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PAULO FREIRE

OPPRESSION, FREEDOM AND CRITICAL APPROACHES TO EDUCATION

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Having read this chapter you should be able to:
- appreciate the background and impact of Freire on critical approaches to education
 - identify and understand his notions of dialogue, praxis, the banking concept of education and problem-posing education
 - apply the principles of problem-posing education in your practice
 - critically evaluate his approach to education.

KEY WORDS

praxis; dialogue; conscientisation; banking concept of education; problem-posing education; cultural circles

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire (1921–97) was one of the most prominent thinkers and writers on education, specifically critical approaches to education. He was first recognised as an adult educator due to his radical and successful adult literacy programmes in his native Brazil. These programmes stemmed from Freire's deep conviction that education played a significant role in freeing people from oppression. His thoughts on critical education have since been applied, beyond the confines of adult literacy, to all sectors of informal and formal education. The aim of his adult literacy classes 'was not *individual* empowerment, but *social* empowerment' (Heaney and Horton, 1990: 84, emphasis in original). He possessed an unusual blend of Marxist ideology and a Christian ethos, which – together with a strong sense of social justice, clarity of intellectual thought and personal humility – made him one of the most important educational theorists of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His concepts are still of significance today, particularly in a time of perceived international inequality in education (Apple et al., 2001).

Freire's earliest writing emerged from a radical viewpoint brought about by the frightening and helpless politically unstable situation in Brazil during the 1960s. Indeed, the military coup of 1964, as with a number of Brazilian activists and educators, led to Freire's imprisonment and exile. His writing and philosophy combine the extremes of the perils and futility of oppression with the delight and optimism in the possibilities that people and communities can achieve (Irwin, 2012). Apart from imprisonment and exile Freire had his work censored by a number of authoritarian governments of the time, such as those of Chile, Argentina, Portugal and Spain, as well as apartheid South Africa (Schugurensky, 2014). Yet, in spite of all these struggles, he never gave up hope. Hope is a theme which underpins and is interwoven throughout his works. In the opening section of his seminal text *Pedagogy of Hope* he emphasises its importance:

Without the minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. ... And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope. Hope, as it happens, is so important for our existence, individual and social, that we must take every care not to experience it in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip toward hopelessness and despair. (Freire, 2004: 3)

Although his earlier writings emerged from the political situation in Brazil, his work has had an impact throughout the world, influencing how education and, in particular, learning and teaching, is perceived. His major writing, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first published in 1970, revised in 1996), has become a standard text for those studying education as a subject and for those undertaking teacher education programmes. It seeks to challenge the traditional processes and frameworks of education in order to enable those from disadvantaged groups in society to question the purpose of education.

Even though his philosophy could be considered very radical in its approach, Freire managed to argue rationally and articulately, which in turn made it possible for him to communicate with others of contrasting ideologies. This ability to patiently listen and converse with others, despite holding very deep-seated radical convictions, allowed him to hold governmental roles in Brazil following his return from exile (Howlett, 2013). This radicalisation advanced by Freire was very evident in adult education policies in Latin American and African countries in the latter half of the twentieth century as they began to gain independence from the control of colonialism. During the 1990s these radical educational ideas were also taken up by educators in Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, the UK and Japan (Bourn, 2012; Bowl, 2012).

Freire's educational theories were developed while working with underprivileged workers in north-eastern Brazil to develop their literacy. In doing this he created a method which drew from his own philosophy of education, which endeavoured to amalgamate teaching and learning with freedom. The features of his philosophy will be explored in greater depth further on in this chapter. These include: **praxis**, which is the practice of education informed by and based on values; the importance of **dialogue** between students and teachers which is meaningful and based on mutual respect; and the significance of learners and teachers developing '**conscientisation**', which empowers both to change the world in the name of social justice. Finally, he criticised the traditional, oppressive and passive notion of education, which he termed the '**banking concept**', but promoted a more radical, reflective and active concept, which he called '**problem-posing education**'. To gain a true insight into factors that forged Freire's philosophy and his critical approach to education, we need to consider his upbringing and the political turmoil he struggled with in his career.

