Peace Profile: Paulo Freire

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Practice needs theory and theory needs practice just like fish need clean water.
—Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire's work touched my life years before I ever remember hearing his name. In the summer of 1969 I was a U.S. high school student studying Spanish in Cuernavaca, Mexico. This school was like no other I had experienced; I noticed an exciting current, a vibrant spirit to the place that I had not witnessed before in an educational setting. It seemed odd that daily language lessons were mixed with evening discussions of individual and group responsibilities for social change, and that prominent figures from social movements were often in attendance ... but the discussions were interesting, the people fascinating, and the learning dynamic and exhilarating.

Not until 13 years later did I discover the context for my experience: the school was founded by education reformer Ivan Illich, and was considered a hotbed of radical education as espoused by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, whose approach to education was focused on the notion of lifelong learning for personal growth and social change.

When I left Cuernavaca that summer, my attitude toward life and education had drastically changed. Up to then, education had been something authority figures did to me; after my experience in Mexico I found that I insisted on directing my own learning for life. The experiences and resultant social consciousness from that summer helped define my activities and interests over the years, affecting my attitudes towards issues of social justice and my work as a media practitioner, and later influencing my academic pursuits. That summer, nearly three decades ago, I learned that learning itself was not so much about information (in my case, learning Spanish) as it was about a process of critically reflecting and interacting with the world. This shift to a manner of thinking and acting upon a personal and social knowledge, thus revealing a world of unlimited possibility, lies at the heart of Freire's life work. It makes it an important contribution to the work of social change.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who worked among the illiterate poor of Brazil in adult literacy education classes. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he began to develop a highly effective method of literacy instruction which drew from students' own social and political realities. After the military seized power in 1964, Freire's ideas were declared subversive. He was jailed, then spent 15 years in exile. These early teaching experiences formed the basis of his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He continued to refine his ideas through participation in national literacy and development projects around the world. From

1988 to 1991 Freire served as the Secretary of Education for the city of Sao Paulo, where he sought to create an institutional/societal culture of learning involving parents, teachers, staff, administrators, and the general community. He died in May of 1997.

Freire's 25 books, translated into 35 languages, address the political nature of education and pedagogy and its role in either subjugating or liberating human beings. "Pedagogy," for Freire, is broadly defined. It goes beyond simple classroom teaching techniques to include the entire process of lifelong learning and teaching engaged in by human beings. It is this scope that makes Freire's work relevant far beyond the confines of educational discourse. In fact the resonance of Freire's ideas with human experience and social structures across the globe have made his work required reading for activists seeking social and individual transformation in many different circumstances.

When speaking of a man who has died, custom often directs that he is spoken of in the past tense. However, when drawing from an author's written works it is possible to speak of him in the present, since the words and thoughts exist in the here and now. This latter approach feels more appropriate to me when talking about Paulo Freire, and is the perspective adopted throughout this essay.

In his work Freire describes a "culture of silence" endemic to oppressed groups, which is characterized by feelings of lethargy and helplessness, and the belief that a person is unable to shape his or her own social world. To Freire, this is the human as "object" acted upon by subjugating forces, and alienated from his world. He observed that this state of oppression is encouraged by social institutions, particularly the educational system, which he saw as cultivating uncritical acceptance of the *status quo* and perpetuating the "culture of silence."

Opposing human as "object" was a perception of human as "subject." Freire considered it a high evolutionary state for a human being to be a subject: to act upon and transform her world. He suggested that when geared toward the purposes of liberation, education and literacy could produce humans as subjects. Education could be an ongoing process through which people become aware of their own self-worth and their ability to transform their social reality. Freire called this process "conscientization," or critical consciousness.

Freire's way to achieve conscientization within a repressive educational structure is "problem posing:" a participatory process where the lines are blurred between student and teacher. In problem posing, a dialectical process emerges where the teacher teaches/learns and the students learn/teach. The teacher listens and asks questions, but is not the provider of the answer; students ask questions and supply possible answers, working as a group. When used in Freire's adult literacy program, the process involves the influence of a strong moderator who helps learners proceed from an acquiescent to a more critical approach to information and the structure of society. Rather than using topics and texts from outside the learners' cultural experience, the process allows them to draw from their daily lives. Photographs of scenes and events from their surroundings are analyzed; the personal and social meanings behind the images are then explored.

In Freire's process, discussion helps clarify the hidden system of values embedded in the photographs. Nothing is assumed as "obvious." Freire provides

an example in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where tenement residents are discussing a picture of a drunken man walking down a street where three young men are talking on the corner:

> The group participants commented that "the only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can't take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and souse like us."

