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TEACHING AND SOCIAL CHANGE: REFLECTIONS ON A FREIREAN APPROACH IN A COLLEGE CLASSROOM*

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This paper reflects on the implementation of Paulo Freire's problem-posing method with community college students during the 1978/1979 academic year. The year-long course focused on the problem of the negative portrayal of Chicanos in the media, which led to a boycott of two "Chicano gang" films. I examine Freire's pedagogy and its application in the classroom, critique the process, and describe recent work applying the Freirean methodology in college classrooms. The paper considers the boycott's possible impact on the decline of Chicano gang films during the 1980s and the recent development of more positive films on the Chicano experience.

In March 1986, the Brazilian educator and social theorist Paulo Freire traveled to Southern California to hold a dialogue with educators and community organizers who were using—or who considered using—his problem-posing pedagogy. Having employed a Freirean method, I attended the meetings and decided to share my experience with other educators. This paper represents my reflections on the 1978–79 academic year, when I used Freire's problem-posing method with a group of students at a community college.

FREIRE'S PROBLEM-POSING METHOD

Freire's (1970, 1973) method starts from the premise that all education is political and thus schools are never neutral institutions. He asserts that schools either function to maintain and reproduce the existing social order or empower people to transform themselves and/or society. Freire argues that when schools domesticate, they socialize students into accepting as legitimate the ideology and values of society's dominant class. According to Freire (1970), schools use the "banking method" to domesticate students. When this approach is taken, students are viewed as passive receptacles waiting for knowledge to be deposited by the teacher. They are taught in a narrative format whereby the teacher

communicates with the students in one-way monologues. This approach can lead students to feel that their thoughts and ideas are not important enough to warrant a two-way dialogue with the teacher. Students also are dependent on the teacher for their acquisition of knowledge. Finally, teachers are seen as conduits through which the ideology and values of the dominant social class are transmitted to the students.

When schools liberate, however, students are viewed as subjects willing and able to act on their world. To create a liberating education, Freire developed the problem-posing method, in which a two-way dialogue of cooperation between the student and the teacher is the focus, content, and pedagogy of the classroom.

Freire's method includes three general phases: 1) identifying and naming the problem, 2) analyzing the causes of the problem, and 3) finding solutions to the problem (Freire 1970, 1973; Smith and Alschuler 1976).

In the naming phase, the educator enters the community or social setting. While in the community, she or he learns about the major issues and problems of the area by listening and speaking to the people and observing community life. After gathering the needed information, the educator develops generative codes. These codes are visual renditions—as in pictures, drawings, stories, articles, or films—of the significant themes or problems that have been identified. The codes are at the heart of the problem-posing process because they are used to begin critical dialogue among the participants.

In the second or analytic phase, the educator takes the codified theme and de-

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scribes and analyzes the causes of the problem through dialogue with students. In the final or solution phase, students—in collaboration with the educator—find and carry out solutions to the problem.

This process of reflecting and acting on one's reality by describing and defining a problem clearly, analyzing its causes, and acting to resolve it is the key element of the problem-posing method. Students are encouraged to view issues as problems that can be resolved, not as a reality to be accepted. Hence students feel that their ideas are recognized as legitimate and that the problem posed can be resolved in a constructive manner. In addition, students and teachers become dependent on each other for knowledge.

THE FREIREAN APPROACH IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

In the fall of 1978 I taught a cross-listed course called "Directed Practice in Social Welfare" at East Los Angeles College in the Sociology and Chicano Studies departments. East Los Angeles College is located about 10 miles east of downtown Los Angeles; in 1978 nearly 20,000 day and evening students attended. About 85 percent were Chicano students, generally from working-class homes in the greater East Los Angeles area. At that time the Chicano Studies department was one of the largest in the country, offering over 50 classes each semester in the day and evening programs.

