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## TEACHING AS AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL PROCESS: A FREIREAN PERSPECTIVE

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Teaching is often conceived in terms of methods and skills. When different approaches to teaching are discussed, the focus is commonly on teaching techniques; on the methods believed to be most effective in enabling students to learn. It is not always clear *what* students are expected to learn, but hopes of improved performance on standardised tests of student achievement usually figure prominently in such discussions. Considerable resources are devoted to researching and implementing schemes for producing better methods and better teaching. The hope is that not only individual test scores but national performances in surveys of international educational achievement (e.g., comparisons between OECD countries) will be boosted as a result of this investment of time, money and effort. The assumption is that if we change the methods, or ‘fix’ the teacher, or increase the funding, some of our most important educational problems will be solved. Teaching, on this view, becomes a largely technical process. It is taken as given that if we ‘get the methods right’ – and these may be not only methods of teaching, but also of *training* teachers – all will be well.

This chapter offers an alternative view – one based on the work of the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire. Freire was one of the most influential educationists of twentieth century, and his work continues to attract attention across the globe today. Freire argued that teaching is never merely about skills and methods. From a Freirean perspective, both teaching and learning are always non-neutral, political and ethical processes. For Freire, methods and skills are not unimportant, but their role in teaching must be considered in relation to a broader understanding of human beings and the world. The first part of this chapter outlines key elements of Freire’s educational philosophy, while the second considers some of the implications of Freirean theory for teacher education and teaching practice. The chapter concludes with brief reflections on strengths and weaknesses in Freire’s work, and with some final comments on the significance of teaching in changing lives.

### FREIRE’S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Freire was an eclectic thinker. His philosophy blends elements of liberalism, Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology, critical theory, radical Catholicism, and postmodernism (Mackie, 1980; Mayo, 1999, 2004; McLaren, 2000; Roberts, 2000, 2003a; Glass, 2001; Morrow and Torres, 2002). At the heart of Freire’s philosophy is the notion of humanisation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a) and other early works (e.g., Freire, 1972b, 1976), humanisation is depicted as a process of

becoming more fully human through critical, dialogical praxis. Praxis, as Freire employs the term, means reflecting and acting on the world in order to transform it. Dialogue, in its Freirean form, is a process of structured, purposeful communication between two or more human beings. Freire argues that humanisation is both an ontological and an historical vocation. It is ontological because it is part of our very *being* – it is what makes us distinctive as human beings. (Ontology is the study of existence or being.) Humanisation is not, however, an abstract process; we humanise ourselves through the thoughts and feelings we develop, the decisions and commitments we make, the relationships we build, and the actions we take in everyday life. We humanise ourselves by entering the historical process as subjects rather than objects. Humanisation thus conceived becomes a ‘calling’ for all human beings, but one to be pursued in different ways in different social, cultural and political circumstances. We dehumanise others when we actively impede their pursuit of humanisation. For Freire, dehumanisation is an historical reality but not an inevitability. The concrete manifestation of dehumanisation can be seen in oppressive structures, practices, policies, attitudes, and social relations. Liberation, from a Freirean point of view, consists in the struggle against oppression. This struggle, as Freire sees it, is never complete; we are always in a process of becoming. Engaging in reflective, transformative action, with others, is a lifelong pursuit.

Influenced by Hegel, Marx and others, Freire adopts a dialectical approach in seeking to understand the nature of reality. He sees ‘consciousness’ and ‘world’ as constantly changing and interacting with each other. ‘World’ in this context refers not only to the realm of nature but also to socially created phenomena (e.g., institutions and workplaces). ‘Consciousness’ includes not only reason but also feeling, willing and desire (cf. Freire, 1997a, p. 94). As conscious beings, we have the capacity to reflect critically on the world and to change it in the light of our reflections. At the same time, the way we think, feel and act is shaped in important ways by the world around us. In a complex social world, there are always contradictions or tensions (e.g., between social classes, or between political rhetoric and everyday experience), and addressing these demands both a certain form of critical awareness and a willingness to engage in transformative action. In any given epoch, Freire says, there will be ‘limit situations’ (challenges to the pursuit of humanisation) that demand ‘limit acts’ (transformative reflection and action). Freire identified ‘oppression’ as one of the key themes of the twentieth century, and saw ‘liberation’ as a fundamental task for citizens in many countries of the world.