The facilitator had intended to discuss the problems of alcoholism. Instead, the participants moved the discussion to their own needs and experiences, taking control of the interpretation of their own cultural images. From this point, the group will learn to read on the basis of the words and issues they themselves have raised.

Freire believes that as literacy develops, so too does a critical analysis of the forces controlling the lives of the oppressed. Empowerment ensues as those now "conscientized" understand their oppression, see their previous internalization of the values of the oppressor, understand their ability to change the reality of their lives, and move to assume control of their lives. This is truly "knowing," which, to Freire, involves "praxis:" the blending of theory and practice for the purpose of social change, a dialectical movement between action and reflection upon that action that leads to new action.

At first glance, it seems that Freire speaks exclusively to the educational community, but his attention is focused more on social transformation than educational philosophy. He addresses the mental frames, or systems of logic endemic to humans and their social systems, and seeks practices that will allow for the establishment of a transformative human experience.

Freire's notions include aspects of the works of, among others, Martin Heidegger (individual self-transformation), Karl Marx (historical and cultural analysis), Georg Hegel (dialectical reasoning), Herbert Marcuse (education and radical individual/social transformation), and John Dewey (reflective thinking within education for democratic purposes). Freire's concept of transformation is similar to those held by grassroots communities living a theology of liberation in the "popular," or "people's" Catholic church in Latin America, also organizing in the 1960s. His process of conscientization parallels the practice within liberation theology of studying the Bible as a gospel of liberation, and stressing reflection and social action at the grassroots level by individuals and groups.

When Freire's work has been adapted by groups around the world, the key element of social action often has yielded to a concentration on critical reflection. For example, Freire's conscientizing group is not to be mistaken for the "consciousness-raising group" that emerged in social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Traditionally the consciousness-raising group has focused primarily on reflection by group members on social responsibilities, while Freire's group moves from critical awareness to action that entails changing the power relationships within society.

Many contemporary radical educators drawing from Freire have also allowed the stringent criterion of societal action to recede from their purview. Instead,

they tend to emphasize only the critical awareness aspect of conscientization; awareness may or may not then translate into some sort of personal and/or social action.

In contrast, Freire's conscientization is based on action and reflection as part of the same dynamic process; awareness, self-reflection, and action constantly intermix in an upwardly spiraling process. Critics of Freire, exemplified by Peter Berger, argue that the conscientizing process places undue focus on the animator as the agent of empowerment, making the process akin to conversion, where members of the oppressor class serve as missionaries to the oppressed, resulting in a "cognitive imperialism." However, such a reading misses Freire's contention that the conscientizing process is not a one-way street, but involves the growth of both the oppressor and the oppressed; both come to an understanding of the dependent relationship both groups suffer. To act otherwise would treat the oppressed as objects and defeat the process of conscientization. Freire's problem-posing model described earlier avoids the imposition Berger addresses, since problems are identified and diagnosed by the learners themselves, and a dialectical relationship is encouraged between learners/teachers.

Feminist pedagogists, evidenced by discussions such as that in *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, note that Freire's earlier work fails to adequately address women, and that he unduly focuses on intellect and reasoning as paths toward empowerment, excluding other ways of knowing the world. After these critiques, Freire expanded his definitions of awareness and self-reflection to include a variety of methods though which humans interact with their world, and he agreed with critiques of gender bias in his early writings. In more recent discussions Freire cited feminism as helping to transform his work, and noted the expanded perspectives of oppression provided by the inclusion of race and gender analyses.

My own critique of Freire is that his notion of empowerment may focus unrealistically on societal change as a goal, rather than on societal change as an ongoing process that begins with individual and collective transformation. I interpret Freirean empowerment as a hierarchy that starts with an awareness of one's self and, through extension, of others and society in relation to the self. Higher levels of empowerment move beyond mere recognition to attempts to act upon these new awarenesses, and the highest level of empowerment is credited to attempts to change power relationships in society.

Judging awarenesses and actions, however, that address social inequities as the most desirable level of empowerment, as Freire does, places undue attention on the goal rather than the process of liberation. Social change is immensely complex, reflecting more of a dialectical relationship between the individual and the collective. A process orientation toward social change may be more helpful in understanding the nature of such change. In such a conceptualization an expanded individual awareness becomes part of a continuum of societal change that begins at a personal level. This is not part of a pluralist obsession with individualism; instead it eliminates the false dichotomy between conceptions of the individual and the collectivity, and posits a dynamic process of interaction between the individual and the collectivity.