The purpose of Directed Practice was to involve students in social and political activities in the greater East Los Angeles community. As part of the course, instructors placed students as volunteers in local elementary and secondary schools or in community service agencies. The students worked in the schools or agencies for at least three hours a week and met one day a week in class to discuss their experiences with other students. Although this approach had been shown to be an enriching experience for students, I wanted to integrate a Freirean problem-posing orientation into the class.

PHASE I: NAMING AND POSING THE PROBLEM

In Freirean style, I began the semester by engaging the students in a dialogue about social issues of concern to them and discuss-

ing how these issues affect their communities. Although such social problems as educational and occupational inequality were identified and discussed, the issue raised most frequently was the youth gang problem in the East Los Angeles neighborhoods. This emphasis was not surprising because gang incidents were, and are, portrayed continually in newspapers, television, and social science texts as a major social problem in the Chicano community (Heller 1966; Trujillo 1974; United States Commission on Civil Rights 1977, 1979). The importance that students placed on this issue also may have been due to the critical and economic success of Luis Valdez's 1978 play *Zoot Suit* (Wilson 1978). The play focused sensitively on the struggles of Pachuco gang youth during the early 1940s in Los Angeles.

By coincidence, in the first week of the fall 1978 semester (September 10) the *Los Angeles Times* ran the first of a three-part series on Chicanos in the mass media (Knoedelseder 1978). This article examined problems on the set of the Universal Studios film titled *Gang* (later renamed *Walk Proud*). The film depicted the story of a young Chicano gang member named Emilio—played by actor Robby Benson—who falls in love with a young white woman named Sarah. At Sarah's insistence and on discovering that his father is white (added at the insistence of Universal Pictures), Emilio leaves the gang (Knoedelseder 1978). The basic story line focused on the film's white characters helping Emilio to see the evil of his cultural (i.e., Chicano) ways. This theme of different cultures clashing was the basis for a preliminary discussion in the class. (Topical class discussions from multiple points of view were central to every stage of the process).

The initial *Los Angeles Times* articles briefly mentioned another film, *Boulevard Nights*, then in the early production phase for Warner Brothers Studios (Knoedelseder 1978; Wilson 1978). This film had a less offensive story line than *Walk Proud*. It examined intrafamily conflict: an older brother, Raymond, struggles to leave the gang and neighborhood and to become a member of a car club, while his younger brother, Chuco, remains a member of the gang.

Walk Proud and *Boulevard Nights* were not isolated releases. According to another *Times* article, these films—scheduled for 1979 release—represented two in a series of gang

films which included the following: *The Warriors* (February), *On the Edge* (May), *The Wanderers* (July), *Defiance* (August), and *The Gangs of New York* (Kilday 1978). Another movie in production titled *America Me*—specifically about a Chicano gang leader—apparently inspired the other projects (Kilday 1978).

Because of these articles, the class spent two weeks on the initial question: "What are some of the images of Chicanos in the mass media?" After reading and discussing the subsequent articles in the *Times* and collecting and discussing other visual and written materials on popular and professional Chicano stereotypes, the class decided that the negative portrayal of Chicanos in the mass media would be the main focus of the semester (see Council on Interracial Books for Children 1977; Martinez 1969; Trujillo 1974; United States Commission on Civil Rights 1977; Wilson 1978; Woll 1977). The students then posed the problem of the negative media image of Chicanos as two additional questions: "Why are Chicanos portrayed negatively in the mass media?" and "Whose interests are served by these negative portrayals of Chicanos?" To answer these questions, the class decided to conduct detailed case studies on the two Chicano gang films, *Boulevard Nights* and *Walk Proud*.

PHASE II: ANALYZING THE CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

After deciding on the problem, the students began to analyze the causes. From the beginning I believed that in order for students to critically understand the nature of any social problem, they had to possess the skills necessary to gather data and have a firm grasp of the theories used to interpret the data. The class decided to gather general information related to Chicanos in the media and Chicano gangs, plus specific information on the films *Boulevard Nights* and *Walk Proud*. To complete this task, students divided into three work groups.

