

Dialogue, Knowledge, and Teacher-Student Relations: Freirean Pedagogy in Theory and Practice

LESLEY BARTLETT

Introduction

Paulo Freire's revolutionary theory of pedagogy has influenced progressive educational practice and inspired educational activism around the world. Many contemporary nonformal educational efforts are deeply influenced by Freire's work.¹ In Latin America approaches that draw on Freire's pedagogy are broadly known as popular education,² while in the United States they

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¹ For example, ActionAid's Reflect project represents an internationally renowned example of the implementation of Freirean-based literacy; see David Archer and S. Cottingham, *Action Research Report on Reflect: The Experience of Three Pilot Projects in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador* (London: Overseas Development Association, 1996); Julia Betts, "Literacies and Livelihood Strategies: Experience from Usulután, El Salvador," *International Journal of Educational Development* 23, no. 3 (2003): 291–98; Caroline Dyer and A. Choksi, "The Reflect Approach to Literacy: Some Issues of Method," *Compare* 28, no. 1 (1997): 75–87; Anna Robinson-Pant, *Why Eat Green Cucumbers at the Time of Dying? Exploring the Link between Women's Literacy and Development: A Nepal Perspective* (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute of Education, 2001).

² In Latin America, the term "popular" denotes the poor and working classes; popular education is rooted in a Marxist class critique. On popular education in Latin America, see Robert Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua* (New York: Praeger, 1986), and "Education as Contested Terrain in Nicaragua," *Comparative Education Review* 39, no. 1 (1995): 28–54; Celso de Rui Beisiegel, *Estado e educação popular* (São Paulo: Pioneira, 1974); Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, *A questão política da educação popular* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1980); Anthony Dewees and Stephen Klees, "Social Movements and the Transformation of National Policy: Street and Working Children in Brazil," *Comparative Education Review* 39, no. 1 (1995): 76–100; Osmar Fávero, ed., *Cultura popular, educação popular: Memória dos anos 60* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal, 1983); Marcy Fink, "Women and Popular Education in Latin America," in *Women and Education in Latin America*, ed. Nelly P. Stromquist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 171–93; Marcy Fink and Robert F. Arnove, "Issues and Tensions in Popular Education in Latin America," *International Journal of Educational Development* 11, no. 3 (1991): 221–30; José Willington Germano, *Lendo e aprendendo: A campanha "de pé no chão"* (São Paulo: Cortez Editora, 1982); John Hammond, *Fighting to Learn: Popular Education and Guerrilla War in El Salvador* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Sheryl Hirshon, *And Also Teach Them to Read* (Westport, CT: L. Hill, 1983); Oscar Jara, *Contributions to the History of Popular Education in Peru* (Lima: Tarea, 1990); Liam Kane, *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2001); Thomas J. La Belle, *Nonformal Education and Social Change in Latin America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, Los Angeles, 1976); Thomas LaBelle, *Nonformal Education and the Poor in Latin America and the Caribbean: Stability, Reform, or Revolution?* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Robert Mackie, *Literacy and Revolution: The Pedagogy of Paulo Freire* (New York: Continuum, 1981); Valerie Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1985); Vanilda Pereira Paiva, *Educação popular e educação de adultos* (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1973); Victoria Purcell-Gates and Robin Waterman, *Now We Read, We See, We Speak: Portrait of Literacy Development in an Adult Freirean-Based Class* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000); Carlos Alberto Torres, *The Politics of Nonformal Education in Latin America*

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are more frequently described as critical pedagogy.³ Those who draw on Freire's pedagogical theory plan and implement educational initiatives that aim—though with varying degrees of success—to create progressive social change and more egalitarian social relations.

In this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork among popular adult education nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Brazil to show how popular educators interpreted and acted based on Freirean pedagogical theory in ways that appeared to reduce its potential for social change. I pay particular attention to three complicated issues that continue to trouble popular or critical educators everywhere: understanding the meaning of dialogue, transforming traditional teacher-student relations, and incorporating local knowledge into the classroom.

In what follows, I first outline some of the basic tenets of Freire's philosophy. I then discuss the setting of this study, the history of popular education in that region, and the methods by which I collected the data for this study. In the core of the article, I use ethnographic data to show how Brazilian adult educators understood and employed Freirean pedagogical theory. I then discuss what these findings teach us about critical literacy and critical pedagogy. In the final section, I discuss the implications of these findings for two contemporary international educational efforts: (a) pedagogical efforts, especially among Latin American and Latino/a educators, to develop a pedagogy of caring and "love" and (b) recent attempts by critics of orthodox education, research, and development to ensure that indigenous knowledge is recognized, respected, protected, and employed.

Freire's Philosophy

In this section I briefly discuss key precepts in Freire's work that have proven to be very difficult for educators to interpret and implement. Freire argued that educators should reject a "banking" model of education, in which the teacher "owns" knowledge and "deposits" it in students. Instead, he promoted a "problem-posing" method in which teachers and students learn together, through dialogue. Problem-posing education depends, then, on a dialogical theory of praxis and knowledge and a revised relationship between teacher and student.

(New York: Praeger, 1990); Carlos Alberto Torres and Adriana Puiggrós, eds., *Latin American Education: Comparative Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

³ The literature on critical pedagogy is vast. For some key texts, see Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*, Critical Studies in Education Series (Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988); Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren, *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (New York: Longman, 1989); Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Boston: South End, 1980); Ira Shor, ed., *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987).

Dialogue, Praxis, and Knowledge

Freire defined dialogue as “the encounter between [humans], mediated by the world, in order to name the world.”⁴ At its broadest, the concept of dialogue represents, for the Catholic Marxist Freire, the dialectical process of moving from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. At times, Freire uses the term interchangeably with another key term, “praxis,” or “reflection and action upon the world to transform it.”⁵ Freire also presented dialogue as a pedagogical process, in which teachers and students actively pursue learning through discussion and debate of sociopolitical realities, processes that entail a particular theory of knowledge.