Freire’s epistemology (theory of knowledge) builds on his ontology and his conception of reality. Given a world in constant change, we can, he maintains, never know absolutely or completely; instead, we can at best come *closer* to understanding an object of study. Knowledge is not ‘bequeathed’ or given but *constructed* through reflective, dialogical human practice. ‘Knowing’, from a Freirean point of view, is not an isolated, purely rational, individual abstract activity; rather, it is a social and practical process. Freire speaks in his later work of knowing with his whole being. Knowing, he says, “involves the whole conscious self, feelings, emotions, memory, affects, an epistemologically curious mind, focused on the object” (Freire, 1998a, p. 92). Reason remains important in Freire’s epistemology, but it is only one part of the knowing process (see Freire, 1997, p. 30). Knowing necessarily involves others. We can never know alone, even if the presence of the other, or others, is not immediate or direct. Freire also comments at length on some of the intellectual virtues he sees as

necessary for those seeking to know. These include curiosity, humility, openness, an inquiring and investigative spirit, a searching and probing stance when faced with problems, a questioning and critical frame of mind, and a willingness to listen and learn from others (Freire, 1985, 1996, 1998a, 1998c, 2004). These dispositions need, Freire argues, to be coupled with broader human virtues – love, hope, tolerance, courage, commitment, and respect for others – as the quest to know becomes integrated with the wider process of human transformation (Freire, 1994; Escobar *et al.*, 1994; Fraser, 1997; Darder, 2002).

These ontological, epistemological and ethical ideas underpin Freire's educational theory and practice. Freire never tired of insisting that education cannot be a neutral process (see, for example, Freire, 1972a, 1985, 1996, 1998a). Teaching and learning are necessarily political activities. This is so in multiple senses. Teachers and students bring a certain view of the world with them to any educational setting, and this cannot but influence the learning that occurs in that context. The politics of education can also be seen in the physical layout of classrooms and other learning environments, in the relationships between teachers and students, in the teaching methods employed, in decisions about what is and is not taught, in the policies and laws to which teachers and students are subject, in the forms of assessment and evaluation applied, and in the funding and resources received for educational initiatives. Freire's later works also stress the importance of wider political forces – those associated with systems of economic and social organisation – in educational matters. Freire saw neoliberalism as a pervasive and destructive influence on education, both in his native Brazil and elsewhere in world, and argued strongly against the marketisation of education (Freire, 1996, 1998a, 2004).

From his earliest publications, Freire made it clear that he favoured neither an authoritarian nor an 'anything goes' approach to pedagogy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a) Freire distinguishes between 'banking education' and 'problem-posing education'. He rejects the former, seeing the banking approach as part of a wider oppressive system. Banking education is authoritarian and dehumanising in nature, and assumes that 'knowledge' is a gift to be bestowed upon passive students waiting to receive the contents of the teacher's narration. Problem-posing education, or 'liberating education' as it has sometimes been termed, is dialogical in character, with both teachers and students learning from each other; it begins with the posing of problems rather than the giving of answers; it draws on, but does not rest with, the students' experience; and it encourages critical thought and questioning. Liberating education is concerned with what Freire calls 'conscientisation'. This notion has been much debated over the years (see Roberts, 2000). In simplest terms, conscientisation (*conscientização* in the original Portuguese) refers to the process of deepening one's understanding of the social world. Conscientisation is inseparable from other key concepts in Freire's work. Developing a deeper understanding of the social world, Freire believes, cannot come about through reflection alone but must be forged in dialogical action with others.

In later publications, Freire places particular emphasis on the need for structure, direction and rigour in liberating education (see, for example, Freire, 1987; Freire and Shor, 1987; Horton and Freire, 1990). Contrary to some readings of his work, Freire insisted that he was a teacher and not merely a facilitator (Freire and Macedo, 1995). Teachers, he argued, are not the same as students. They have a responsibility to

exercise a certain form of authority, without being authoritarian. An authoritarian or banking approach to education might present one version of reality as if it were the only (legitimate) one, and openly or implicitly suppresses questioning of this; a liberating approach, by contrast, requires of teachers that they not only allow but actively encourage the exploration of alternatives (cf. Escobar *et al.*, 1994). Freire saw this as especially important near the end of the twentieth century, with neoliberal global capitalism coming increasingly to be seen as the only way forward for countries in both the North and the South (see Freire, 1996, 1997a, 1998a, 2004; Rossatto, 2005). Teachers need to know their subject matter well, prepare thoroughly, consider carefully why they wish to employ one pedagogical approach over another, dedicate themselves to the students and the dialogical pursuit of knowledge, and have a clear sense of their ethical commitments. Teaching, from a Freirean point of view, is a task with extraordinarily important responsibilities. Its significance, Freire believed, has seldom been appreciated by governments and other funding authorities, and in later works (e.g., Freire, 1998c, 2004) Freire argued strongly in favour of better salaries and working conditions for teachers.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHING PRACTICE