The first group used the library to collect more information on the images of Chicanos in the media from both a contemporary and a historical perspective. They used the *Readers Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Sociological Abstracts*, the *Social Science Index*, the *Los Angeles Times Index*, and the *New York Times Index*. (Today they could also use the

Hispanic American Periodicals Index and the *Chicano Periodical Index*.) They also examined such Hollywood trade papers and magazines as *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Daily Variety*, and *American Film*. In addition, they discovered an excellent Chicano news monitoring service called COMEXAZ to gather background information from seven major newspapers in the southwestern United States.

A second group gathered public information data on youth gangs in East Los Angeles from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and the Los Angeles City Police Department. This group also examined different sociological theories of gang and deviant behavior (see Hernandez, Haug, and Wagner 1976; Mirande 1978; Moore 1978; Morales 1972; and Trujillo 1974). They also gathered first-hand information from youths involved in gang activity. To develop a demographic profile of Chicanos, this group analyzed census data from the 1970 Census publications for the United States, California, and the Los Angeles-Long Beach Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (United States Bureau of the Census 1972a, 1972b, 1972c, 1973).

A third group contacted and interviewed representatives of Universal Pictures and Warner Brothers Studios for further information on *Boulevard Nights* and *Walk Proud*. The studio's public relations department gave them a standard press packet on the film's background, shooting schedule, and expected release date. Students also contacted and interviewed Chicano community and professional organizations who were working as technical and script consultants on the two films (Barrios Unidos, Project Ayudate, the Imperials Car Club, and Nosotros). With the help of these groups, students could determine each organization's role in the film's production; some of the groups served as on-site security, while others supplied more technical and professional help. Finally, students contacted and interviewed community and professional groups who were beginning to challenge the negative role of Chicanos in the media, such as the Coalition of Mexicanos/Latinos Against Defamation (Morales 1978).

For two weeks the students analyzed and synthesized the statistical and anecdotal data and the theoretical explanations of the Chicanos' social conditions in the United States, California, and Los Angeles. When they compared their findings with the historical

and contemporary image of Chicanos in film and television, it became apparent that the entertainment industry was not concerned with accurate portrayals of Chicano social life. For example, it appeared that the data on Chicano youth gangs were being blown out of proportion. The students' research disclosed that the proportion of Chicano youth in gangs was not the 10 percent claimed by the electronic and print media, but closer to three percent (Morales 1972, 1978). This finding led the students to question the statistics of the Los Angeles County Sheriff and the Los Angeles City Police Department and related police practices regarding Chicano youth and youth gangs in the Los Angeles area.

In addition, through the visual imagery in television, films, newspapers, magazines, and textbooks, the students concluded that Chicanos were stereotyped disproportionately in subordinate and demeaning occupational and social roles such as bandits, thieves, and gangsters. Students also found negative Latino portrayals in films and in magazine and newspaper articles dating back to the turn of the century (Council on Interracial Books for Children 1977; Lamb 1975; Martinez 1969; Trujillo 1974; United States Commission on Civil Rights 1977, 1979; Woll 1977). This popular media portrayal seemed to reinforce the social scientific image of Chicanos as stereotypic social beings whose problems could be traced to a deficient or disadvantaged culture (Heller 1966).

PHASE III: FINDING SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

The students concluded that the Hollywood studios were not concerned with projecting a more positive image of Chicanos; their main concern was the profit that this genre of film could generate. Therefore one solution to the problem was to organize some public action against the Chicano youth gang films. The students decided that the action should achieve two goals: 1) to bring the attention of both the Chicano and the non-Chicano community to the problem of negative portrayal of Chicanos in the media, and 2) to stop the further release of media that reinforced a negative image of the Chicano population. After discussion, the students decided to organize a boycott and an information picket against the two films.