PAULO FREIRE, THE PERSON

From the start, Paulo Freire's own childhood in deprived and impoverished north-east Brazil made him aware of the reality of inequality and oppression. Although born into a relatively wealthy family, he and the rest of his family were to experience poverty when his father died when Freire was thirteen years old. This affected his own education, delaying the start of his secondary education until the age of sixteen. This unusual postponement in starting secondary education could have been, it is argued, the reason he regarded traditional and formal systems of education with a degree of suspicion (Irwin, 2012). His early encounter with poverty led him to discover what he termed as the 'culture of silence': rather than the poor being encouraged to fulfil their aspirations, they became dispossessed. This dispossession was a direct result of the 'economic, social and political domination – and paternalism – of which they were victims' and he was convinced that the education system was to blame for the preservation of this culture of silence (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 12). The experience of living in

poverty helped Freire to become acquainted with the language usage of the people he lived among. This also supported his future work as an adult literacy educator. Moreover, through his experience he witnessed the social inequalities of the poor. Freire's conversations with his father, a military police official, initiated his thoughts on social injustices and presented him with a political awareness at an early age (Schugurensky, 2014). It is suggested that what was mostly significant in forming his philosophy and perhaps contributed to his humble nature was his Catholic upbringing, nurtured by his mother's robust religious faith. Although he later confronted and condemned the more traditional Catholic Church when he felt it became an instrument of oppression, his ideal of Christianity was one of freedom and emancipation (Irwin, 2012). Freire started to study philosophy and sociology of language and then entered law school at the University of Pernambuco in 1943. After a short spell practising law he taught for six years at secondary school level before working as a welfare official. Then from 1947 until 1957 he was the director of Education and Culture of the Social Service of Industry (Schugurensky, 2014).

Freire's educational thinking emerged while developing adult literacy programmes with the workers and peasants in north-eastern Brazil, which became the focus of his doctoral thesis that he submitted to the University of Recife in 1959 (Spring, 1994). Following the success of these programmes the Brazilian Ministry of Education asked him to implement a national literacy scheme. This work was stopped during the 1964 military coup and he was arrested, imprisoned and then sent into exile to Chile. Nevertheless, he continued to develop his method of adult literacy in other parts of the world, in particular Latin America and Africa. During his time in exile he also advised UNESCO and the Department of Education of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. His work gained further influence in academia – he was offered a position at Harvard University and achieved acclaim and awards from numerous international universities, who recognised his critical approach to education and his struggles against oppression (Apple et al., 2001).

Brazil declared an amnesty in 1979 and Freire and many other academics who were exiled were allowed to return. He first took up a lectureship at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and then at the University of Campinas. His long years in exile had not dampened his political activism and he joined the Workers' Party to advise them on matters of literacy and culture. When the Workers' Party was successful in the São Paulo municipal elections in 1989, Freire became Secretary of Education. During his tenure as Secretary he formulated and implemented many progressive educational policies, including revising and promoting adult and community education, restructuring of the curricula and making schools more democratic places of learning (Apple et al., 2001).

Following his time as Secretary of Education he gave lectures around the world and wrote numerous texts, all of which were well received. His thoughts remained very anti-oppression and political but increasingly personal and optimistic in nature. For example, *Pedagogy of Hope* (2004) revisits in a positive and encouraging manner

the features of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (which are his reflections from his time in exile) and suggests a need for a continuation of the struggle to liberate, through education, the many who are still oppressed. Although Freire died in 1997, his thoughts and philosophy remain pertinent today. His main premise was that education is a political act. Overall, as an educator he spurned the emerging forms of undemocratic pedagogy which put the 'market, instrumentalised knowledge and priority of training over the pursuit of the imagination, critical thinking, and the teaching of freedom and social responsibility' (Giroux, 2011: 156). Furthermore, for many educators it is the clarity and the deep-seated ethos of social justice of his theories that continue to be influential.

FREIRE'S THEORIES

Before exploring the key features of Freire's theories we need to delve deeper into the origins of his educational practice and emerging philosophy, which developed from his work in adult literacy. For him literacy was more than merely imparting the physical and mental skills for reading and writing. It was a much more complex process, one that was liberating and lasted a lifetime:

To be literate is not to have arrived at some pre-determined destination, but to utilise reading, writing and speaking skills so that our understanding of the world is progressively enlarged. Furthermore, literacy is not acquired neutrally, but in specific historical, social and cultural contexts. (Mackie, 1980: 1)