For Freire all learning is relational, and knowledge is produced in interaction. “Knowledge is not a piece of data, something immobilized, concluded, finished, something to be transferred by one who acquired it to one who still does not possess it.”⁶ Freire elaborates on this point: “I cannot think authentically unless others think. I cannot think for others, or without others. . . . Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”⁷

Freire insisted that students are not blank slates, stating that “no one knows everything and no one is ignorant of everything.”⁸ He suggested that students’ experiences were a major source of their own knowledge, clarifying this point in his dialogue with Donalddo Macedo: “Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring to the classroom.”⁹ And in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire asserted, “The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people.”¹⁰

Freire was well aware of the power imbalance between students’ local, experiential knowledge and teachers’ academic knowledge, derived from and certified by official educational institutions. At certain moments (especially

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1990), 76. Freire warned that true dialogue can only occur within egalitarian, respectful relations: “Dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny other men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied to them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression” (76).

⁵ Freire as quoted in Peter Roberts, *Education, Literacy, and Humanization: Exploring the Work of Paulo Freire*, Critical Studies in Education and Culture Series (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2000), 42.

⁶ Paulo Freire and Donalddo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), 41.

⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 58.

⁸ Freire and Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 85.

in his early writings), he fell victim to the Marxist argument that students' knowledge was essentially a form of false consciousness.¹¹ Freire consistently suggested that true dialogue emerged from the dialectical opposition of student and teacher knowledge, resulting in the intersubjective "synthesis" of new knowledge.

Freire's literacy pedagogy, or "method" as it has come to be called, was based in students' linguistic and social realities. He recommended that literacy teachers conduct ethnographic research in the students' community, document their linguistic universe, draw "generative themes" and key words from that local culture, and engage in a dialogical process with students to elaborate a social analysis, while simultaneously studying words at the syllable level, phonetically. In this way, students learn to "read the word and the world."

Problem-Posing Education and the Teacher-Student Relationship

The type of liberatory, dialogical pedagogical praxis that Freire advocated constituted an act of love:

Dialogue cannot exist . . . in the absence of a profound love for the world and for [human beings]. . . . Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to other [people]. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is [a] loving [one], is dialogical. . . . Only by abolishing the situation of oppression is it possible to restore the love which that situation made impossible. If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love [human beings]—I cannot enter into dialogue.¹²

In choosing to emphasize love, Freire was inspired by the revolutionary Che Guevara's declaration that "the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love";¹³ yet he was also undoubtedly guided by his Christian humanist principles.

Thus, problem-posing education relies on a transformed and transformational, respectful relationship between teacher and student. According to Freire, "through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. . . . The teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is . . . taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach."¹⁴ Problem-posing education, according to

¹¹ Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1973), 34–35; see also Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy in Process* (New York: Seabury, 1978), 51.

¹² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 77–78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77 n. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

Freire scholar Moacir Gadotti, is “a horizontal relationship . . . fed by love, humility, hope, faith, and confidence.”¹⁵

Freire’s words, which seemed to equate teachers and students, generated a staggering amount of debate over the teacher’s role. However, in a dialogue with Moacir Gadotti and Sérgio Guimarães, Freire sought to clarify his view of the teacher as directive and authoritative, but not authoritarian:

I have never said that the educator is the same as the pupil. . . . The educator is different from the pupil. But this difference, from the point of view of the revolution, must not be antagonistic. The difference becomes antagonistic when the authority of the educator, different from the freedom of the pupil, is transformed into authoritarianism. . . . For me, it is absolutely contradictory when the educator, in the name of the revolution, takes power over the method and orders the pupil, in an authoritarian way, using this difference that exists. This is my position, and therefore it makes me surprised when it is said that I defend a nondirective position.¹⁶

Thus, Freire advocated a directive role for teachers that nonetheless respected student autonomy and built upon student knowledge.

In what follows, I first contextualize this study and detail the methods of data collection. I then examine how teachers interpreted and implemented Freirean pedagogical theory.

Setting, Background, and Methods

Setting

I conducted ethnographic research in João Pessoa, Brazil over a 12-month period during 1999 among three nongovernmental literacy programs inspired by Freire’s philosophy. João Pessoa is the capital of the state of Paraíba, located in the northeast of Brazil. Almost half of the state’s population (3.4 million, according to a 1996 estimate) lives in a state of extreme poverty, unable to meet minimal nutritional requirements; the majority of those reside in the drought-stricken rural interior of the state.¹⁷ Across the state, 27.2 percent of the population over the age of 15 is illiterate; literacy is unevenly distributed across the state, with 22.4 percent of the urban population and 42.2 percent of the rural population reported as illiterate.¹⁸ Most of the 640,000 residents of João Pessoa employed in the formal economy work in

¹⁵ Moacir Gadotti, *Reading Paulo Freire: His Life and Work* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 50.

¹⁶ Paulo Freire, Moacir Gadotti, and Sérgio Guimarães, *Pedagogia: Diálogo e conflito* (São Paulo: Cortez, 1985), 76. See also Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, *Medo e ousadia: O cotidiano do professor* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1987); Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Ira Shor and Caroline Pari, eds., *Critical Literacy in Action: Writing Words, Changing Worlds* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1999).

¹⁷ World Bank, “Northeast Rural Poverty Alleviation Program, Paraíba, Brazil,” staff appraisal report no. 16757, October 23, 1997.

¹⁸ Census data from Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios (PNAD), 2001.

construction, service and retail, transportation, sugar processing, and public bureaucracies, like the local government and schools. A large but incalculable percentage of the population works in the informal economy, fishing, doing domestic labor, selling along the city's sidewalks, or working at odd jobs.

Historical Background

João Pessoa provides an ideal location to study the contemporary development and implementation of Freirean thought. The northeast of Brazil was the cradle of Freire's radical pedagogy. Freire created his core philosophy while living and working in Pernambuco in the 1950s and 1960s, and during the 1960s Freire and hundreds of like-minded educational activists also developed popular education programs in other northeastern states of Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba.¹⁹ The installation of a military dictatorship in Brazil in 1965 cut short that work. Freire was forced into exile, a move that eventually contributed to the internationalization of his pedagogy. Other popular educators went underground, though many continued their activities, in a reduced form, under the auspices and protection of the Catholic Church. Upon the political "opening," or *abertura*, in the 1980s, and the eventual redemocratization of the country in 1985, Brazilian social movements and NGOs resumed educational activism aimed at social change toward greater equity.²⁰

The northeast of Brazil continues to be an important location for the development of popular education. For example, the Federal University of Paraíba offers a specialization in both popular education and adult literacy; courses and conferences keep the issues in lively debate. Further, despite a general shift to the right among Catholic Church hierarchy in the region generally, local priests and congregations continue to support popular education. Finally, João Pessoa features three large, well-established, and active NGOs that provide most of the nonformal educational opportunities for adults in the city who wish to learn to read and write. While a few other nonformal literacy classrooms exist in the city, they either were not informed by Freirean theory, were short-lived and unstable, or involved relatively few students. Thus, I employed purposive sampling in electing to work with the three large NGOs in 1999.

