

Reflection on Paulo Freire and Classroom Relevance

Emmy J. Rugut

Ahmed A. Osman

Moi University, School of Education
Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Educational Media
P.O. Box 3900, Eldoret 30100, Kenya

Abstract

This paper focuses on the philosophical concepts of Paulo Freire on education. It reports on the relevance of Freire's ideas to the classroom and its impact on the world of 'educator' and 'educatee'. The paper is a reflection of Freire's reaction to 'banking education' and problem-posing model, culture-circle, codifications, praxis (action/intervention), Easter experience, dialogue and conscientization. Freire has been able to draw upon and weave together a number of strands of thinking about educational practice and liberation. His theoretical innovations have had a considerable impact on the development of educational practice all over the world.

Keywords: banking education, reflection, culture circle, codifications, praxis

Introduction

The paper focuses on the philosophy of Paulo Freire whose ideas has subsequently influenced many other academic disciplines and has remained an inspiration to many across the world. This Brazilian educator has been very revolutionary and political in his approach to educational issues and many have remained faithful to his convictions. His philosophy has a lot to offer to the field of education in all aspects and remains valid at all times. Freire's philosophy on education has permeated deeply in the education sector and has greatly influenced the approaches and models used in literacy learning.

The influence of Freire in Latin America and Africa has been enormous. Working originally in the state education system, Freire conceived and developed adult literacy programs whose purpose was to assist the poorest people to learn to read and write through helping them to respect their own everyday language. Freire insisted that the function of education was to build on the language, experiences and skills of the 'educatees', rather than imposing on them the culture of the 'educators'.

Freire left a significant mark on thinking about progressive practice. Freire was able to draw upon ,and weave together, a number of strands of thinking about educational practice and liberation. He has made a number of important theoretical innovations that have had a considerable impact on the development of educational practice- and on informal education and popular education in particular. Freire's philosophy begins from a deep respect and humility before poor and oppressed people and a respect for their understanding of the world they inhabit or 'common sense' which constitutes a knowledge no less important than the scientific knowledge of the professional/dominant group/oppressors as he termed them (Darder, 2002).According to Freire this respect and humility fosters a condition of trust and communication between teacher (who also learns) and learner (who also teaches). Education becomes a collective activity, a dialogue between participants rather than a 'top-down' one-way lecture from one person for the benefit of the other. In saying this Freire did not intend to create conditions where learner's knowledge, feelings and understanding should go unchallenged or for the teacher to step back as a mere facilitator (Freire, 1996).

To me his belief that humility and respect fosters a situation characterized by trust is absolutely true. In many instances learning takes place when there is mutual respect and understanding between the teacher and the learner. The learners' feelings and knowledge should also be challenged and directed by the teacher for meaningful learning to be achieved.

According to Freire, the teacher has authority but does not become an authoritarian. He intervenes in order to help the learner reflect on aspects of his/her cultural, social and gender constructs and help the learner to think critically. His view of the teacher and the learner promotes human relations. The failure by the teachers and the learners to communicate has always resulted in strikes and demonstrations in our learning institutions.

The benchmark that Freire used for evaluating experiences grew out of Christianized Marxist humanism (McLaren, 2000). From this position, Freire urged both students and teachers to unlearn their race, class, and gender privileges and to engage in a dialogue with those whose experiences are very different from their own. Thus, he did not uncritically affirm student or teacher experiences but provided the conceptual tools with which to critically interrogate them so as to minimize their politically domesticating influences (hooks, 1994).

Banking education

In this form of education the teacher deposits in the minds of the learners who are considered to be empty or ignorant, bits of information or knowledge, much like we deposit money in a [empty] bank account. This is why Freire called this model of education 'banking education'. Freire criticized this model of education because he believed it made students into passive objects to be acted upon by the teacher (Freire, 1988). He argued that the goal of 'banking education' is to demobilize the people within the existing establishment of power by conditioning them to accept the cultural, social, political status quo of the dominant culture. In the banking education model knowledge/education is seen as a gift given to the student by the teacher who considers the learner as marginal, ignorant and resource-less. Freire saw this as false generosity from the dominant group (oppressors) and a way of dominating and controlling the people (the oppressed) to improve or maintain their own interests (Freire 1973).