I arrive at this position in part from my work with community media,

particularly from research I conducted regarding the nature of Freirean empowerment within the setting of community television (public access cable television channels) in the United States. When talking with community volunteer producers at the public access center, it seemed clear to me that Freire's criterion for the highest level of empowerment—direct social action—was not being addressed by most of the producers. However, it was equally obvious that all the people with whom I spoke had experienced deeply meaningful "empowering moments," times of simple awarenesses or actions involving themselves and other people that for ever changed their perceptions of the world. Daniel, a producer who had previously spoken about such an experience while working on programs with people outside his own ethnic background and sexual orientation, suggests how this change in perception might alter society:

> I don't know that I have made that much change in the community ... or the society in general, other than maybe have changed some of my outlooks on the community and I guess as a whole we're all part of that society so what changes I make may not be great. But it does have some bearing on how I interface in with the rest of society which I would hope would have an impact ...

Daniel is addressing connections he recognizes between his involvement with public access television and impacts on society as a whole. His response helps indicate the seemingly small shifts in awareness that contribute to societal transformation as part of an expansion of individual awareness and action within the context of the collectivity.

Paul sees a more direct link between participation in community television and societal change:

> Even if you aren't consciously changing things by their participation, they [public access producers] change the world. Just by their choosing to put that message on the air, and that message going out, people are going to change things—"no I don't agree with that—or I guess I do," and tell friends—it's like throwing a pebble in the pond. Every story is a pebble—and you can't even judge where those waves go. Simply the fact that those stories were told—and without access TV they would not have been—the world's been changed by what's been said. It's like any other criticism—to a degree—how much, how watched is it, how much do people learn? How much is the world changed?

Paul is stating that a lack of focus on overt social change by public access producers does not necessarily rule out the possibility that societal change is taking place. His response and those of other producers indicate a process that seems to move outward from the self to others and to society in terms of awareness, reflections upon this awareness, and, in a few cases, overt social action.

Conceptualizing social change primarily as a process does not contradict Freire; it merely redirects attention away from the goal of societal change and toward the process by which this change takes place. It is a recognition that society is transformed through the little cognitive awarenesses and actions by individuals within the collectivity, in much the same fashion that, as Paul states, a pebble spreads ripples which eventually encompass the entire pond.

The discussion here provides at least three indicators for democratic, progressive groups attempting to develop space conducive to Freirean

transformation on the individual, group, and/or societal levels. First, while the particular content issues addressed within the organization are important, attention also needs to focus on the structures and processes used by the group, with an eye to emphasizing inclusive dialogic procedures and structures. Freire argues that, more than learning specific information, people are learning a process. The lifeblood of conscientization is dialogic encounters, which are restricted by structures that reinforce the legitimacy of vertical, top-down hierarchies.

Second, groups and individuals need to maintain ongoing evaluation and corrective action, avoiding stagnation. Freire's praxis is a dynamic interplay between action, reflection upon that action, and action based on that reflection. His statement, "A progressive, postmodernist requirement is that we not be too certain of our certainties," suggests the importance of ongoing reflection and action.

Third, as part of this struggle for ongoing renewal, we can benefit from an understanding of the situations that encourage individual and collective growth, and then consciously create the opportunity for such learning moments. Freire describes moments—called "limit situations"—where a person and/or group faces a challenge; once overcome, these moments inspire hope and confidence to triumph in additional situations. These "empowering moments" of triumph, characterized by a shifted and/or heightened perception, are exhilarating and richly rewarding. Such moments also serve to keep individuals and groups invested in the transformative work of the organization.

And, of course, there is the vision. To Freire, without a dream, an idea of utopia, there is not sufficient reason even to initiate a progressive pedagogical practice.

These are some of the principles that lie at the heart of Paulo Freire's life work, reflecting 40 years of evolution and development. His philosophy transcends cultural and geographic boundaries, resonating solidly with people across the globe seeking more equitable social conditions. I hope that his work will continue to be nurtured, criticized, and transformed not only by those of us currently familiar with his ideas but by those who have yet to "meet" Freire.

Not that any formal introduction is necessary for us to have been touched by his life and his work. I experienced Freire's ideas long before I ever knew about him, and three decades later I find myself still reflecting and acting on his ideas. Others share similar experiences, refining the interplay between awareness, social action, reflection, and further action in an attempt to create a more equitable world community.

Like ripples on the pond …

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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