His idea was to popularise education and make literacy accessible, but in doing so to discard the traditional pedagogical methods used in schools. Freire and his teams of literacy practitioners set up what they called '**cultural circles**' in the poor towns and villages around Recife. These cultural circles were purposely planned to be different from schools in both curricula and pedagogy. In place of teachers delivering information to passive learners, all were encouraged to exchange thoughts and take part in a dialogue of ideas that were considered by all to be of interest: 'topics for debates in the cultural circles included nationalism ... illiteracy ... [the] vote for illiterates, and democracy' (Bee, 1980: 39). These were topics which had a direct connection to the realities of their daily lives. Also, being involved in such topical themes and related problems allowed learners and teachers to be critically aware and seek the potential for action and transformation (Bee, 1980). From these origins in adult literacy Freire was convinced of the significance of dialogue, praxis and conscientisation in creating a critical and liberating problem-posing education, as opposed to the traditional 'banking' concept of education, which viewed the learner as a passive empty vessel to be filled with knowledge and information by a teacher.

Freire's concept of dialogue emerged from the cultural circles, where teachers and learners developed a mutually accepted vocabulary which enabled them to

comprehend the social, economic and political influences that had created this level of existence. Such a dialogue is intended to increase the level of understanding between learner and teacher. To gain this understanding Freire felt it was important to observe the lives of the learners he and his teams worked with. The aim of these observations was to uncover the aspects of their lives which the learners considered important. The outcomes of these observations allowed teachers to begin a meaningful and critical educational dialogue. Furthermore, Freire stressed the importance of dialogue for teachers themselves, so that they learn more about the environment and culture they work in and how they themselves feel and think about the world (Spring, 1994). As such, dialogue is the start of a shared notion of learning. In Freire's words:

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but the one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. (1996 [1970]: 61)

Therefore, through dialogue, learning is based upon mutual respect between the learner and teacher with shared values and the need to act and transform the world. Such action was central to Freire's philosophy and he termed it praxis. Praxis, for Freire, was the need to act against oppression rather than simply criticise, 'which, in his terms, amounted to a passive legitimating of social inequality' (Howlett, 2013: 255). Action on its own was not a part of his notion of praxis. For Freire, praxis required teachers not only to practise what they preached but also to underpin such action with reflection and theory, which in turn would give 'a dynamic example of teachers seeking practical wisdom' (hooks, 2003: x). Praxis is enabled by curious enquiry where knowledge is constructed and reconstructed, and allows learners to progress from a passive acceptance to a deeper understanding of the foundations of reality. Praxis, then, is an empowering concept which focuses the student on being a critically active investigator (Collins et al., 2002). This swing in awareness is affirmed by future involvement against oppression (Connolly, 1980).

Dialogue, praxis, and what Freire termed 'conscientisation' formed a foundation for constructing a pedagogical process which was embedded in the social, cultural and political realities of the learners and teachers. Conscientisation was the manner in which learners and teachers developed their consciousness, which would lead to decisions about pedagogy. Reading was central to the function of developing conscientisation. Freire argued that it was the process of learning to read which made it possible to better understand, and subsequently change, the world (Spring, 1994). Conscientisation was to be the catalyst which helped make decisions regarding pedagogy. In other words, what was to be learned, and in which way, was based upon dialogue, reflection and action, as well as theory. As such, conscientisation 'allows for the building of programs *with* and *from* the communities rather than *for* them' (Torres, 2006: 543). These aspects of conscientisation were to bolster and give

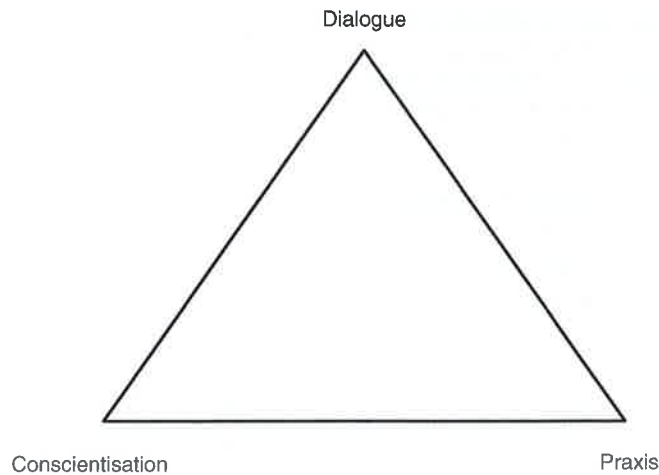


Figure 11.1 The interlinked foundations underpinning Freire's pedagogical process

strength to Freire's critical problem-posing education in opposition to the traditional banking concept of education (Apple et al., 2001). The three aspects of dialogue, praxis and conscientisation are interlinked and form the essential foundations for Freire's concept of the pedagogical process (see Figure 11.1).

