

Paulo Freire and Peace Education

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WHO WAS PAULO FRIERE?

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was one of the best known and most influential radical education theorists in the 20th century; his impact upon peace education, adult education, non-formal education, and critical literacy has been incalculable. Born in 1921 in Recife, in the Brazilian Northeast, Freire was raised in a middle class family that hit hard times during the Great Depression. As a result, Freire directly experienced the impact of poverty on educational opportunities in a way that marked his entire career. Freire's participation in Recife's Movement for Popular Culture and his work for the University of Recife's Cultural Extension department greatly influenced his critique of educational inequalities and his remarkable approach to pedagogy.

Freire's early career was strongly influenced by the extraordinary political and cultural changes occurring in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Cuban Revolution (1959-1961) inspired socialist movements throughout the region; further, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1965), the Catholic Church increasingly embraced Liberation Theology and a commitment to the poor. Freire's formative period coincided with a general effervescence of radical politics in the Brazilian Northeast: peasant leagues demanded labor rights for rural workers; the Catholic Church formed "base communities" at the local level to involve lay people in interpretations of the Bible and the conduct of the Church's work; cultural circles focused on promoting popular culture and social critique formed throughout the region; and leftist leaders were elected at municipal, state, and federal levels. Because literacy was a requirement to vote at that time (and, indeed, until 1988 in Brazil), the Left focused energy on teaching literacy in order to build a populist political base.

In this context, Freire rose to prominence for his radical humanist pedagogy. In 1963, Freire was hired by the federal Ministry of Education to work for *SUDENE*, the Northeast Development Board, to develop educational projects. Upon invitation from local politicians, Freire and his colleagues conducted a "dialogical" literacy campaign in Angicos. Soon afterward, President João Goulart's populist national administration invited Freire to coordinate a national literacy campaign. This plan was aborted by the military coup in 1964. When the coup leaders exiled Freire, they ironically set up the conditions for his ideas to gain international attention. After a period in Chile and a shorter stint at Harvard University's School of Education, Freire joined the Department of Education at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. From that position, he actively participated in projects in Latin America and Africa.

When, after fifteen years of exile, the military dictatorship began gradually to give way to re-democratization, Freire returned to his beloved Brazil. He joined the Workers Party, a new effort to invigorate and institutionalize the Left's involvement with formal politics. Freire wrote and taught actively during this period. With his characteristic determination to join theory and practice, Freire took on the daunting task of serving as Minister of Education for the city of São Paulo from 1988 to 1991. At the time of his death in 1997, Freire had authored or co-authored over a period of thirty years more than twenty books whose content significantly reshaped the way that educators think about the purpose and promise of schooling.

FREIRE'S KEY CONCEPTS

Freire's personal experiences deeply shaped his conceptual development. This chapter provides a necessarily partial overview of Freire's core tenets, including: education as a political act; banking versus problem-posing education; dialogue and critical consciousness; democratic teacher-student relationships; and the co-construction of knowledge since they are foundational concepts that have been utilized in the field of peace education.

Education as a Political Act

Freire's major contribution to the field of peace education is the insight that education is, necessarily, a form of politics. He averred that schooling is never neutral; instead, it always serves some interests and impedes others. Freire's magnetism lies in his insistence that schooling can be used for liberation, just as it has been used for oppression. He argued that through liberatory education, people come to understand social systems of oppression and equip themselves to act to change those situations. Educators, then, must reconceptualize their labor as political work and "must ask themselves for whom and on whose behalf they are working" (Freire, 1985, p. 80).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire introduced a radical distinction that has since become an enduring feature of progressive educational thought: the difference between what he called "banking" and "problem-posing" education. For Freire,

[Banking education] attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way men exist in the world.... Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers.... Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby responding to the vocation of men as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (1970/1990, p. 71)

Banking education is a relationship of domination in which the teacher has knowledge that she deposits in the heads of the passive objects of assistance—her students. Banking education maintains students' immersion in a culture of silence and positions them as objects, outside of history and agency.

In contrast to banking education, Freire proposes a problem-posing education. Problem-posing education encourages students to become active in thinking about and acting upon their world. Problem-posing education relies upon dialogue and critical consciousness, democratic teacher-student relationships, the co-creation of knowledge through interaction, and a curriculum grounded in students' interests and experiences.

