LETTER TO North-American Teachers

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My dear friend Ira Shor asked me to write a brief letter to the North-American teachers to whom this short collection of essays is primarily addressed.

I believe I should make a preliminary statement by which I will attempt to be consistent with my own ideas and to introduce a dialogic relation between me and the probable readers of this book. In no way do I want this letter to be an arrogant message from a Brazilian teacher to his North-American colleagues, nor am I making a subtle effort to give prescriptive advice. On the contrary, this letter has only one purpose--that of continuing the dialogue, begun so long ago and constantly being renewed, with countless North-American teachers. I would like to do this by repeating some reflections on the teacher's role that I presented recently in a seminar at UCLA.

One fundamental insight I want to stress now, ~~as I did~~ in the ~~seminar,~~ is that since education is by nature social, historical, and political, there is no way we can talk about some universal, unchanging role for the teacher. This point becomes very clear if we think about what has been expected of teachers in different times and places.

The idea of an identical and neutral role for all teachers could only be accepted by someone who was either naive or very clever. Such a person might affirm the neutrality of education, thinking of school as merely a kind of parenthesis whose essential structure was immune to the influences of social class, of gender, or of race.

It is impossible for me to believe that a history teacher who is racist and reactionary will carry out his or her task in the same way as another who is progressive and democratic. It is my basic conviction that a teacher must be fully cognizant of the political nature of his/her practice and assume responsibility for this rather than denying it.

When the teacher is seen as a political person, then the political nature of education requires that the teacher either serve whoever is in power or present options to those in power. The teacher who is critical of the current power in society needs to lessen the distance between the speeches he or she makes to describe political options and what she/he does in the classroom. In other words, to realize alternatives or choices, in the day-to-day classroom, the progressive teacher attempts to build coherence and consistency as a virtue. It is contradictory to proclaim progressive politics and then to practice authoritarianism or opportunism in the classroom. A progressive position requires democratic practice where authority never becomes authoritarianism, and where authority is never so reduced that it disappears in a climate of irresponsibility and license.

There is, however, one dimension of every teacher's role that is independent of political choice, whether progressive or reactionary. This is the act of teaching subject matter or content. It is unthinkable for a teacher to be in charge of a class without providing students with material relevant to the discipline. But if both progressive and reactionary are equal in their obligation to to teach, if both agree that it is unthinkable to be a teacher without teaching, nevertheless they will differ with regard to their

understanding of what teaching really is. They will differ in their pactice, in the way they teach. Professional competence, command of a subject or discipline, is never understood by the progressive teacher as something neutral. There is no such thing as a category called "professioal competence" all by itself. We must always ask ourselves: In favor of whom and of what do we use our technical competence?

At the risk of repeating myself, let me emphasize that a progressive teacher, in contrast to a reactionary one, is always endeavoring to reveal reality for her/his students, removing whatever keeps them from seeing clearly and critically. Such a teacher would never neglect course content simply to politicize students. From the progressive teacher's point of view, it is not some magic understanding of content by itself that liberates, nor does disregard for subject mattter liberate a student, as if political insight could be achieved all by itself. Political clarity is crucial but it is not enough by itself.

Whether a progressive teacher works in Latin America or in the United States, we cannot neglect the task of helping students become literate, choosing instead to spend most of the teaching time on political analysis. However, it is equally impossible to spend all of the class time on purely technical and linguistic questions, trusting that critical consciousness will follow as a result of being literate. Clearly, those who are illiterate need to learn how to read and write. However, reading and writing words encompasses the reading of the world, that is, the critical understanding of politics in the world, a fact I have noted many times in the past.

As I said above, progressive and reactionary teachers do have one thing in common--the act of teaching some course content. But if

they share this obligation to teach, their comprehension of teaching differs, and if they are consistent with their own views, their methods of teaching also differ.

Teaching from a progressive point of view is not simply the transmission of knowledge about an object or about some subject. This kind of transmission is usually a description of a concept or of an object, which is intended to be mechanially memorized by students. Also, from the progressive teacher's perspective, teaching students how to learn can never be reduced to some operation where the goal is merely how to learn. Teaching someone how to learn is only valid in a progressive class when the learners learn how to learn as they learn the inner meaning (the raison d'etre) of an object or subject of study. It is by teaching biology or economics that the teacher teaches students how to learn.

For progressive teachers, pedagogy implies, then, that the learners penetrate or enter into the discourse of the teacher, appropriating for themselves the deepest significance of the subject being taught. The indisputable responsibility of the teacher to teach is thus shared by the learners through their own act of intimately knowing what is taught.

And the progressive teacher only truly teaches to the degree that he or she has also appropriated the content of what is being taught, learning it critically for herself or himself. In this way, the act of teaching is an act of re-knowing an already known object. In other words, the teacher re-experiences his or her own capacity to know through the similar capacity to know that exists in the learners. To teach, then, is the form that knowing takes as the teacher searches for the particular way of teaching that will challenge and call forth

in students their own act of knowing. Thus, teaching is both creative and critical. It requires inventiveness and curiosity by both teacher and learner in the process.

To teach content in a way that will make subject matter appropriated by students implies the creation and exercise of serious intellectual discipline. Such discipline began forming long before schooling began. To believe that placing students in a learning milieu automatically creates a situation for critical knowing without this kind of discipline is a vain hope. Just as it is impossible to teach someone how to learn without teaching some content, it is also impossible to to teach intellectual discipline except through a practice of knowing that enables learners to become active and critical subjects, constantly increasing their critical abilities.

In the formation of this necessary discipline, the progressive teacher cannot identify the act of studying, learning, knowing with entertainment or game-playing that has very relaxed or nonexistent rules. Neither can it be identified with a learning milieu that is boring or unpleasant. The act of studying, learning, knowing is difficult and above all demanding. But, it is necessary for learners to discover and feel the inherent joy that is always ready to take hold of those who give themselves to the process of learning.

The teacher's role in nurturing this discipline and joy is enormous. Authority and competence both play a part. A teacher who does not take pedagogy seriously, who does not study, who teaches badly what she/he does not know well, who does not struggle to obtain the material conditions indispensable to education, that teacher is actively inhibiting the formation of intellectual discipline so essential to students. That teacher is also destroying herself/himself as a teacher.

On the other hand, this intellectual discipline is not the result of something the teacher does to the learners. Although the presence, the orientation, the stimulation, the authority, of the teacher are all essential, the discipline has to be built and internalized by the students. Therefore, any teacher who rigidly adheres to the routines set forth in teaching manuals is exercising authority in a way that inhibits the freedom of students, the freedom they need to exercise critical intelligence through which they appropriate the subject matter. Such a teacher is neither free nor able to help students become creative, curious people.

This collection of essays organized by Ira Shor is a testimony to creativity in the classroom. It deserves careful reading and study.

São Paulo

September 1986