Freire felt that oppression was legitimised and sustained through the banking concept of education, a concept which is central to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The underlying principle of banking education is the dominance of the oppressor over the oppressed, where learners are passive receivers of information delivered to them to memorise and regurgitate:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing. (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 53)

There are two interesting and topical aspects of Freire employing the banking metaphor here to describe this concept as an oppressive model of education. Firstly, he is using the vocabulary of conflict, one being the actor or the depositor (the teacher) and the other the passive receptacle (the learner). It becomes, therefore, apparent that he viewed the banking concept of education as unfair. Such inequity is also reflected in the world where access to knowledge and the educational choice of participation are determined by the oppressor (Howlett, 2013). Secondly, the vocabulary that links education and banking mirrors that used in an era of increasing austerity and the supremacy of market forces – that is, as we would deposit money in a bank, teachers deposit knowledge into their learners:

Like banks, this share is, ultimately, unequal with some (those with sufficient levels of capital) benefiting at the expense of others (who are lacking). It is only those who are seen as being able to sufficiently repay the institutional investment (financially and intellectually) who will serve to gain from the system. Clearly a theory for the modern world! (Howlett, 2013: 257)

On a more practical level, the banking notion is typified by set curricula, such as the National Curriculum, and the content and pedagogy are prescribed and monitored by the government to ensure that teachers comply. The prescriptive and compliant nature of set curricula, Freire argued, stifles the natural curiosity, critical thinking skills and creativity of learners, which are abandoned in preference to an inflexible adherence to a socially established view of learning.

Freire offered problem-posing education as an alternative to the banking concept, which was steeped in his notions of dialogue, praxis and conscientisation. Problem-posing originated from the cultural circles for adult literacy and is connected to the needs and lives of the learners. The teachers' role is to pose problems to the learners regarding features of their lives. Both learners and teachers take part in a dialogue surrounding these problems and from that dialogue a range of recurrent words surface from the learners connected to their lives. The words that surface from the dialogue become the foundations of the learning and teaching of reading. Hence, there is a direct correlation between the process of learning to read and the manner in which the learner reads and thinks about the world (Spring, 1994).

A problem-posing teacher forms and re-forms their reflections through an ongoing dialogue with the learner:

The students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. ... Whereas banking education anaesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the *submersion* of consciousness; the latter strives for the *emergence* of consciousness. (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 62)

Therefore, problem-posing education is centred upon creativity, which encourages true reflection and action to transform the world. There is also an affirmation that education can be liberating – an ongoing and emergent activity where learners and teachers are in 'the process of *becoming* – as unfinished uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality' (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 65). Problem-posing education was not only a notion which is in conflict with the banking concept, but also one which, for Freire, offered hope for alleviating the situation for the oppressed of all social, cultural and racial backgrounds. He summed up the difference between banking education and problem-posing education: 'banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers' (2007: 73). Jarvis et al. give a further explanation of the differences between the two:

In 'banking education', learners were expected to remember and repeat what they were taught. In problem-posing education, they were encouraged to question situations and learn from their questioning. In the former, they accepted the situation and the status quo and their learning occurred within that context, while [in] the latter they were encouraged to question the validity of the situation. (Jarvis et al., 2003: 70)

Finally, Giroux, a fellow critical educator, sums up what the purpose of education was from Freire's point of view:

Freire believed that education was part of a project of freedom in its broadest sense and eminently political because it offered students the conditions for self-reflection, a self-managed life, and empowering forms of critical agency. Pedagogy in this sense connected learning to social change; it was a project and provocation that challenged students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it. (Giroux, 2011: 154)

Many of Freire's sentiments were shared by other educational thinkers, particularly humanists, social constructivists and those with radical or alternative viewpoints.