Methods

The data on which this article is based stems from a larger, 24-month ethnographic study of public and NGO adult literacy programs in two Bra-

¹⁹ See Fávero, *Cultura popular, educação popular: Memória dos anos 60*; Calazans Fernandes and Antonia Terra, *40 horas de esperança: O método Paulo Freire; Política e pedagogia na experiência de angicos* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1994); Germano, *Lendo e aprendendo*; Afonso Celso Scocuglia, *A história da alfabetização política na Paraíba dos anos sessenta* (Recife: Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, 1997).

²⁰ As Beisiegel argues, however, the literacy movement never regained the momentum it had built in the early 1960s. See Celso de Rui Beisiegel, *Política e educação popular: A teoria e a prática de Paulo Freire no Brasil* (São Paulo: Editora Atica, 1982).

zilian cities. I selected this topic because, after working as an adult educator in the United States and reading the work of Paulo Freire in that context, I wished to see what Freirean pedagogy looked like in his home country, where I presumed organizations adopted his approach more completely. Therefore, my work was framed by my general estimation of Freirean approaches and my awareness of the difficulties involved in translating his ideas into practice.

The core data for this article come from research in a community-based NGO sponsored by Italian Catholic priests in João Pessoa. That NGO, Vida, focused all of its resources and energies on one poor neighborhood, offering nonformal education to all age levels via courses taught by local residents with at least a fifth-grade education.²¹ In 1999, over a 10-month period, I lived in this neighborhood with one of Vida's preschool teachers. In an attempt to establish reciprocity with the organization and to demonstrate my commitment to their goals, I taught English classes in the afternoons to youth preparing to take the college entrance exam (*vestibular*). At night, I conducted participant observation in Vida's seven adult literacy classes. My role in the classroom varied widely: in two classrooms, I was asked by the NGO to provide guidance to the novice teachers; in the classrooms of veteran teachers, I focused on interacting with the students. The adult literacy teachers met twice a month: once to study the month's theme and once to plan lessons. I attended all teacher training events that occurred during the 10-month research period. In addition, I interviewed each of the literacy teachers, coordinators, and NGO administrators on multiple occasions. At the end of my research, I conducted a workshop for the NGO in which I presented some of the findings reported here to teachers, which we then discussed at great length.

The data are supplemented by my work with two other Freirean NGOs in João Pessoa. The first was Community Works, which was funded by European Catholic development organizations and which provided nighttime literacy classes in poor communities throughout the city of João Pessoa. The courses were taught by local residents who had high school diplomas; the literacy teachers met one Saturday each month for professional development provided by the administrators, a Catholic missionary and three Brazilian educators. The second NGO, Building Together, was a unique partnership between the public university and a union. An education faculty member and his team of experienced educators provided an initial teacher training and ongoing, continual professional development to the literacy teachers, who were undergraduate education majors. The literacy courses were offered at night where the students worked. I was less involved with these two NGOs: I attended teacher training sessions for Community Works and Building

²¹ In keeping with anthropological convention, all names of places beyond the city level and people are pseudonyms.

Together, I interviewed 10 teachers from the two programs, and observed classes on an intermittent basis.²²

Popular Education in Practice

Here I examine how popular educators in these three organizations interpreted and implemented key Freirean tenets, specifically the construction of egalitarian teacher-student relations and the dialogical theory of knowledge and praxis. Freire was a powerful symbol among the educators I met. Freirean aphorisms such as “teaching within students’ reality” or teaching students to read “the word and the world” were frequently invoked during training sessions. On one occasion, the prize for a contest held during teacher training was a short booklet by Freire. And I was told by “teachers” and “students” involved that the adult literacy programs in these three organizations were deeply shaped by Freire’s ideas.

It is important to note, however, that the NGO teachers with whom I worked did not have an exhaustive knowledge of Freire’s corpus. Practitioners tended to be familiar with only a small segment of his early opus, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Few of the teachers, other than those at university, had read more than a chapter from one of Freire’s books. They did not have the opportunity that many scholars and some practitioners have to trace the gradual refinement of ideas in which Freire engaged during the “talking” books and the writing of *Pedagogy of Hope*. In the teacher trainings that I attended, only one of the three organizations asked teachers to read any of Freire’s work, and, in that instance, the teachers read less than a chapter. During professional development sessions, Freire’s basic ideas were more invoked than discussed at any length. Thus, most educators were not given the opportunity to scrutinize and debate his complex ideas. This is a common characteristic of adult literacy programs. Therefore, rather than spending time debating what Freire *meant*, as an ethnographer, I explore teachers’ *understanding and enactment* of Freire’s key ideas and the implications of such for social change.²³

²² For more information on methods and more background on each field site, see Lesley Bartlett, “Literacy Shame and Competing Educational Projects in Contemporary Brazil” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001).

²³ For critical engagements with Freire’s work by Brazilian educational scholars, feminists, and critical pedagogues, see Celso de Rui Beisiegel, *Política e educação popular*; Diana Coben, *Radical Heroes: Gramsci, Freire, and the Politics of Adult Education* (New York: Garland, 1998); Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–324; Jennifer Gore, *The Struggle for Pedagogies* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Jennifer Gore and Carmen Luke, eds., *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Colin Lankshear and Peter McLaren, *Critical Literacy*; Peter McLaren and Colin Lankshear, *Politics of Liberation: Paths from Freire* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, eds., *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Maria Pilar O’Cadiz, Pia Wong, and Carlos Alberto Torres, *Education and Democracy: Paulo Freire, Social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998); Vanilda Pereira Paiva, *Educação popular e educação de adultos*; Vanilda Pereira Paiva, *Paulo Freire e o nacionalismo-desenvolvimentista* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização

Dialogue and Teacher-Student Relations

In the NGOs with which I worked, teachers spent considerable time and energy reflecting on and discussing the teacher-student relationship. Indeed, this seemed to be the element of Freirean pedagogy to which they most responded. They engaged in what I call a “friendship strategy,” in which they worked hard to create a climate of friendship, trust, and equality inside the classroom. For example, Lila, a young teacher, explained the importance of friendship: “Last year, I had a good group. We were really friends, we had a great friendship. . . . The first thing I try to get across to the students is friendship. The first day of class, I tell them that I’m there not only as a teacher, but primarily as a friend. That creates . . . a freedom for the teacher to be with the student, so that she’s not some locked-away person, with her students very distant” (June 22, 1999).²⁴ For Lila, the social distance between “locked-away” teachers and “distant” students in a traditional classroom involves a hierarchical relation, which is the opposite of the kind of “freedom” she sought for teachers and students. Lila also implied that social distance interferes with the educational process, especially if teachers desire to transform class structures as well as to increase students’ self-esteem, and to help students to speak out more politically.