Some of the tools a banking education model might use include a pre-prescribed curriculum, syllabus or course book, which either takes no account or makes assumptions of learners' views or knowledge of the world. Freire called these pre-prescribed plans and course books primers (Freire 1973). Freire argued that conventional learning was the tool of the elite because it treated students as objects upon which knowledge is "deposited." Genuine learning for Freire, could only be achieved through lived experience, critical reflection and praxis (Aronowitz, 1993). The banking education is not the best method of instruction; learners should be allowed to participate and also bring out what has been learned from their surroundings and earlier experiences.

A problem-posing model

To challenge the banking education model, Freire proposed a problem-posing model of education. In this model, the teacher and learner discuss and analyze their experiences, feelings and knowledge of the world together. Instead of the belief that learners' and teacher's situation in the world is fixed, as the banking model suggests, the problem-posing model explores problems or realities people find themselves in as something which can be transformed (McLaren, 2000).

It is not the job of the teacher to provide answers to the problems, but to help the learners achieve a form of critical thinking about the situation, Freire called this *conscientization* (Freire 1973). This makes it possible to understand that the world or society is not fixed and is potentially open to transformation. It becomes possible to imagine a new and different reality (Freire 1988).

In order to undertake this process successfully, the people (oppressed) must challenge their own perception of the dominant group (oppressor). Freire argued that the oppressed think of themselves as 'less than' or something lacking. He suggested that they have been conditioned to view the practices and behaviors of the dominant groups as complete, whole and correct. To become whole complete and correct means to simulate the practices of the dominant culture. To counter this perception means engaging the learner in a process of dis-identification with dominant culture/oppressor and to help the learner to imagine a new being and a new life according to their own rationality (Freire 1973). Learning can best be achieved through critical thinking and analysis of one's experiences and feelings. In many institutions, the best performed subjects are those that learners do it practically, for example Agriculture, Art and Design, Home science etc.

Culture Circle

Freire took education out of the classroom and created 'the culture circle', where learners used their own ways of speaking to articulate their shared understanding of how their world came to be like it was and how to act to change their future. From being a monologue process, education became a process of dialogue in which educatees and educators engaged in mutually respectful learning. Through the culture circles process, people progressed very quickly: in Brazil illiterate adults learned to read and write in 30 hours; and in Nicaragua illiteracy was reduced from 40% to 13% in two months. Freire pointed out that the astounding results achieved by the culture circles were a consequence of offering literacy as a tool through which groups, rather than individuals, could be empowered. In culture circles, everyone makes good progress, not just a few isolated 'star-pupils' (www.gaian-democracy.net).

The concrete basis for Freire's dialogical system of education is the *culture circle*, in which students and coordinator together discuss generative themes that have significance within the context of students' lives (Freire, 1988). These themes, which are related to nature, culture, work, and relationships, are discovered through the cooperative research of educators and students. They express, in an open rather than propagandistic fashion, the principle contradictions that confront the students in their world. These themes are then represented in the form of codifications (usually visual representations) that are taken as the basis for dialogue within the circle. As students decode these representations, they recognize them as situations in which they themselves are involved as subjects. The process of critical consciousness formation is initiated when students learn to read the codifications in their situationality, rather than simply experiencing them, and this makes possible the intervention by students in society. As the culture circle comes to recognize the need for print literacy, the visual codifications are accompanied by words to which they correspond. Students learn to read these words in the process of reading the aspects of the world with which they are linked (Mayo, 1999).

Although this system of codifications has been very successful in promoting print literacy among adult students, Freire always emphasized that it should not be approached mechanically, but rather as a process of creation and awakening of consciousness. For Freire, it is a mistake to speak of reading as solely the decoding of text. Rather, reading is a process of apprehending power and causality in society and one's location in it. For Freire, authentic education is always a "practice of freedom" rather than an alienating inculcation of skills (Freire.P.1988).

The learning circle is a non-hierarchical 'class' model where participants can discuss *generative* themes which have significance within the context of their lives. This involves creating a democratic space where every one's voice has equal weight. The conditions needed for this have to be actively created as it does not often occur naturally. This can mean challenging cultural, gender and other status related power relationships and stratifications.

Generative themes and codifications

Participants explore generative themes which are of interest to them. A generative theme is a cultural or political topic of great concern or importance to participants, from which discussion can be generated. These generative themes are then represented in the form of 'codifications' (either represented by a word or short phrase or a visual representation - a picture or photograph). Participants are able to step back from these visual representations of their ideas or history and decode or explore them critically by regarding them objectively rather than simply experiencing them. This makes it possible for the participants to intervene and initiate change in society (Freire, 1978).

