

Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought

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Freire, Paulo Reglus Neves (1921-1997) has achieved iconic status among educators and a whole range of cultural workers. Born in Recife (Pernambuco, N-E Brazil), Paulo Freire dedicated the best part of his life to combating social injustices. He suffered imprisonment and exile for his efforts in planning what was perceived as being a ‘subversive’ approach to literacy in Brazil in the early sixties. He moved briefly to Bolivia and then to Chile where he was engaged in an educational programme connected with the agrarian reform and later the USA where his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in English translation. He eventually went to Geneva where he worked for the World Council of Churches. He was frequently called upon by revolutionary governments, such as those in Guinea Bissau and Nicaragua, to assist them in developing and evaluating educational projects. He also used his sixteen year exile to work with different groups in Europe. Following his return to Brazil, he engaged in municipal educational administration in São Paulo. Many of his works were translated into English and other languages.

Freire’s celebrated, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is considered exemplary in the way it comprises reflections on the various contexts with which he was engaged. In this work Freire constantly provides theoretical formulations and insights from a variety of sources. Freire’s work emphasizes the political nature of education: education IS politics. For

Freire, education cannot be neutral; it can either ‘domesticate’ or ‘liberate.’ A liberating education enables learners to engage in a dialectical relationship with knowledge and society (Mayo, 1994, 2009).

A ‘top-to-bottom’ prescriptive process of teacher-student transmission constitutes a domesticating ‘banking education’. Freire advocates an authentically dialogical approach to knowledge. Although not being on an equal footing, teacher and learner learn from each other as they dialectically co-investigate the object of knowledge. The concept involved is *praxis*. It is central to Paulo Freire’s educational philosophy; learners and educators obtain critical distance from the world they know to perceive it in a critical light. The community is researched beforehand by a team of educators and project participants: informal meetings with community members, close observation of their speech patterns, obtaining knowledge of the community members’ concerns. The insights derived from this research are codified into learning materials to enable learners from the same community to collectively unveil the underlying social contradictions.

Freire places emphasis on the pedagogy of the question. Knowledge is problematized in a problem posing rather than a problem solving approach. Knowledge is therefore not something possessed by educators which they transfer to the learner but is explored collectively – dynamic knowledge. The approach is directive since learning is conceived of as a political act. The roles of educator and learner are almost interchangeable, as all learn from each other. The learner and educator are however not on an equal footing. The latter must have a certain amount of authority (bestowed on the educator by the learner because of the former’s competence in the field of learning and as a pedagogue) which should not be allowed to degenerate into authoritarianism. Only through dialogue

does the group learn collectively to unveil the contradictions. Adult educators are to show tact when promoting dialogical relations. They often alternate dialogue with instruction; people exposed for years to banking education do not engage in dialogue easily. The starting point is the learner's existential reality - not the be all and end all of the learning process, lest one lapses into populism. Educators must have enough humility to relearn, through their dialogic interactions with the learners, that which they think they already know.

Freire conceived of the educators and learners as "integral human beings" (Darder, 2002, p. 94) in an educational process based on love which marks the humanizing relationship between teacher and taught (teacher-student and student-teacher, in Freire's terms). It also drives the educator forward in teaching and working for the dismantling of dehumanizing structures.

And the entire pedagogical process practiced and articulated by Freire is based on his trust in human beings' ability to create "a world in which it will be easier to love" (Freire, 1970a, 1993, p.40; see Allman et. al, 1998, p. 9). Freire's concept of love has strong Christian overtones and revolutionary ones (Freire, 1970b, p. 45).

His influence has been enormous comprising areas as philosophy and sociology of education, theology, anthropology, communications, theatre studies and health studies. He has been influential among teachers, social workers and social movement activists such as those working in the Movement of Landless Peasants in Brazil (MST).

References

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