By creating conditions of friendship and trust, teachers also encouraged students to bring their experiences of social problems into the classroom. For example, NGO teacher Neide told me she worked to create friendship with students “through dialogue, with confidence. If you join them, become their equal through conversation and jokes, they start to confide in you and tell you their problems. And as teachers, sometimes we tell our problems to them. . . . I love it when I’m conversing with students and they tell me, ‘Today we didn’t have anything to eat.’ Would they have courage to tell the public school teacher this? They wouldn’t! But they’ll tell me, ‘Today I didn’t eat lunch. Today my husband beat me’” (June 27, 1999). In Neide’s mind, the NGO successfully reduced an authority hierarchy through the cultivation of sociable relations between teacher and students. This allowed students to acknowledge personal social problems in the classroom.

Teachers hoped to heal the “hidden injuries of class”²⁵ through the cultivation of sociability and friendship in the classroom. For example, Rita explained the importance of getting her working-class students to “open up,”

Brasileira, Edições UFC, 1980); Daniel Schugurensky, “The Legacy of Paulo Freire: A Critical Review of His Contributions,” *Convergence* 31, nos. 1/2 (1998): 17–29; Ira Shor and Caroline Pari, *Critical Literacy in Action*; Paul V. Taylor, *The Texts of Paulo Freire* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1993); Kathleen Weiler, “Myths of Paulo Freire,” *Educational Theory* 46, no. 3 (1996): 353–71; Frank Youngman, *Adult Education and Socialist Pedagogy* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1986).

²⁴ Quotations from ethnographic materials were translated from the Portuguese to English by the author and then checked by a bilingual Brazilian who taught English in Rio de Janeiro and now teaches Portuguese in the United States.

²⁵ Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

converse, and joke: “Look, an adult arrives to class very tired and tense. So instead of heading directly into a boring lecture, you get them to converse, you see how their days were, see what you can do to help . . . [so] that person is able to become your friend. First, you have to give them self-confidence, so they can open up with you. . . . The teacher has to open her heart to the student, has to converse, to laugh, to ask questions” (June 22, 1999). Rita’s comments immediately positioned her students as laborers whose daily responsibilities leave them “tired and tense.” Her approach is to try to offset those frustrations with conversation, laughter, expressions of concern, and an “open heart,” in order to get them to “open up.” Despite Rita’s awareness of the role of class, she focused mainly on establishing emotional ties and raising each student’s “self-confidence” and not on engaging with them in a critique—let alone a challenge—of existing social relations.²⁶

In describing the emotional work they did to get students to talk or dialogue, the NGO teachers often consciously contrasted their efforts to cultivate respect and friendship to the disrespect and disdain that, according to them, characterized mainstream pedagogy in public schools. An NGO teacher, Rafael, explained it to me this way:

[The public] school is traditional. It’s a school that dominates. There is no dialogue. . . . I’ll give you an example from my experience. In school, through high school, if I would say, “Teacher, I didn’t understand this,” she would get irritated, get hostile. And then your classmates would start making fun of you, because you didn’t understand. And so the kid starts to think, “Oh, I’m an idiot [literally, a donkey]. I’ll never learn. I’m just going to stay quiet. I’m not going to question any more.” That happened to me. If the teacher doesn’t have a political pedagogical position [like the one in the NGO that allows them] to see that students ask questions because they want to learn, then the teacher represses students. She thinks she is transmitting information to the student, and she doesn’t allow the student to respond or question. . . . I mean, the teacher knows all, is the owner of knowledge; she holds all the power. The traditional, conservative conception is like that. (March 10, 1999)

²⁶ In reflecting on Rita’s interview, I was struck by her sense of social distance from these students. Rita lived in Cruz, the same neighborhood as her students, less than 200 hundred yards away, but Rita lived in a brick house on the flat, top part of the hill, the part with a school, a small grocer, a church, a bus stop, and (dirt) roads. Rita was schooled, as were her children, and she worked with her mind. In contrast, her students lived “down the hill” in cramped, part brick, part daub-and-wattle houses, wedged between the railroad tracks and the occasionally flooded, mosquito-infested mangrove swamp. Their parents foraged the mangrove for fish and crabs to sell or worked in blue-collar jobs as maids or construction workers (if they were lucky enough to have jobs). This social distance called into question the NGO conviction that working-class teachers were like organic intellectuals who felt “in the flesh,” as they would say, the problems of their students, or that they were so totally aware of and immersed in their “students’ reality.” Indeed, this romantic notion of the organic intellectual was the reason that both Vida and Community Works insisted on hiring local teachers, often on the advice of local residents. While these teachers certainly knew more about local culture than the public school teachers, who bused in and out every day, there was still a significant social, economic, and educational distance between these teachers and their students.

By and large, the NGO educators that I interviewed felt that their stance of respect and friendship toward students was the hallmark of their pedagogy.

The centrality of emotion and friendship to teachers' conceptions of their work was crystallized for me during one particular teacher training session in the Community Works NGO. At that time, the novice teachers were instructed to write down adjectives that they thought best described the popular educator and to attach them to a poster-board outline of a female figure. As the apprentices stepped back, a visual representation of the popular educator emerged. At her eyes, a card stated that she should "teach according to the needs of the neighborhood." Her ears were marked with two notes urging her to be a "good listener." Her mouth said she should be "patient," "humble," "respectful," and "dynamic." Her feet proclaimed that the teacher should "walk among the people." It was the heart, however, that bore the greatest number of note cards. These described the good educator as someone who was "caring," "loving," "understanding," and "promoted self-esteem." The majority of the notes attached there simply stated that she should be a "friend" (March 13, 1999).

