

Reflective Teaching

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Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 50th Anniversary - Viva Paulo Freire

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We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of Paulo Freire's magnificent book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and the Wabash journal, *Teaching Theology and Religion*, has published a Forum to to celebrate the book and Freire's legacy.

Very few books in recent history have made their way around the world expanding the ways people think about education and learning processes. Freire's legacy is one that will always be developed and challenged. Developed by those who care for deep, critical thinking and challenged by people and governments who see the danger of Freire's thinking.

Regarding the latter, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the new president of Brazil, where Paulo Freire is from, sees a danger in Freire's work and legacy. While campaigning, the new president said that he would go into the Ministry of Education with a flame-thrower to burn anything associated with Paulo Freire. Even though Mr. Bolsonaro most probably has never read any of Freire's books, he claims that Freire offers a sectarian and socialist education whose Marxist teachings undermine the education of the student. Along with Bolsonaro, the Brazilian new conservative movement called "Schools Without a Party" also blames Freire for making students receptacles of ideologists who want to put socialist interests before the love of Brazil and threaten the "Christian values" of family, property and church.

It is with good reason that the president of Brazil and conservative sectors of society are all concerned with Paulo Freire. Freire's education helps people to figure out their own lives more fully, to develop critical minds, to engage into social mobilization, to gain their own sense of

liberation, and become subjects of their own history. This process helps people to see, judge and act, challenging all forms of power.

Education for Freire is the unfolding of worlds for the one who is learning. It is a way to gain conscientization of one's own life and the environment in which one lives. When Paulo Freire is teaching a village of fishers, he starts by asking people "what is a fish?" Then he asks what is the meaning of the fish to the community, and how fish and fishing are connected with their own ways of living, as well as how they relate with other fishing villages, the environment, and even big fishing companies. Through pursuing the meaning of the word "fish," the fishers describe several power relations around their lives. In the end, people learn not only how to spell and write "fish," but also how "fish" tells people about their lives, their world, and the other worlds with which they are connected.

Done this way, education is a path from being oppressed to become free. Education is a way of giving voice to the voiceless and gaining conscientization that unleashes the struggle against the domination of those in power, of realizing that everyone has the strength to organize and struggle to change their lives.

This form of education is everywhere in the world and as educators we must go where transformation is at work. In order to continue to honor Paulo Freire, we must acknowledge that popular education is present in the movements of resistance and emancipation. For us to get a better sense of what Freire's pedagogy can do, we should listen to those who are at the bottom of society trying not only to survive, but to thrive. It is from those places that we gain a much better sense of what Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed means. As Oscar Soto says:

The popular education of Paulo Freire is the possibility that workers, peasants, landless workers, excluded and marginalized people will think and re-invent themselves in the transit from being spectators to become genuine creators of the material conditions of life. It is not in vain that the language of the pedagogical rebellion of the oppressed is spoken in the popular movements, in the base communities, in the theories of dependencies, the sociologies of exploitation, the liberation theologies, the Latin American socialisms, the research/activism, participatory action and so many traditions of resistance in Our America.[1]

On the other hand, Freire's pedagogy can also be relevant for teaching contexts with privileged students in elite universities. It can help students gain a sense of *vincularidad*[2] or deep relationality, of unbalanced power, exploitation, and class struggle. By gaining consciousness of our lives in the relation with others and larger societies, we learn how to act towards somebody else, and move from protecting our own groups into seeking common justice for all.

This opening of the world of oneself into the world of another brings a demand with it, namely that we engage in each other's worlds. What happens then is that I have to check how my own ways of thinking and living are related to other forms of thinking and living, how my habits of eating fish relate to fishing villages and the massive destruction of the sea life by big corporations.

This consciousness of our common situation and the fundamental sense of *vincularidad* challenge teachers and students in any school, poor or rich, to engage in uneven exchanges. Freire's education for consciousness is the beginning of the unfolding of a vast world of wonders and imperfections that need to be engaged. For instance, if we want to deeply honor Paulo Freire and his legacy, we must respond to one of the most fundamental challenges of our times: patriarchy/fascism and the "masculine mandate." Rita Laura Segato calls our attention to the war against women and how the new forms of fascism are aimed at the destruction of the women.[3] How can we engage pedagogies of liberation that help us engage and relate with this those being oppressed by it? How can we find tools, together, to understand it and create conditions of possibilities for transformation?

Our lives, and the life of our planet, depend on forever-expanding forms of conscientization that keep demanding freedom, and justice for every person. In this way, the work of Paulo Freire, developed by the work of women, indigenous voices and popular movements, can reach any and every school and community, connecting us deeply with the work of Martin Luther King who said "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." (*Letter from Birmingham Jail*)

[1] Oscar Soto, *Freire, Mariategui y una educación popular campesino*, Noviembre 22, 2018, <http://contrahegemoniaweb.com.ar/freire-mariategui-y-una-educacion-popular-campesina/>

[2] Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018).

[3] Rita Laura Segato, *La Guerra Contra Las Mujeres* (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2016).

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2019/01/pedagogy-of-the-oppressed-50th-anniversary-iva-paulo-freire/>