LINKS WITH OTHER THEORISTS

We have already noted how Freire was influenced by Christianity and by Marxism, both of which could be perceived as having contrasting ideologies, but he managed to incorporate facets of both philosophies into his work and life. Nevertheless, he was at odds with the more traditional aspects of the established Catholic Church. There are a number of other thinkers who are aligned with Freire or who were influenced by him. One with very similar ideas is Henry Giroux, a North American educational thinker and acclaimed founder of the notion of critical pedagogy. For Giroux it is important that learners understand the social structure of knowledge and that they are empowered to improve both the economic and social conditions of the world. At the centre of his critical pedagogy is the notion that learners should seek actions which promote social justice and break down the barriers of inequalities of power. Giroux has also supported the use of critical dialogue as part of teacher education programmes to help prepare student teachers for classroom practice (Spring, 1994). These progressive ideas were also associated with contemporary educational thinkers such as Michael Apple, Peter McLaren and Ivan Illich. Illich shared Freire's Christian background and a quest for social justice. Both Freire and Illich were also critical of the conventional schooling system. Freire's disdain of the school system was also aligned with the thoughts of John Holt, who thought that school did very little to improve the aspirations of poor children. The disquiet about the formality of school and the authoritative teacher figure mirrors the work of Nel Noddings, who encouraged teachers to forge a relationship of joy and happiness with students.

There are also quite clear links between Freire and John Dewey, who both championed a democratic notion of teaching and learning and a child-centred and culturally based approach to the curriculum. Moreover, Dewey, like Freire, was a critic of the traditional schooling system. Similarities with the social constructivist theories of Vygotsky, where learners are dynamically involved with teachers in developing knowledge, are also associated with Freire's notion of the learner as an activist. Freire's problem-posing education aligns closely with the socially situated learning theories of Lave and Wenger with their emphasis on culture, community and a shared vocabulary in the process of learning. Freire stressed that knowledge is historical and based upon the culture and language of the learner, which resonates fittingly with Bourdieu. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and social reproduction theory proposed that learners from disadvantaged and minority communities did not conform to the traditional 'norms' of society and, consequently, suffered oppression and social injustice. Freire's work with literacy and language is comparable with Basil Bernstein's theory of restricted and elaborate language codes. Bernstein argued that disadvantaged groups suffered if they did not communicate using the sophisticated elaborate language of the 'establishment' or that which was considered acceptable in the traditional school system.

Like A.S. Neil, the founder of the revolutionary Summerhill School, Freire maintained that children who grow up in an authoritarian home setting are prone later in their lives to accept dominance from authority and also have a tendency to dominate others (Spring, 1994). Another leading adult educator and humanist psychologist, Carl Rogers, agreed with Freire's thoughts concerning the need for the individual emancipation of learners from disfranchised social groups. Rogers' noteworthy books *On Becoming a Person* (1961) and (with Freiberg) *Freedom to Learn* (1969) have been standard texts used by teachers in adult education (Ecclestone, 2004). There are also links with prominent thinkers who focused on adult education. Malcolm Knowles' idea of andragogy and his emphasis on the importance of contextualising learning is similar to Freire's overall philosophy of adult education. Jack Mezirow argued that Freire's concept of conscientisation was closely aligned with his own radical notion of transformative learning. Linda Darling-Hammond's ideas of promoting innovative and challenging learning activities, which encompass the cultural and social interests of the students, are similar to Freire's concept of problem-posing learning. Finally, American feminist university educator bell hooks has employed much of the ethos of Freire's critical pedagogy in her own teaching. Interestingly, she is also one of his chief critics (Aubrey and Riley, 2017).

CRITIQUING FREIRE

Freire himself, true to his belief in the value of reflection, has critiqued his own work. *Pedagogy of Hope* (2004) revisited and revised his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996 [1970]) to 'rethink', address and defend some of the criticism regarding the

perceived politicisation of his writing. This willingness to be self-critical is exemplified and recognised by bell hooks: 'In so much of Paulo's work there is a generous spirit and quality of open-mindedness that I feel is often missing from intellectual and academic arenas' (hooks, 1994: 54). There has also been some comment about the relevance of his revolutionary stance and whether his notions on education can be transferred to other less chaotic regions of the world. For example, Moore argues that Freire's censure of the state educational system and his call for a more critical pedagogy are pointless as teachers are hindered by 'the rules, regulations and ideologies of the larger social system' (Moore, 2000: 154). Although students may change the way they create new radical understandings of their difficulties in society, as a result of Freire's teachings, they too are thwarted if they cannot actually improve their situation (Heaney and Horton, 1990).

Freire has been criticised because of his sexist language. Indeed, the new revised 1996 edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first published in 1970) was, according to its cover notes, 'modified to reflect the connection between liberation and inclusive language'. One of his main critics, among many feminist academics, was bell hooks. Freire and hooks formed a perplexing partnership because, although hooks abhorred his sexist language, she thought highly of his work and applied much of his philosophy in her own teaching. Furthermore, hooks accepted that Freire's notions on pedagogy and politics were closely connected with feminist thought (Irwin, 2012).