Freire's work suggests that any attempt to find a single, 'perfect' method of teaching, applicable for all people in all contexts at all times, will be misguided. Freire has never seen his approach to education as a 'method' or even a set of methods (see Freire, 1997b; Aronowitz, 1993; Roberts, 2000). This does not mean he has nothing of practical value to offer teachers. It is possible to delineate key principles in Freire's pedagogical philosophy. These include a commitment to dialogue, an attitude of care and respect toward students, support for rigour and investigation, and the fostering of critical thought. The form these ideals take, however, will differ – often substantially – from one context to another. The kind of critical thought appropriate for very young children in early childhood centres, for example, will differ from what can be promoted in a Masters class at a university. Similarly, before a teacher can know how dialogue might 'work' in an educational setting, he or she will need to consider the subject matter, the existing knowledge and previous experience of the students, the aims of the course or programme, the ways in which the physical environment might enable or impede discussion, and the time available for teaching and learning, among other things. Teachers also need to reflect on their *own* limits and abilities, and be willing to admit when they don't know the answer to a question, while also being prepared to investigate further. It is not that methods have no importance; Freire stresses that teachers must know their subject areas well and have a high degree of technical competence in working with students. But teaching, as Freire understands it, is not *merely* about methods; it also implies a particular orientation toward human beings and the world. Deciding what methods will be appropriate in a given context depends, in part, on how teachers understand themselves, the students with whom they work, and the purpose of education.

These deeper ontological, ethical and political questions seldom form a significant part of teacher education programmes. Yet, as Freire sees it, they are vital. Teaching is a process of *formation* – a process of creating human beings. We cannot be neutral in such a process, and to pretend otherwise is, from a Freirean perspective, to be either naïve or disingenuous. It is not a case of favouring *either* the subject matter (i.e., the curriculum areas to be taught) *or* methods of teaching *or* questions of an ethical and

political kind; rather, all three elements of teacher preparation are, or should be, intertwined. Freire comments further:

[O]ne of the requirements of the present historical context is that the ethical formation of teachers has to accompany, has to go hand-in-hand with, the professional preparation of scientifically and technologically literate teachers. The ethical requirements are becoming more and more critical in a world that is becoming less and less ethical. Thus we can never really solve the problem of teacher preparation with mere technicist proposals, which is what everyone is asking me to give. (Freire, 1997b, p. 313)

The fact that ethical questions are given so little consideration in teacher education is, Freire believes, no accident. Freire argues that in a neoliberal world – one in which the market provides the model for all economic and social life – there is a fatalistic attitude. Neoliberals see inequalities between different groups as inevitable. They adopt a form of meritocratic thinking in explaining such inequalities, depicting them as the failure of some individuals to compete adequately. For neoliberals, people gain what they deserve. Some citizens in a marketised world will make the most of their abilities, working hard to maximise their advantage over others; others will fail to take the opportunities open to them and will suffer the consequences. Freire rejects this view. He maintains that in teaching biology (for example), it is imperative that the teacher discuss not only “the nature of the life-forms ... he or she is analyzing, but also ... solidarity, ethics, love, dignity, respect for others, the nature of democracy” (Freire, 1997b, p. 314). For Freire, these wider issues form part of a holistic approach to biology (and the same sort of claim could be made for other subject areas); yet they are considered by neoliberals as “expressions of an inoperative romanticism or idealism” (p. 314). Neoliberals accuse those wanting to address ethical questions of ‘being political’ while denying their own politics: their commitment to a world where competition will be favoured over cooperation, individualism over community, and the accumulation of wealth over the fair distribution of limited resources.