Freire initially concerned himself with literacy learning. The codifications (visuals) prompted discussion, phrases and words which learners would use to develop their skills. Although this system of codifications has been very successful in promoting print literacy among adult students, Freire always emphasized that it should not be approached mechanically, but rather as a process of creation and awakening of consciousness (Freire, 1988). For Freire, it is a mistake to speak of reading as solely the decoding of text. Rather, reading is a process of apprehending power and causality in society and one's location in it. For Freire, authentic education is always a "practice of freedom" rather than an alienating inculcation of skills.

Codification is a way of gathering information in order to build up a picture (codify) around real situations and real people.

Decodification is a process whereby the people in a group begin to identify with aspects of the situation until they feel themselves to be in the situation and be able to reflect critically upon its various aspects, thus gathering understanding. It is like a photographer bringing a picture into focus (McLaren, 2000). Indeed generative themes and codifications are in use in institutions of higher learning and this approach is beneficial if used with the guidance of teachers. Freire's approach is therefore useful in today's world.

Praxis (action / intervention)

Paulo Freire, whose perspective is derived from both Marxist and Existentialist thought, maintained that for the oppressed to become authentic selves they must fight not only for freedom from hunger, but for freedom to create and construct, wonder, and venture. True knowledge, Freire contended, emerges only through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful, critical inquiry with other people about their relations to the world. Therefore, he advocated that instead of learners receiving, filling and storing deposits made by educators, learners should be allowed to develop praxis, an inventive way of life that encourages free, creative reflection and thoughtful action in order to change the world, even as the learners are transformed in the process (Encyclopedia of the social and cultural foundations of education, 2008).

A core component of Freirian theory is that learning begins with action is then shaped by reflection, which gives rise to further action. Learning is thus a continuous process, directed at enhancing the learners' capacity to act in the world and change it. For Freire, whether it is called literacy or learning, this is the principal political task of any society committed to people-power.

Freire put forward the notion that authoritarian forms of education such as banking education prevented learners from 'knowing' the world and seeing it as something which can be changed. He believed that authoritarian forms of education inhibited the liberation and freedom of the oppressed. Freire argued that change could come through a process of dialogue and reflection leading on to change through action or intervention and or political change. Freire called this process praxis (Freire, 1973).

"The act of knowing involves a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action." (Ibid).

In summary, in regard to learning, literacy and praxis Freire says:

"If learning to read and write is to constitute an act of knowing the learners must assume from the beginning the role of creative subjects. It is not a matter of memorizing and repeating given syllables, words and phrases but rather, reflecting critically on the process of reading and writing itself and on the profound significance of language" (Freire, 1988).

It is through action, dialogue, reflection and intervention by both the teacher and the learner that true learning can be achieved in the classroom. Success stories have been reported in institutions where teachers allow learners to commune freely with them, but with rules and regulations being kept.

Easter experience

According to Paulo Freire (1994) those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. To him this conversion is so radical and does not allow for ambivalent behavior... Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were. A number of informal educators have connected with Paulo Freire's use of metaphors drawn from Christian sources. An example of this is the way in which the divide between teachers and learners can be transcended. The educator for liberation has to die as the unilateral educator of educatees in order to be born again as the educator-educatee of the educatees-educators. An educator is a person who has to live in the deep significance of Easter (Taylor, 1993).

According to Freire teachers should be beyond reproach so as to be good role models to their students. Teaching is a very noble profession and those who go into it must be ready to lead by example, thus calling for continued personal reflection to remain worthy of the profession.

Dialogue

Freire advocated for dialogue, constant communication unlocks doors for prosperity and victory in any situation. When teachers and learners dialogue, there are always breakthroughs. Dialogic action challenges mediating social realities by posing them as problems that can be analyzed critically by those who have direct experience of them (Freire, 1997). Freire argues that dialogue is not just about deepening understanding but is part of making a difference in the world. Dialogue becomes a form of collective praxis directly concerned with unveiling inequitable conditions obscured by the ruling classes. The process is important and can be seen as enhancing community and building social capital that leads to justice and human flourishing.

To enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what he or she knows and realizes that through dialogue existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created (Mayo, 1999). Freire's emphasis on dialogue has struck a very strong chord with those concerned with popular and informal education. Informal education is dialogical or conversational and involves respect and people working with one another (co-operative activity). According to Paulo Freire too much education involves 'banking'-the educator making 'deposits' in the educatee (Gadotti, 1994).

Dialogue is an encounter, mediated by the world itself, between men and women to name the world (make sense of the world). Dialogue is the means by which we achieve significance as human beings. Those in the dialogue must each *want* to name the world. All must be able to speak the word to name the world. "The domination implicit in dialogue is that of the world by the dialoguers; it is conquest of the world for the liberation of humankind" (Freire, 1972).

Man is not allowed to understand and transform the reality that encircles him when education is simply a method used to adapt him to this reality. Freire is of the opinion that the individual learns to understand and transform reality. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary that 'dialogicity' be established between teacher and student, since man does not create himself in silence, but through words, actions and reflection. The use of dialogue, therefore, is the key element in learning. The dialogue established between the two subjects helps to increase reciprocal kindness, something that is an act of bravery, not cowardice.

In Freire's terms, learning based on group dialogues is liberating for everyone involved in the process. By contrast, teaching based on individual monologues in an imposed language leads to silence and apathy, and is the ultimate form of oppression. In his analysis of the dynamics of power, Freire reserves the term 'oppressed' for those whose own voices are silenced because they are forced to speak with a voice that is not their own: "The oppressed are not only powerless, but reconciled to their powerlessness, perceiving it fatalistically, as a consequence of personal inadequacy or failure. The ultimate product of highly unequal power relationships is a class unable to articulate its own interests or perceive the existence of social conflict". (www.gaian-democracy.net)

Conscientization

Freire (1988) has described this as the process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs (Freire, 1973). The idea that "experiences are lived and not transplanted" is a central tenet of Freire's philosophy (Gadotti 1994). Conscientization is the key process by which students develop a critical awareness of the world based on the concrete experience of their everyday lives. The development of critical awareness through conscientization alters power relations between students and teachers, the colonized and the colonizer, thereby transforming objects of knowledge into historical subjects (Freire, 1997). Freire proposed that a dialogical theory of action based on communication and cooperation was necessary not only for understanding the mediating role of historical, colonial and class relations (conscientization), but also for the active work of changing them.

Freire's attention to naming the world has been of great significance to those educators who have traditionally worked with those who do not have a voice and who are oppressed.

The idea of building ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ or a ‘pedagogy of hope’ and how this may be carried forward has formed a significant impetus to work. An important element of this, is his concern with conscientization-developing consciousness but consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality (Taylor, 1993).

Conclusion

Freire's conception of education as a deeply political project oriented toward the transformation of society has been crucial to the education of revolutionary societies and societies undergoing civil war, as well as established Western democracies. Freire's work has exercised considerable influence among progressive educators in the West, especially in the context of emerging traditions of critical pedagogy, bilingual education, and multicultural education.

It is evident that Freire’s revolutionary pedagogical theory influenced educational and social movements throughout the world and his philosophical writings have influenced academic disciplines such as theology, sociology, anthropology, applied linguistics, pedagogy, and cultural studies.

Freire’s generative themes is a student centered system of learning that challenges how knowledge is constructed in the formal education system and in society at large. Freire’s student centered approach stands in stark contrast to conventional educational practice, which he referred to as the “banking approach” to education. Freire’s philosophy is valid and useful in the world today, for there is need for critical analysis of the situation, coordination, dialogue, intervention and action. Freire remains relevant in all aspects and at all times.

References

- Darder, A. (2002). *Reinventing Paulo Freire*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Seabury.
- Freire, P. (1978). *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Seabury.
- Freire, P.(1988). "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom and Education and Conscientizacao."In *Perspectives on Literacy*, ed. Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose, pp. 398–409. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Freire, P.(1993). *Pedagogy of the City*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P.(1996). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gadotti,M.(1994) *Reading Paulo Freire. His life and work*, New York, SUNY press.
- Hooks, b.(1994). *Teaching to Transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- Mayo, P.(1999). *Gramsci, Freire, and Adult Education: Possibilities for Transformative Action*. London: Zed Books.
- Mclaren, P. (2000). *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*. Oxford Press
- Taylor,P.(1993) *The texts of Paulo Freire*, Buckingham:Open University Press. www.gaian-democracy.net–‘Paulo Freire’s Learning Principles’