Apart from the sexist nature of Freire's language in his earlier work, there is also a view that the language was somewhat mystical and emotional in tone and style. However, his writing in later works, such as *Pedagogy of Hope* (2004) and *Teachers as Cultural Workers* (2005), was markedly more comprehensible (Smith, 2002). Freire tended to be quite one-sided in his arguments – his readers either supported the oppressed or were hostile to them. Although this might be seen as a clear and straightforward viewpoint, 'taken too literally it can make a rather simplistic (political) analysis' (Smith, 2002). There is the possible difficulty that because not all of his writing has been translated into English the wholeness of that writing cannot be fully analysed; there is also a risk that translation has obscured the meaning of his work (Schugurensky, 2014). Regardless of these criticisms, Freire's philosophy is one of emancipation and hope. In practice it is not suggested that teachers take a revolutionary stance to bring down what they may perceive to be an oppressive system, but that they should be aware of the signs of oppression so they are better able to challenge and manage the situation (Moore, 2000).

APPLYING FREIRE IN THE CLASSROOM

For Freire, teaching was not about control and following set ready-made curriculum packages created and imposed by others. Rather, it is a matter of mutual trust and partnership (between teacher and student) regarding which challenges our preconceived ideas. He makes his point about this:

Authentic education is not carried on by 'A' *for* 'B' or by 'A' *about* 'B', but rather by 'A' *with* 'B', mediated by the world – a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it. (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 74, emphasis in original)

The 2005 book *Teachers as Cultural Workers* is a series of letters written conversationally in which Freire challenges teachers to critically reflect on their own meanings of learning and teaching. It explores and brings together the practical classroom implications of Freire's theories offered in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and in other works. He stresses that for teachers to become successful they need to be constantly dedicated to their own professional learning development and to reflect on their own classroom practice. His works have considerable commentary on features of classroom practice, such as the resistance to a banking concept of education, advice regarding problem-posing teaching, the role of the teacher and thoughts on the curriculum.

Freire considered that the purpose of education was to liberate and that there should be mutual respect between the teachers and learners, who both have an equal role to play in the learning process. He argued that this was not to be achieved by adopting a banking concept of education. He set out the following attitudes and practices which exemplified banking education:

- The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
- The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
- The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
- The teacher talks and the students listen – meekly.
- The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
- The teacher chooses and enforces her or his choice, and the students comply.
- The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
- The teacher chooses the programme content, and the students (who are not consulted) adapt to it.
- The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which he or she sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
- The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.

(Freire, 1996 [1970]: 54)

Teaching which embraces these practices and attitudes encourages learners to consent to a passive role enforced on them by the teacher, and hence gain only a 'fragmented view of reality deposited in them' (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 54).

Conversely, Freire argues for more dialogical problem-posing education. Learners are engaged with matters of their everyday lives to challenge and resolve issues that are important to them. They are actively involved in the process of deciding topics for discussion and the planning sessions. The teacher's role in this is to help learners create a critical aptitude and encourage the learners' historic and cultural backgrounds to help stimulate the content to be studied. Problem-posing education promotes the

natural curiosity in learners. According to Freire, curiosity together with the use of critical readings are core to dialogic teaching. Without the use of curiosity and critical readings teachers are not truly dialogic, but 'instead [engaged] in a process of conversation without the ability to turn the shared experience and stories into knowledge' (Freire and Macedo, 1999: 51). One idea for the application of a dialogical problem-posing teaching approach which Freire suggests is the reading of magazine and newspaper articles, and book chapters. The authors of the works presented are first introduced and then the students read the pieces presented, and the group then discuss the contents and an analysis of their thoughts with each other and with the teacher. Doing this, he argues, helps students cultivate the practice of criticism, and therefore as readers will 'not become passive objects of the "communiques" directed at them, but rather as consciousnesses seeking to be free' (Freire, 1996 [1970]: 103–4).

bell hooks has employed Freire's dialogical problem-posing pedagogy successfully in multicultural classrooms. She approaches each teaching session with the notion of building an active 'community' to generate an environment of openness and scholarly depth. In doing so she feels that this community creates a collective wish to learn from others and makes possible the 'magic that is always present when individuals are active learners' (hooks, 2003: 43). Like Freire, hooks emphasises the benefit of dialogue through genuine conversation to share the knowledge and power essential in creating supportive group activities (hooks, 2010). Her views are very inclusive and in keeping with Freire's notion of education being emancipating:

One way to build a community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice. In my classes, students keep journals and often write paragraphs during class which we read to one another. This happens at least once irrespective of the class size. (hooks, 1994: 40)

This practical guidance is aligned with that of Freire, who also encouraged the notion of empowering learners by building knowledge through communities. Empowering learners in this way helps them prepare to take a full and active role in a democratic society (Collins et al., 2002). This in turn can help learners to be transformed from a passive reliance on the teacher's knowledge. In fact the teacher, from Freire's experience with cultural circles, was 'no longer necessary because the community members have acquired their own expertise' (Freire, 2005: xix).

Freire was an opponent of the traditional standardised curriculum where the content of what was to be learned and the manner in which it was to be taught were prescribed by others. For him, learning was most effective when learners were involved in the forming of their own educational aspirations by making curriculum choices. It is recognised that educators working within the restraints of standard curricula have little flexibility in allowing learners to make radical choices. However, one possible, if somewhat diluted, resolution is for the teacher to take time to know about the lives of the learners. As far as possible the curriculum should be pertinent and take into account the interests, culture and history of individual learners.

Furthermore, the language used needs to be in tune with, and understandable by, the learners, so the language employed by the teacher 'demands an understanding of the structural conditions in which thought and language of the students are dialectally framed' (Connolly, 1980: 80).

Although Freire stresses the mutual relationship between teachers and learners, he does acknowledge that the teacher has a clear directional role to give clarity and to help learners become involved in the dialogical process. It is undeniable that Freire was a passionate student-centred teacher – he talks about the 'joy' and 'love' of teaching – but he also argues that 'teaching is not coddling' (Freire, 2005: 27). Neither does he shy away from the demands, and rewards, faced by teachers and learners alike in the process of study in 'which we encounter pain, pleasure, victory, defeat, doubt, and happiness' (Freire, 2005: 52). He also argues that teachers should welcome, and not feel uncomfortable, being questioned by their students. He explains: 'I don't get offended if students put me to the test. I don't feel infallible. I know I am imperfect' (Freire, 2005: 107). Before we close this section, let us reflect on the type of teacher he perceived himself to be:

I am a teacher who stands up for what is right against what is indecent, who is in favour of freedom against authoritarianism. ... I am the teacher who favours the permanent struggle against every form of bigotry and against the economic domination of individuals and social class. ... I am the teacher full of spirit of hope, in spite of all the signs to the contrary. (Freire, 1998: 94)

It is acknowledged that some of his notions of education are quite idealistic and difficult to put into practice, particularly within the constraints of formally structured curricula. However, the struggle for social justice in our classrooms is a worthy cause. As already mentioned, there are some ways in which we can apply those theories in practice. As Moore (2000) has advised, even if we cannot apply these ideas in our own practice, we should be aware of the signs of oppression and hence be better able to challenge and manage the situation.

OVERVIEW OF APPLICATION: FREIRE'S CONCEPT OF PEDAGOGY, IDEAS FOR PRACTICE

As mentioned above there may be limitations encountered when attempting to put Freire's pedagogy into practice, particularly in formal educational settings. It is fully understandable if you feel some of these are not possible within the constraints when working to a fixed and objectives curriculum. However, we have listed some ideas which you might consider, thereby, as Moore (2000) proposes, creating an opportunity for awareness, and as such a topic for reflection.

- Seek to develop a mutually trusting and respectful relationship between students and staff.
- Consider, when possible, to deviate away from traditional 'banking' methods of teaching and encourage problem-posing discussions to stimulate curiosity.
- Remember teachers and students have equal roles to play in the learning process - rather than being the 'subject' and 'object' respectively.
- Encourage student voice and choice.
- Create time for critical reflection of practice - seek collaboration with a trusted colleague to facilitate this if appropriate to do so.
- Use texts for reading to prompt critical commentary and active group discussions.
- Look to raise topics for discussion which are of cultural interest to students.