Neoliberals treat education as just another commodity: something to be sold by ‘providers’ and bought by ‘consumers’. Education, from this point of view, becomes a *private* good: something of benefit only to the individuals who ‘consume’ it. It is taken as given, for example, that students who enrol in tertiary education courses are doing so out of self interest, seeking to gain an economic advantage from the qualifications they gain. From a Freirean standpoint, however, this view of education is fundamentally flawed. Education for the neoliberal is a product; something to be traded in the market just as we might trade items of food or clothing. For Freire, by contrast, education is a complex, multifaceted *process* of teaching and learning – and of ethical formation – and cannot be reduced to a series of economic transactions. Education, for Freire, has, or *can* have, benefits far beyond the individual. Education can be seen as a *public* good; as something of potential value to all in a society, and to which all might be expected to contribute. Neoliberals work to create a separation between ‘text’ and ‘context’, between the subject under investigation and the wider world: “Information and knowledge are thus separated from the social and ethical context in which this information or knowledge appears” (p. 314). When this disarticulation occurs, “you lose the possibility of developing cultural signposts that enable you to understand the world so as to act in it and transform it” (p.314). Freire elaborates:

When one accepts the role of being a mere dispenser of knowledge along the lines of the market requirements that view students as mere consumers of knowledge, one becomes entrapped in the very ideological manipulation that denies one the possibility to articulate his or her world as a subject of history and not as a mere object to be consumed and discarded. (p. 315)

As Freire sees it, a neoliberal way of viewing education and the professional preparation of teachers is restrictive and dehumanising. A neoliberal approach purports to be ‘pragmatic’ (see Freire, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 2004); to be concerned just with ‘what works’ in a competitive world. Yet, it fails to ask deeper ethical and political questions about the nature of the society into which teachers and students are being ushered. The neoliberal way is portrayed as the *only* way, and exploration of social and economic alternatives is discouraged.

While Freire never sought to hide his opposition to neoliberal politics, he was adamant that he did not have a right as a teacher to *impose* his views on others. This is where an important distinction needs to be drawn. Teaching in any formal setting is a necessarily interventionist process. In committing oneself to the task of teaching, it must be accepted that one will change the lives of others. The question, from a Freirean point of view, is not whether one should intervene or not but what *form* this intervention will take. Imposing one’s political position on others denies the possibility of dialogue and treats knowledge as something to be given rather than created. In his university teaching Freire did not hide his involvement with the Brazilian Workers Party from students when they asked him about this; on the other hand, nor did he see the university classroom as a space for political rallying or rhetoric (see Escobar *et al.*, 1994). Instead, Freire believed the university should be place where students not only encounter but actively *engage* difference in a variety of forms. The same should be true, Freire would argue, of educational environments at any level, from early childhood to late adulthood. ‘Difference’ here can include the varying backgrounds and theoretical orientations of teachers, the diversity in cultures and worldviews among students, and the range of possible perspectives on complex and contested areas of academic inquiry.

Difference, as Freire sees it, need not be an impediment to dialogue; to the contrary, it can provide the very motor for it. Dialogue requires a certain form of shared commitment (e.g., to working with others and to knowledge and learning), but difference can provide the stimulus for reflection and inquiry. For this to work well, teachers need to take care not to adopt a defensive or reactionary posture when faced with challenges to their own views. They also have a duty to intervene, where necessary, to allow different student voices to be heard. Freire does not suggest that all students should be required to express their views; they have a right, he believes, to remain silent (see Freire and Shor, 1987). ‘Silence’ need not signal a lack of engagement with the material being taught. Sometimes quiet critical reflection is necessary before a contribution to the educational conversation can be made, and teachers must respect this. But when students *do* wish to speak, they should, as far as reasonably possible, be given an opportunity to do so. For some students – and the teacher – this will often mean suppressing the urge to speak in order to allow others who have not been heard to express their views. Developing the ability to *listen* is essential for liberating pedagogy, as Freire understands it, and for genuine dialogue

(Freire, 1998a, p. 107). Having a sound grasp of different pedagogical techniques is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the kind of dialogue Freire has in mind here. Teachers also need to have a deep understanding of their subject matter, being aware, for example, of how time devoted to one problem or theme might impede or enhance the study of another. In addition, teachers need to have a knowledge of the students with whom they are working – of their interests, aspirations, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses – and of the constraints placed on learning by other requirements (e.g., assessment and monitoring).