The emphasis on friendship served multiple purposes. First, it allowed teachers to avoid positioning themselves as "the expert" and encouraged them to elicit personal stories from students, thus partially meeting Freire's call for both dialogue (in the sense of discussion) and the inclusion of students' experiences in the classroom.

Second, it helped to address the students' sense of shame over their reading, writing, and, in particular, speaking abilities.²⁷ Popular educators saw students' silence as a political obstacle, preventing them from speaking out against injustices. Teachers also saw silence as an impediment to students' development as fully human, fully happy individuals. Teachers tried to overcome speech shame by placing conversation at the center of their classroom activities. They were following their understanding of Freirean dialogue. Through conversations, the teachers explained to me, they worked to incite in the student the sense of having something worthy to say and also of being capable of saying it. By urging students to speak while they listened, teachers sought to undermine the speech-class hierarchy and declared equality, at least temporarily, between interlocutors.

Thus, teachers engaged in emotional labor in the service of their work.²⁸ They were consciously styling their interactions in contrast to their perceptions of the too-often disrespectful relationships between teachers and stu-

²⁷ I elaborate this point in Lesley Bartlett, "Shaming as Education: Literacy, Language Ideologies, and the Politics of Emotion in Brazil" (unpublished manuscript, Columbia University, 2005).

²⁸ Here, I borrow the idea of emotional labor from Arlie Hochschild's feminist analysis of emotion work among flight attendants and other categories of workers; see Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

dents in public schools.²⁹ It is not uncommon to see this kind of emotional labor expected of or volunteered by teachers, because of the gendered socialization of the largely female educational labor force.³⁰ As Megan Boler notes, emotions can be a site for both social control and for social resistance.³¹ Indeed, popular educators' emotional labor seemed to be aimed at social resistance; these teachers were volunteering their emotions for a political cause—their desire to provide the type of education that might lead to social change.

Despite its potential as a feminist ethic of solidarity, the friendship strategy suffered from some definite weaknesses. First, the temporary reversal of social hierarchies between teachers and students did not transfer outside the classroom. Students, like teachers, valued sociability, and many (though not all) gladly adopted a more informal posture in the safety of the classroom. The teachers' insistent language of "friendship" made it more acceptable to socialize as equals, despite the marked status, power, and wealth gap between teachers and students. However, as students revealed during interviews, they were quite aware that deference, not sociability, was the appropriate posture for interactions with status superiors outside the classroom.

Moreover, the focus of "reflection" and "action" for the literacy teachers was on school-based ways of knowing, speaking, reading, and writing, and not some broader social activism. Students in two of the NGOs did have opportunities, outside the classroom, for activism. Vida sought to link classroom activities with political mobilizations, as when they organized a demonstration at city hall to protest the poor quality of neighborhood sanitation and transportation, when they held a series of informational sessions for local Workers Party candidates, or when they gathered literacy students to join the landless movement *Movimento Sem-Terra* in a protest march. Building Together hoped that literacy students would become more active in union politics. However, within the organization's literacy programs, action was limited to students gaining self-esteem and literacy skills.

The friendship strategy also substituted personable chatting for a fuller pursuit of the kind of critical dialogue envisioned in Freire's democratic educational philosophy. NGO teachers encouraged students to talk about their families, to review their days, and to "open up." This kind of conversation serves an important purpose. It builds rapport between students and teachers; it humanizes the school, an institution that had discouraged or rejected many of these adults in the past; and it is consistent with the cultural

²⁹ My participant observation in a variety of public school adult literacy classrooms confirmed that, while teachers were usually not overtly rude or disrespectful to students, too often they publicly denigrated their students' abilities.

³⁰ Michael W. Apple, *Teachers and Texts: A Political Economy of Class and Gender Relations in Education* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

³¹ Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

importance attached to sociability in Brazil.³² Nevertheless, the teachers in these programs were reducing Freire's complex notion of dialogue to a more simplistic ideal of egalitarian classroom discussion.

Knowledge

Literacy teachers in these programs also struggled with Freire's constructivist theory of knowledge, specifically his notions that students' experiences provided important sources of knowledge and that valid knowledge would emerge in dialogical interaction between teachers and students as well as through reflection and action. As part of their desire to teach "within students' reality," teachers sought to value or valorize (*valorizar*) "popular" or working-class knowledge. They believed that working-class people possessed valuable knowledge that could and should be brought into the classroom.

For example, in 1998 the NGO Vida worked with one of the local public schools to prepare students to participate in a citywide science fair. While the public school teachers wanted them to work on the Amazon, the NGO recommended that they study the ecology of the mangrove swamp in their own neighborhood instead, given its economic and ecological significance in the lives of residents. (The public school teachers heavily criticized this decision, saying it would make the neighborhood look "low class.") Similarly, in 1999 I observed teachers in a Community Works classroom encourage students to discuss their or their parents' use of medicinal plants for common illnesses—a health care practice that is often considered to be "backward," and certainly was never discussed in the more traditional public school classrooms that I visited, where institutional and "modern" medical care was emphasized.

The reasons for integrating popular knowledge were made evident to me in this excerpt from an interview with Rita, a Vida teacher, in which she explained her theory of literacy teaching:

In order to develop literacy, we seek first to see what the people bring, what is their home knowledge. I think it's important to enter their world. When you do that, you discover a lot of things—if [s/]he has already studied in a school, what is his [/her] experience, what type of communication [abilities s/]he has, the environment in which [s/]he lives. It's important for you to teach in accordance with that environment. For example, I teach students who live in [the poorest part of the neighborhood, along the mangrove swamp]. They are accustomed to canoes, water, [and] fishing. So I'm not going to talk about airplanes, or Volkswagens. I'll talk about their world first for them to feel secure, and to give importance to what we'll study. First, we'll study what interests them, right? So first I start with their world, in order for him later to want a different world.

