

Paulo Freire: A beginner's guide¹

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It is very difficult to understand Adult Education in the last fifty years without considering the historical figure and works of Paulo Freire. In a it is very interesting because Freire is not an educator in a strict sense, maybe we can consider him more as a community and cultural worker very committed with literacy as a way to liberating people. This connection, between adult education and community work, as exemplified in Freire's work makes him the most impressive representative of Radical Adult Education or Popular Adult Education: a kind of educational struggle for Social Justice.

Life and works.

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born in Recife (Brazil) in 1921. In a short review we can differentiate three different stages in his life.

The first period concerns work in Brazil. He worked in several organizations – public and private – making connections between culture and adult literacy. This is an important fact because Freire always connected literacy and adult

education in a wide range of different contexts. This stage was interrupted by the *coup d'état* in Brazil in 1964. His early books are a legacy of this time.

The second period began with his exile in Bolivia, Chile, the USA and, finally with his work in *The World Council of Churches* in Geneva (Switzerland). This period is, possibly, the moment of a wider application of his philosophy and practice and the establishment of his international reputation. He worked as advisor in literacy campaign in several countries like Guinea Bissau; Sao Tomé and Principe, etc. This work is an important link with his own past because these countries were, at that time, colonies fighting for their independence.

The third step in his life is his return to Brazil. This last period is characterised by his work as a teacher in several universities and, finally, as Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo (Brazil) between 1989-1991 (see Torres, O'Cadiz & Lindquist, 2007). Paulo Freire died in 1997 in Sao Paulo.

His ample bibliography can be divided in four different moments, not necessarily in a chronological way. The first relates to his early works in Brazil: *Education: The practice of Freedom* (1973)², and, overall, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the book which he is most associated with and has been translated into more languages in the world than any of his other works. This book can be considered the founder

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² Brazilian edition of this book is previous to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

document in relation to Freire's thought. A second section can be characterised as the *spoken books* phase. These are books made with other thinkers – not only educators – that were created in a dialogical way: Miles Horton; Ivan Illich; Antonio Faundez; Moacir Gadotti, etc. have all collaborated with Freire in producing 'talking books' which are based on their conversations. The third period is represented by books in which Freire reflects on his own thought, rewriting and adapting his earlier ideas: *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994) and *Pedagogy of the City* (1993) are two examples. A final, fourth period is his books concerning experiences: *Pedagogy in Process* (1978, in relation to his work as adviser in Guinea Bissau), *Extension or Communication* (1973, about his experience in Chile).

Key concepts.

Key elements in his work and thought are diverse but the following can be stressed:

Dialogue: This cannot be understood as a simple methodology. Dialogue is the core of Freire's philosophy and his method. Dialogue guarantees communication and establishes education as a cooperative process characterised by social interactions between people in which new knowledge is created through joining and sharing the knowledge that people have. For this, dialogue as an educational journey considers people as social human beings and not as recipients of knowledge. It is

the essence of liberating education. Dialogue is, in this sense, the starting point to edify a liberating education.

Literacy 'Method': This is not a way merely to learn letters, words or sentences. The starting point is always people's real situations and experiences shared through dialogue. From this point of departure, people can build the meanings of their own surrounding world. The literacy method makes sense within the bounds of a concrete territory – physical and symbolic. People in literacy processes become learners of their own everyday life. In this sense, to 'say their word' is to speak about the world in cooperation with others through dialogue. In Freire's 'method' words are more than a simple skill. Words are doors opened to understand the world and change it.

Oppression and the oppressed: From his early works, Freire considered the educational process as one of liberation that will allow people to move away from a **Culture of Silence** and to have the experience and confidence to say their own word. To maintain this kind of oppression – Culture of Silence – the prevailing sectors in society maintain an educational system that Freire called **banking education**: deposits are made; rules are given; knowledge is memorized not built. All these kind of things maintain people in a state of alienation. To turn this around, his proposal is for a **liberating education** that supports people to say their own word / world. This means, that people can express their

dreams, desires, hopes, and to find ways to act on these.