In contemporary neoliberal capitalist societies, there is often an emphasis on finding rapid, neat *answers* to problems. Freire shows that many of the most important problems faced by human beings do not lend themselves to ready, ‘quick fix’ solutions. This was clearly evident in the situations Freire encountered as an adult educator in Brazil, with extreme poverty for many (and opulence for a few), high rates of infant mortality, widespread disease, and severe malnutrition (see Freire, 1972a, 1972b, 1976, 1996, 2004). Freire never saw his adult literacy work as a ‘solution’ to these difficulties. This does not mean education cannot make a difference in changing conditions of social and economic hardship; it can and, Freire believes, it *should*. But we need to be aware of the limits of education and of the importance of other forms of political struggle in addressing situations of oppression. In a marketised world, we often expect not merely answers but solutions that can be packaged and ‘sold’ to others. The current obsession with ‘evidence based teaching’ – a ‘what works’ approach – provides an example of this. It is assumed that if evidence of what works in one context can be found, this will ‘fix’ similar problems elsewhere. This approach often rests on a narrow conception of what counts as worthwhile evidence and does not pay adequate attention to questions of context. More than this, the very idea of ‘what works’ can itself be limited and limiting. For educational ‘success’ from one perspective can also be ‘failure’ from another. If success in the system encourages people to accept that system (its structures, laws, policies, prevailing ideas, and relations of production, among other things) without question, this might also be seen as a form of educational failure. Freire reminds us that instead of always seeking answers, we should as teachers, at any level, emphasise the importance of learning to ask questions; of fostering a searching, probing, investigative spirit; of posing problems and experiencing a certain joy (as well as frustration, at times) in seeking to address them.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Freire tried to live in a manner consistent with his ideals. He acknowledged that he did not succeed entirely in this but this, in itself, was in keeping with his philosophy: humanisation, for Freire as much as for anyone else, was an ongoing process. In the years immediately prior to his death in 1997 Freire had been more active than ever. He spoke in his later publications of becoming ‘less certain of his certainties’ (see Freire, 1994, 1997a, 1998a), and he continued to reflect critically on his own work right up to the last days of his life. He was, in his own terms, an *incomplete* being and was keen to keep learning from his dialogues with others.

Freire welcomed constructive critique of his work. Over the years, a number of different criticisms have emerged. Postmodern feminists such as Weiler (1991) have argued that Freire’s theory of oppression in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is

‘universalist’ and that more attention needs to be paid to multiple, often conflicting, layers or levels of oppression. In response, Freire has noted that while his primary focus in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was social class, he had always been opposed to other forms of discrimination such as racism and sexism (Freire, 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 1998a). Freire accepted and adopted a number of insights from postmodern critics (see Freire, 1994, 1998b; Peters, 1999; Mayo, 2004; Roberts, 2003a), while nonetheless retaining the idea of a ‘universal human ethic’ (see Freire, 1998a, 2004). He advocated an ethical stance of ‘unity in diversity’ (Freire, 1994, 1996, 1997a), arguing that differences between various groups should become a source of strength rather than divisiveness. Others have been critical of Freire’s concept of conscientisation (e.g., Berger, 1974). One theorist (Bowers, 1983) has suggested that Freire’s emphasis on dialogue, problematisation and critical thought has the potential to be culturally invasive. Another (Walker, 1980) has detected elements of intellectual vanguardism and anti-dialogue in Freire’s pedagogical theory. These lines of argument have been engaged at length elsewhere (Roberts, 2000, 2003b) and many of Freire’s later works (e.g., Freire, 1994, 1996, 1997a, 1998a) provide evidence of his careful consideration of the issues at stake in critiques of this kind. There are other aspects of Freire’s work worthy of further development. These include his account of the relationship between reason and emotion (see Roberts, 2007), his support for ecological causes (evident, for example, in Freire, 2004), and his exploration of questions relating to spirituality (to which he has made some reference in, for example, Freire, 1985, 1997a, 2004).

Freire does not provide a panacea for social or educational ills. He did not want to be seen as an educational ‘guru’ with disciples or followers. He would encourage those interested in his pedagogical theory and practice to set his ideas in their appropriate contexts, to adopt a holistic approach in reading his work (going beyond, for example, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), and to consider carefully the points made by his critics. Freirean ideas have been engaged and applied by a number of educationists in New Zealand over the years, in areas such as Maori education (Smith, 1999), adult education (Findsen, 1998), theological education (Armstrong, 1999; Jenkins and Martin, 1999), and tertiary education (Roberts, 1999), among other domains. Freire offers a clear alternative to ‘methods-driven’ and ‘market-driven’ approaches to education, both of which have been heavily influential in many countries of the Western world over the past two decades. Freire invites us to see teaching as an ethical and political endeavour of profound importance. Teaching *changes lives* – sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. From a Freirean point of view, no one should set out on the path to becoming a teacher without a deep commitment to knowledge, dialogue and one’s fellow human beings. There are no easy answers to educational ‘problems’. Teaching is a difficult and complex process. Despite this, or perhaps *because* of this, teaching can also be one of the most rewarding forms of human activity. For these reasons, among others, the preparation of teachers is a matter of the utmost seriousness and demands ongoing reflection, dialogue and action.



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