Dialogue and Critical Consciousness

For Freire, dialogue was a key component of problem-posing education. Dialogue, he wrote, is "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name [that is, to change] the world" (1970/1990, p. 76). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire insisted that dialogical encounters help students to develop critical consciousness of social, political, and economic contradictions so that they can take action against them (1970/1990, p. 43). Coming to critical consciousness requires analyzing, interactively and through dialogue, who is and is not allowed access to resources and opportunities, and how access is allowed or denied. Critical

consciousness ultimately requires questioning the status quo rather than taking it as given. Though Freire's early work suggested that critical consciousness would somehow necessarily lead to social action, his later work amended that claim. Nonetheless, the goal of problem-posing education is praxis, which is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970/1990, p. 33).

Democratic Teacher-Student Relationships

According to Freire, problem-posing education 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. (1970/1990, pp. 76-77)

Problem-posing education relies on a revolutionary, respectful relationship between teacher and student. Democratic educators seek to replace the traditional teacher-student hierarchy with egalitarian interactions. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire wrote that problem-posing education "cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and its people.... Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence" (1970/1990, pp. 77-78).

Further, Freire suggested that problem-posing education revolutionizes the teacher-student relationship: "through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers.... [T]he teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach" (1970/1990, p. 67).

Freire's early call for a "horizontal" relationship generated a staggering amount of debate over the teacher's role in a democratic classroom. In his later writings, Freire refined his notion of directivity and the teacher-student relationship. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, he explained: "Dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally; but it does mark the democratic position between them" (Freire, 1994, p. 116-117). In his "talking" books of the 1980s and 90s, Freire distinguished between authoritative and authoritarian teachers:

I have never said that the educator is the same as the pupil. Quite the contrary, I have always said that whoever says that they are equal is being demagogic and false. 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. This is the demand I make of the revolutionary educator. 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. How could I defend the fact that the nature of the educational process is always directive whether the education is given by the bourgeoisie or the working class. (Freire 1985, p. 76).

The Co-Construction of Knowledge

According to Freire, new knowledge is produced in the classroom from the interaction between students' and teachers' knowledges. "Knowledge," according to Freire, "emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopefully inquiry men [sic] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (1970/1990, p. 58).

Freire consistently advocated pedagogies, curricula, and learning based in the students' 'reality.' In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he 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" (1970/1990, p. 85). This idea has become a core principle of critical pedagogy, peace education, and, in many ways, of progressive education more generally: education should be relevant, and it should be grounded in the experiences and interests of students.

Fundamentally, Freire advocated that teachers should *respect* students' knowledge, *begin with* student's knowledge, and remain *humble* about the limitations of their own knowledge. He warned about the dual threat of elitism, or the rejection of popular knowledge as backward or simplistic, and basicism, or the "exaltation or mystification" of popular knowledge (Schugurensky, 1998, p. 24).

In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire stated that he did not wish to suggest that popular knowledge was somehow, by itself, sufficient: "it is unacceptable to advocate an educational practice that is satisfied with rotating on the axis of 'common sense,'" he wrote (1994, p. 58). Responding to charges that his focus on popular knowledge would limit students' understanding of global structures, he asserted, "never ... have I said that these programs...ought to remain absolutely bound up with local reality" (p. 86). Instead, education should start with but go beyond student's local knowledge:

The educator needs to know that his or her 'here' and 'now' are nearly always the educands' 'there' and 'then.' Even though the educator's dream is not only to render his or her 'here-and-now' with them, or to understand and rejoice that educands have gotten beyond their 'here' so that this dream is realized, she or he must begin with the educands' 'here' and not with her or his own. At the very least, the educator must keep account of the existence of his or her educands' 'here' and respect it. Let me put it this way: you never get there by starting from there, you get there by starting from some here. This means, ultimately, that the educator must not be ignorant of, underestimate, or reject any of the 'knowledge of living experience' with which educands come to school. (Freire, 1994, p. 58)

Later in the book, he added:

...we must not by-pass—spurning it as 'good for nothing'—that which educands...bring with them in the way of an understanding of the world.... With progressive education, respect for the knowledge of living experience is inserted into the larger horizon against which it is generated—the horizon of cultural context, which cannot be understood apart from its class particularities.... (p. 85)

Freire recommended that all learning *begin* from students' experiential knowledge, and that it proceed by working with students to understand the "logic of these kinds of knowledge in relation to their contents" (1998, p. 36).

FREIRE'S INFLUENCE ON PEACE EDUCATION

Freire's philosophy thoroughly informs peace education pedagogy and practice. His complicated concept of conscientization provides the foundation of peace education's hope for a link between education and social transformation. His insistence on dialogue and his discussions of egalitarian teacher-student relations provide the basis for peace education pedagogy. Despite his death a decade ago, Freire's ideas continue to resound throughout the field.

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