to make a difference.'

*** Eddie Playfair writes here in a personal capacity.**

All quotations are from *Pedagogy of Hope* and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

***Pedagogy of Hope* was November's book for the Philosophy of Education reading group. To find out more about their monthly meetings, visit [@PhilofEd](https://twitter.com/PhilofEd) on Twitter.**