Although Rita articulated clearly the popular education principles of valuing students' knowledge and experience and trying to integrate those

³² See Lesley Bartlett, "Women Teaching Class: Emotional Labor in Brazilian Literacy Classes," *Anthropology of Work Review* 22, no. 3 (2001): 22–26.

into the classroom, her discussion of these principles revealed several limitations in either her appropriation of Freirean ideas and, potentially, in the ideas themselves. First, Rita assumed that her students' interests were geographically and culturally circumscribed to the "local environment," as though the neighborhood limited their horizon of interests and expectations. While poverty certainly did reduce students' geographical mobility, many of them (especially the men) had considerable experience outside the neighborhood and even beyond, given their histories of migration in search of work. Further, even the poorest of households in Cruz did not lack a television; thus, they may not have had personal experience in an airplane, but they certainly knew what airplanes and Volkswagens were, and they undoubtedly understood that actions and events taking place in settings in other locales in Brazil and throughout the world could affect their lives. Certainly, students' interests, as expressed in less structured times before, during, and after class, extended far beyond the local.³³

Second, the idea of a singular "environment" or "reality" for students was misleading. In fact, as some teachers recognized when I questioned them about this, the students varied greatly in terms of their skills, experiences, needs, status, religious beliefs, educational histories, racial identities, gender roles, ages, incomes, and so on. Yet, in Rita's remarks and, more important, in most teacher training sessions, discussions of a (singular) "reality" were the norm.

Third, in closing her statement, Rita asserted that she starts with a student's "world in order for him[/her] later to want a different world." In other words, while she rooted her classes in students' knowledge, culture, and experiences, she ultimately aimed to educate them to envision and work for a different world. That is, she and many other teachers conceptualized their work as respecting and valorizing popular knowledge *in order to further their goal* of socializing students into their own way of seeing the world. Indeed, Freire argued for a directive (though nonauthoritarian) role for teachers, engaged in trying to achieve an essentially predetermined outcome for dialogical knowledge construction. Thus, teachers serve as a kind of vanguard. This contradiction in Freire's work, which has been highlighted by other Freirean scholars, placed teachers in an untenable position.³⁴

In my interviews with and observations of literacy teachers, other problems emerged concerning the implementation of the notion of "popular knowledge." On occasion, a teacher's celebration of "popular knowledge"

³³ Rita suggested that including discussions about objects or information that (economically) were beyond her students' reach might make them feel less "secure." In retrospect, I can think of two plausible explanations for this emphasis. Perhaps Rita felt students should have personal experience of something in order to have knowledge about it; this was a common assumption in Freirean NGOs. Or perhaps she was trying to avoid presenting the experiences of the wealthy and upper middle classes as "normal"; this would be consistent with the Freirean critique of hegemony.

³⁴ See, e.g., Schugurensky, "The Legacy of Paulo Freire."

seemed gratuitous or even patronizing. For example, one evening I traveled with an administrator of a statewide literacy project to visit an NGO in a rural community several hours outside the capital. When we arrived, the teacher and students were discussing how the agricultural cycle influenced their work and their studies. The administrator, feeling inspired, suddenly insisted that the students push the desks to the corners of the room and do some impromptu folk dances that were traditionally performed at harvest time. The students' participation in this activity seemed, to me, more compliant than authentic, and I wondered what the students were thinking.

In some instances, students introduced popular knowledge that was contrary to the aims of the program or simply wrong. I heard students tell folk stories or popular sayings that were fundamentally racist. On one occasion, a student talked about using folk remedies to cure someone who was diagnosed as having cancer. Such moments can be productive if teachers remember to depart from students' knowledge, rather than thinking that they need to accept it uncritically. Yet this did not always happen. One teacher told me that popular knowledge was the only source of true revolutionary knowledge; another insisted that to correct students' popular knowledge would be a form of imperialism. Teachers were occasionally consigned to a perpetual cultural relativism, feeling they had no right to "correct" or even question students' knowledge.

The dilemma over how to engage students' knowledge emerged, in part, because popular knowledge was defined in a narrow, limited way as students' experiences. It was as if personal experience itself were the single arbiter of validity or truth; how, then, could an educator challenge popular knowledge? Teachers never articulated how experience related to knowledge.³⁵ Either they assumed that they were one and the same, or they maintained a dichotomous division between experience (what students could contribute) and knowledge (what education provides, thanks to teachers' pedagogical action).

In actuality, the teachers had difficulty equally valuing students' knowledge. As schooled people, they had a great reverence for official, school knowledge. Though they attempted to incorporate popular experience into their classrooms, they inevitably and (perhaps) unconsciously thought of themselves as having "more" of a quantifiable amount of knowledge. For example, during their training, Building Together professors discussed the need to "adapt our knowledge to our students" and "not speak above their

³⁵ This topic has received considerable focus in the literature on adult learning. See, e.g., David Boud and Nod Miller, eds., *Working with Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Sharan Merriam and Rosemary Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999); Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); Peter Reason, "Human Inquiry as Discipline and Practice," in *Participation in Human Inquiry*, ed. Peter Reason (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 40–56.

reality,” because students’ knowledge is not “systematized” while teachers’ knowledge is “much greater” (February 10, 1999).

Discussion

Freire’s liberatory pedagogy has inspired and continues to guide a variety of educational efforts around the world. Further, he has influenced many of the progressive developments in the fields of pedagogy and educational development. This article highlights the difficulty of translating some of his key concepts—dialogue, a dialogical theory of knowledge, and egalitarian teacher-student relations—into practice.

As noted above, teachers in Freirean-inspired literacy programs struggled to implement a dialogical, problem-posing pedagogy. In their efforts to (re)construct teacher-student relations, teachers engaged in a friendship strategy that emphasized the expression of concern, love, and friendship for one’s students. Teachers’ overly romantic notions of friendship, associated with a pretheoretical notion of empathy and human relations, deflected them away from the very social critiques that Freire advocated. The approach reduced dialogue to a bland version of socializing, obscuring the politics of oral exchange and human interaction and defusing the dialectical elements of dialogue. The teachers substituted a pedagogy of love and a simplified notion of cultural difference for the development of critical lenses on economic and social issues.

I suggest that, rather than the emphasis on “getting along” and valuing students’ utterances on principle, students might benefit from a more straightforward discussion of the way unequal power and wealth relations operate in everyday social interaction. In particular, given the prominence of literacy and speech shaming in students’ experiences, an analysis of linguistic violence might transfer more easily outside the classroom and allow students to confront the shaming they regularly experience.³⁶ As the teachers conceptualized it, dialogue became a dogged expression of optimism in an “ideal speech situation,” a circumstance in which presumably normal social hierarchies governing speech production are temporarily suspended. But, as most sociolinguists would argue, linguistic relations are always relations of power.³⁷ In this sense, caring was necessary but insufficient; it could more profitably be paired with the development of critiques—let alone challenges—of social inequalities and linguistic/cultural hierarchies.