Conscientization: This can be the most controversial concept in the whole of Freire's thought. It is related to the concept of oppression, above. In fact, Freire stopped using it for a while because he considered that it might be understood mainly in an epistemological sense: an oppressed man or woman could be conscious about their own oppression in an intellectual way, and he or she can create some knowledge about this situation. For this, it is important to stress that Freire always uses the concept of conscientization to refer not only to the knowledge that a group of people have, but, beyond this, consciousness is formed in a process of investigation and changes – deriving from it – are made in their own reality. In this process, each person, through dialogue, meets with other people and can move from a **magical consciousness** to a **critical one**. We can say that conscientization is a process and not a stage. In this path, Freire names different steps: magical consciousness where fate and inevitability are dominant in people's understanding, naïve consciousness which involves some understanding of the context in which events occur but the analysis is shallow, and finally critical consciousness where deeper and contextual analysis are evident. Conscientization is more than merely 'consciousness raising' it implies also the need to act on what is known. But the most important element that I can stress is that conscientization is forged in

everyday liberating actions that allow people not only to be conscious about their alienation, but changing the situation that are the cause of it.

The glossary included in Kirkwood & Kirkwood (1989) is very useful to go deeply into Freire's key concepts.

Critics.

Diverse authors and thinkers have made several criticisms of Paulo Freire's ideas. The most stimulating, in my personal opinion, are the following:

Methodological incoherence: Some people consider that Freire didn't define his method beyond the theoretical and epistemological elements. It is true in a certain sense. In fact, only in *Education: the practice of freedom* we can find an explanation about concrete words and generative themes' applications. But, on the contrary, in my personal view, I think that we can affirm that Freire pointed out the essence of the method: dialogue and people's everyday life as a starting point. From these, the word and the world are created and recreated.

Other critics stress the idea that Freire forgot **orality** as a primary and vital part of people's communicative ability. In fact, it is correct that Freire always stressed the act of reading and the importance of writing, but, on the other hand, he always contemplated the real existing people's situation as a starting point for educational intervention. This means that – on a lot of occasions – orality is the starting point for literacy

work. Plus, dialogue – the essential key element in Freire’s methodology - is constructed and conducted thanks to orality. Freire says: “In adult literacy, like in post literacy, the domain of both oral and writing language is one of the dimensions in the process of expression” (1984, p. 54). In fact, both generative words and themes are derived from the study of people’s oral universe.

The concept of oppression. Two main critics come from feminist and people working with minorities. The major element relates to the idea that Freire only considers peasant without land as oppressed.

Feminists have been very critical because Freire didn’t introduce gender as an element of oppression. His work primarily considers the oppressed as peasants without land, and he takes little cognisance of gender.

On the other hand, other authors consider that Freire forgot cultural issues and problems of ethnic minorities in this analysis about oppression. In short, these critics consider that the analysis of oppression must go beyond class analysis.

Making connections.

In the last twenty years there have been several attempts to connect Freire’s thought with that of other thinkers. Perhaps the more explicit effort has been in making connections between Freire and the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (see Allman, 1988; Coben,

1998; Mayo, 1999). We can also point to works connecting Freire and the German critical theorist Jurgen Habermas (see Welton, 1995; Torres & Morrow, 2002). In a less explicit way, there is a growing work connecting Freire and the Russian psychologist Vygotski (see Gadotti, 2005) and works on the relationship with social learning in a way so called socio historical psychology. (For this last issue see Cole & Scribner, 1981)

Paulo Freire’s Actuality.

Paulo Freire’s works and thought are spreading around the world. They have been very significant in the twentieth century and today. Freire took part, as advisor, in literacy campaigns in countries such as: Guinea Bissau, Sao Tomé and Principe, Nicaragua, etc. His work has been important not only in Third World’s countries. In more advanced economies there have been significant attempts to translate his ideas for adult education. We can stress *The Adult Learning Project* in Edinburgh (see Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989) as one of these.

Another important development is the creation of Paulo Freire’s Institutes. The first was created in Brazil (see www.paulofreire.org) before Freire’s death. Then others have been created. One example of these is *The Paulo Freire Institute of Spain* (see www.institutpaulofreire.org) that publishes an Online Journal called Freirean Rhizome (see www.rizoma-freireano.org) in four languages

(Spanish, English, Portuguese and Valenciano). The Institute encourages some research about Literacy and about Participatory Citizenship and Adult Education. Plus, the Institute is supporting a Literacy Campaign in Nicaragua connecting literacy with health, productivity and environmental issues.

These practises and new developments renew the richness of Freirean thought.

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