SUMMARY

Freire's radical philosophy was, and still is, of great significance to educators throughout the world. Although his notions of critical pedagogy are applicable to all sectors of education, originally they were formed during his revolutionary and successful adult literacy programmes in Brazil. For Freire the importance and purpose of literacy was more than empowering his learners, rather it was about empowering society. Freire held a strong belief that education was a significant factor in freeing people from oppression. This belief was firmly set within a political perspective based upon his own struggles and persecution in Brazil during a time of conflict and instability. The chief features of his educational philosophy were set out in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996 [1970]). His philosophy challenged the traditional banking concept of education, which he considered to be oppressive. Instead he called for a more critical libertarian problem-posing education which included the use of cultural circles, and embedded dialogue, praxis and conscientisation.

Influenced by Christianity and Marxism, Freire's ideas can be associated with many other educational thinkers, particularly those concerned with social justice. One who is very similar in his ideas is Giroux, who established the concept of critical pedagogy with its emphasis on empowerment and the quest that education should be transformational. Dewey's criticism of traditional schooling and his emphasis on the importance of culture in the learning process strikes a chord with Freire's philosophy as well. There are also strong correlations with the socially situated learning concepts of Lave and Wenger, specifically with the significance of learning communities. Others with comparable ideas regarding the worth of culture and language are Bourdieu and Bernstein. Two others who epitomise Freire's views on authority and the need for mutual respect between learner and teacher are the

radical educator A.S. Neill and the humanist Carl Rogers. There are also links between progressive thinkers who have, for the most part, focused on adult education, such as Knowles, Mezirow, Apple, McLaren, Illich and bell hooks.

There has been a fair amount of criticism of Freire's ideas. This focuses on his sexist, mystical and emotional language, which was particularly evident in his early works. There has also been some negative evaluation that some of his writing is overly one-sided, simplistic and political in its nature. Furthermore, some of his ideas are quite difficult to put into practice in a time of standardised curricula and an environment of regulations and compliance. However, Freire's spirit of educational freedom against oppression and his democratic approach to teaching and learning deserve practical consideration – even if this is in the form of being aware of the indications of oppression. Moreover, the quest for hope is interwoven throughout Freire's work and thinking – this despite the struggles he endured and the oppression his adult literacy learners experienced.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Banking concept of education

The process of learners passively accumulating knowledge which is delivered by the teacher. The underpinning principle being the dominance of the oppressor over the oppressed, where learners accept as a gift, from professed educated teachers, information they are given to memorise and regurgitate.

Conscientisation

The way in which learners and teachers cultivate their consciousness, leading to the choices they both make regarding the adoption of methods of learning and teaching. Core to developing conscientisation is reading. The process of learning to read enables learners to understand and consequently transform their lives.

Cultural circles

The use of cultural circles was an approach used by Freire which was completely divorced from methods of teaching used in schools. Students were encouraged to exchange thoughts, ideas that were of interest to them and which affected their daily lives. Freire believed that cultural circles were vital in developing conscientisation through dialogue, praxis and problem-posing education. It is where adult literacy and critical consciousness are first established.

Dialogue

The fundamental basis of dialogue is the mutual respect between teachers and learners, a respect which is embedded in their cultural backgrounds. Learners and teachers

foster a mutually agreed vocabulary so they can understand the social, economic and political drivers that have shaped their lives. Teachers need to understand the environment and the culture of the learners, and what they value, so they can begin a deep and critical learning experience. In doing this the teacher also becomes the one who is being taught through dialogue.

Praxis

The idea of a functional connection between theory and the world people live in, so they can be proactive in making changes and improvements in their lives. Being proactive also requires teachers to practise what they teach and support their actions with theory and reflection. Praxis is reinforced through a questioning approach to learning where knowledge is constructed and reconstructed; learners adopt a more active and critical way of understanding the world.

Problem-posing education

A concept in direct opposition to the established banking concept of education (see above). Evolving from the cultural aspects of adult literacy, it is closely associated with the lives of the learners where teachers pose problems to the learners relating to their social environments. Teachers and learners both engage in a dialogue about these problems. The words that emanate from the dialogue become the foundations of the learning and teaching of reading. Through this process learners become active, creative inquisitors in tandem with the teachers, and the teachers form and reform their reflections through the continuous dialogue process.

FURTHER READING

Freire, P. (1985) *The Politics of Education: Culture, power, and liberation*. London: Bergin & Garvey. An anthology of Freire's unpublished writing in English. The work affirms his political and activist stance of education being transformational.

Morrow, R. and Torres, C. (2002) *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical pedagogy and transformative social change*. London: Teachers College Press.

This comprehensive text examines Freire's philosophy, particularly regarding issues of culture and power and the implications for practice.

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