That a group of teachers utterly committed to Freirean pedagogy essentially defused its radical potential by emphasizing friendship over an analysis of conflict suggests just how difficult it is to put Freirean philosophy into

³⁶ See Lesley Bartlett, “Women Teaching Class: Emotional Labor in Brazilian Literacy Classes,” *Anthropology of Work Review* 22, no. 3 (2001): 22–26.

³⁷ See, e.g., Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

practice. Based on my observations of these three programs, I suggest that teachers need to be given more time and opportunities to examine Freirean theory in depth. They should be provided with more readings, or at least with summaries of how Freire's ideas about dialogue and teacher-student relations developed over time. Training sessions for adult literacy educators should regularly reserve sufficient time for teachers to engage in praxis: that is, to reflect on, problematize, reconceptualize, and revise their teaching practice. Too often, Freire's ideas are presented to teachers as slogans and are not explored in the depth that their complexity demands. This approach reduces their potential to contribute to social change, which is the goal of Freirean pedagogy.

While insufficient understanding of Freire's intent contributed to the difficulties these adult literacy teachers faced in integrating students' knowledge, limitations in Freire's theory of knowledge production were also factors. Some of these limitations emanate from Freire's efforts to translate 1970s-era Marxist theory into pedagogy. As I have already suggested, the implication of a singular student "reality," determined by a shared class position, obscured the myriad ways in which students experienced and enacted oppression.³⁸ Further, Freire's dichotomous division between teachers' schooled, dominant knowledge and students' experiential, subordinate knowledge left him open to two contradictory interpretations, alternately employed by the literacy teachers: (a) the uncritical and culturally relativistic celebration of popular knowledge (and culture) as pure, revolutionary, and beyond challenge and (b) the conviction that students' knowledge was penetrated, alienated, resulting in (essentially) false consciousness, and that therefore teachers needed to serve as the vanguard to lead students to a predetermined conclusion that served their "real" interests.

I suggest that Freire's dichotomous notion of knowledge suffers from an early Marxist theory of power as binary and repressive, or what educational theorist Thomas Popkewitz called a view of "power as sovereignty," "in which some 'groups,' 'forces' or individuals make and 'own' the decisions that enable one to distinguish between rulers and ruled." As Popkewitz noted, "the sovereignty notion of power, by itself, tends to encourage dichotomous thinking about the world, in which there are oppressors and oppressed—who, because they lack power, are presumed to be socially righteous."³⁹

Similarly, I argue that Freirean theory could benefit from a complementary, Foucauldian notion of power as ubiquitous, rather than located in certain groups; productive, rather than merely repressive; and relational, rather than

³⁸ Feminist scholars, in particular, have critiqued Freire's privileging of class. See Gore, *The Struggle for Pedagogies*; Gore and Luke, *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*.

³⁹ Thomas Popkewitz, ed., *Changing Patterns of Power: Social Regulation and Teacher Education Reform* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 16–17.

reified.⁴⁰ For Foucault, power is omnipresent but not omnipotent: its existence by definition provides the possibility of resistance. Further, power is not outside an individual or group; instead, it works through people. Power, in this sense, “is intricately bound to the rules, standards, and styles of reasoning by which individuals speak, think, and act in producing their everyday world. . . . The ways individuals understand and interpret the world act as mechanisms of self-discipline; knowledge constrains and produces options and possibilities.”⁴¹ Critical pedagogues could benefit greatly from the Foucauldian realization that all knowledge is political: social relations shape what is known by teachers and students, how it is known, how it is valued, and how it affects one’s conceptions of the possible. I am not suggesting that critical pedagogues should ignore oppression in class or other forms; instead, I am suggesting that teaching students to think critically about a broader, more complex notion of power and oppression better serves the cause of critical literacy.

Implications

The issues discussed in this article have obvious implications for the conduct of critical literacy and critical pedagogy. However, the findings of this study also yield insights that are transferable to two current debates in the field of comparative and international education: (a) pedagogical efforts, especially among educators of Latin American immigrant students in the United States, to develop a pedagogy of caring and “love” and (b) the politics of indigenous knowledge and its incorporation into educational, research, and development initiatives.

First, the issue of caring has recently become quite prominent in the literature concerned with improving educational opportunities for students of Latin American descent living and studying in the United States. The arguments of these scholars rest on their perception of a cultural mismatch between home and school, especially school-based notions of education in contrast to the broader Latin notion of *educación*. For example, Guadalupe Valdés argued that school-based family intervention programs do not respect Mexican parents’ cultural perspectives and economic circumstances and that ultimately they damage children’s educational opportunities. And, in her ethnography of a Houston high school, Angela Valenzuela reported that, while teachers carped about students who did not “care about” school, students explained that they did not feel “cared for” and that this contributed to their educational disengagement. On this basis, Valenzuela urged teachers to engage in a “politics of caring” in which teachers would demonstrate

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

⁴¹ Popkewitz, *Changing Patterns of Power*, 17.

authentic caring and mutual respect, initiate trust and emotional connections, and prioritize relationships over things and ideas.⁴²

The findings of this study suggest that, while respect for one's students is fundamental, educators should avoid exaggerating the benefits of a pedagogy of love, friendship, or caring. The communication of respect for one's students should be the foundation of a critical pedagogy, not its ultimate goal. There is a danger in emphasizing a pedagogy of love or caring so much that teacher-student relations become reduced to a local psychodynamic and substituted for the very difficult work of forging, together, a praxis to understand and address social inequalities. I do not think such is the intent of authors like Valdés or Valenzuela, nor was it Freire's intent. But changing interpersonal relations may seem easier, safer, and more feasible to practitioners than developing social critique and promoting social change, and thus educators might inadvertently believe that, in caring for their students, they are sufficiently addressing the broader objectives of critical pedagogy.

Second, in recent years, scholars in the fields of international education and development as well as alternative approaches to research have pushed for the recognition of what is variably called indigenous, non-Western, or local knowledge. Scholars have questioned how knowledge is produced and how politics influence the determination of what counts as official or legitimate knowledge.⁴³ They have outlined the educational thought and practices of "non-Western cultures."⁴⁴ Scholars have focused in particular on the need to create culturally relevant schooling by including indigenous knowledge in the curriculum.⁴⁵

Efforts to incorporate indigenous knowledge extend beyond education to broader "ethnodevelopment" initiatives.⁴⁶ Many of these projects aim specifically at relations with the natural world, such as relying on indigenous

⁴² See Guadalupe Valdés, *Con respeto: Bridging the Differences between Culturally Diverse Families and Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996). See also Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁴³ George J. Sefa Dei, Budd Hall, and Dorothy Goldin Rosenberg, eds., *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Ruth Hayhoe and Julia Pan, eds., *Knowledge across Cultures: A Contribution to Dialogue among Civilizations* (Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Center, University of Hong Kong, 2001).

⁴⁴ Bradley Cook, "Islamic versus Western Conceptions of Education: Reflections on Egypt," and Linda King, "Learning through the Soul: Concepts Relating to Learning and Knowledge in the Mayan Cultures of Mexico," *International Review of Education* 45, nos. 3/4 (1999): 339–58, 367–70; Timothy Reagan, *Non-Western Educational Traditions: Alternative Approaches to Educational Thought and Practice* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000).

⁴⁵ Hayhoe and Pan, *Knowledge across Cultures*; King, "Learning through the Soul"; Ladislaus Semali and Joe L. Kincheloe, eds., *What Is Indigenous Knowledge? Voices from the Academy* (New York: Falmer, 1999).

⁴⁶ Rodney Reynar, "Indigenous People's Knowledge and Education: A Tool for Development," in Semali and Kincheloe, *What Is Indigenous Knowledge? Voices from the Academy*, 285–304; Paul Sillitoe, Alan Bicker, and Johan Pottier, eds., *Participating in Development: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

knowledge in developing better plant and animal husbandry strategies.⁴⁷ These efforts have been supported by international conferences, newsletters such as the *Indigenous Knowledge and Development Monitor* and *Indigenous Knowledge Resource Centers*.⁴⁸ Finally, scholars have argued for the inclusion and elaboration of indigenous knowledge in research endeavors.⁴⁹ More broadly, participatory action research, action research, action science, collaborative inquiry, and applied anthropology all recommend the inclusion of local knowledge (often defined as, in part, experientially based).⁵⁰ In short, indigenous or local knowledge has become a major concern in international education, development, and research.

This is important and salutary work. However, once again, the findings of this study suggest caution. The category of “indigenous,” local, or “popular” knowledge can be overly general. It can suggest that all people within a (geographical or cultural) category have access to the same knowledge. This approach tends to lump all forms of traditional knowledge (e.g., medicinal plant healing, midwifery, and folktales) into a single category and overlook important social differences among those forms, their ascribed sources, and their authorized proprietors. Assumptions about the relation of experience to knowledge too often remain undertheorized. Finally, blind valorization of indigenous knowledge could lead proponents to be uncritical of it, as if all statements are equally valid.

Some who use the concept of indigenous knowledge talk about it as a static, durable whole. This discussion can suffer the same flaws as do popular conceptions of culture as coherent, static, unchanging, and holistic.⁵¹ Indeed,

⁴⁷ See, e.g., the case studies listed in the best practices database run cooperatively by the Netherlands Organization for International Cooperation in Higher Education Indigenous Knowledge Unit and UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformations Programme at <http://www.unesco.org/most/bpikreg.htm>.

⁴⁸ These efforts have been supported by international conferences, the World Bank’s Indigenous Knowledge Program (<http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/>), UNESCO’s Database of Best Practices (<http://www.unesco.org/most/bpindi.htm>), newsletters such as *Indigenous Knowledge World Wide* (<http://www.nuffic.nl/ik-pages/ikww>), and the development of Indigenous Knowledge Resource Centers (<http://www.unesco.org/most/bpiklist.htm>).

⁴⁹ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Paul Sillitoe, “Participant Observation to Participatory Development: Making Anthropology Work,” in Sillitoe et al., *Participating in Development: Approaches to Indigenous Knowledge*, 1–23.

⁵⁰ For more information on these approaches, see Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam, and Diana Smith, *Action Science* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985); Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974); Davydd Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998); John Bray et al., *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice: Action, Reflection, and Making Meaning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000); Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (New York: Wiley, 1983), and *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* (London: ITDG, 1997); Orlando Fals-Borda and M. A. Rahman, eds., *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research* (New York: Apex, 1991).

⁵¹ Indeed, development agents of many varieties are using the notion of indigenous knowledge in a way that parallels the development industry’s historical and continued use of the notion of culture as either “cause” or “cure” of particular problems. As Frances Vavrus argued, this tendency to blame culture and traditional beliefs for development problems developed in the colonial period and continues in contemporary development discourse; see Frances Vavrus, *Desire and Decline: Schooling amid Crisis in Tanzania* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). Alternative development discourse tends to err on the side of praise, viewing indigenous knowl-

in many realms, the term “knowledge” (like the concept of “identity”) is used as a shorthand for culture, often in uncritical ways.

Further, a dichotomous approach ignores the interconnections between “indigenous” or “popular” and “Western” or “schooled” knowledge, including how the former is informed by and responds to the latter. In this era of mass schooling, it does not seem likely that indigenous knowledge somehow runs parallel to, and remains unaffected by, this standardized epistemology.⁵² Drawing a strong distinction between two forms of knowledge may obscure how people shift between or combine epistemologies. Further, it may in some ways help to perpetuate the hierarchy of knowledges.

The results of my ethnographic study with popular educators in João Pessoa, Paraíba, Brazil, suggest that indigenous knowledge advocates should be wary of how the imprecision of current discussions might lead even well-intentioned teachers and development practitioners to misinterpret the complexities of the concept and implement it in ways that disrupt or alter the original aims.

edge as a type of cure for development problems. In short, efforts to define indigenous or traditional knowledge parallel debates about culture to a great extent, in some cases using the words interchangeably.

⁵² On the influential argument that mass education has created a homogeneous schooling experience around the world, see Francisco Ramirez and John Meyer, “The World Institutionalization of Education,” in *Discourse Formation in Comparative Education*, ed. Jurgen Schriewer (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 111–32.