In an incident that reinforced the need for

organized action, the CBS program *60 Minutes* ran a segment on Chicano gangs in East Los Angeles, titled "The West Coast Story." This program (air date December 10, 1978) was seen as a negative and inaccurate portrayal of life in East Los Angeles, and drew criticism from community and professional organizations (Morales 1978). Dr. Armando Morales, the president of the Coalition of Mexicanos/Latinos Against Defamation, lodged a formal protest with Robert Salant, the president of CBS, criticizing the program's portrayal of Chicano youth. He asked for equal time to present "the ELA gang situation on '60 Minutes' in a more balanced, objective, and factual manner" (Morales 1978). CBS denied his request (Chandler 1978).

This incident reminded the students that they would be fighting a media giant, and that at least a formal campus organization would be needed as a base of support. The students approached MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos de Aztlan), the Chicano student organization of the East Los Angeles College (ELAC) campus, to discuss the project. The MECHA students decided to get involved, and they established the ad hoc Gang Exploitation Film Committee to oversee and support the project.

The Gang Exploitation Film Committee approached and received the support of the MECHA Central Committee of college and high school campuses in the Los Angeles area. In February 1979, the ELAC Committee took a plan of action to MECHA's statewide conference in Sacramento and received the endorsement of the state organization (Gang Exploitation Film Committee 1979). The Committee also took the plan to local community organizations to solicit their support for the boycott. Other MECHA chapters throughout California gathered support in their own areas. During this period a February 1979 article in the magazine *American Film*, titled "The Lowriders of Whittier Boulevard," confirmed our information on other scripts or ideas being considered for films, pending the financial and critical outcome of *Boulevard Nights* and *Walk Proud* (Jeffries 1979).

After examining the information collected on *Walk Proud*, the students felt that this film would be an easier target for the boycott. For unexplained reasons, however, Universal Pictures delayed the release of *Walk Proud*

until May 18, 1979. By default, the boycott shifted to March 21, the release date of *Boulevard Nights* (Schreger 1979). Students decided that *Boulevard Nights* symbolized a genre of films on Chicano youth gangs. They were protesting against the gang theme, and *Boulevard Nights* happened to be the first film of that genre to be released.

After a private screening of *Boulevard Nights*, *Nosotros*, a national Latino organization of media professionals, denounced the film one month before its opening (Warren 1979). (This organization, however, served as technical advisors in script and casting to *Walk Proud*; *Nuestro* 1979.)

At the opening of *Boulevard Nights* in West Los Angeles, over 100 students organized a picket line. The mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, entered the controversy by including and then deleting his name from the list of dignitaries planning to appear at the film's opening. He was to give the filmmaker a city proclamation honoring *Boulevard Nights* as "an instrument of peace" (Warren 1979). In addition, for the first three weeks of the film's run, boycotts and informational picket lines were conducted by local MECHA chapters and community organizations at theaters throughout southern and northern California. During this period television, radio, and newspaper media focused on the problems of Chicano stereotypes in the mass media. After a stabbing and shooting at a San Francisco theater showing *Boulevard Nights*, Mayor Diane Feinstein requested that the film be removed from the theater (Grant 1979a, 1979b). Gang-related incidents also caused the film to be canceled in Pomona (Landsbaum 1979).

Despite the boycott, the picket lines, and generally negative publicity, *Boulevard Nights* had a somewhat successful run. The reviews of the film were mixed; the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* film critic called it "as Latino in flavor as a Jack-in-the-box taco" (Sagrow 1979). The *Los Angeles Times* critic was kinder, referring to the film "as entertaining and admirable as a use of the medium" (Champlin 1979). An editorial writer for the *Herald Examiner* said, "Were this a book, it might qualify as the Great Mexican-American Novel" (Castro 1979). A *Times* editorial writer called the film a "thoughtful attempt to portray a subculture that Americans have heard much about but know very little." The

writer criticized the film, however, for making "no attempt to show the pathetic state of many schools in East Los Angeles . . . it's these schools that help create gang members by turning off young Chicanos with insensitive or ill-trained teachers and outmoded or irrelevant study programs, all of which contribute to high drop-out rates" (Del Olmo 1979). Another *Times* staff writer claimed, "Groups both within the film industry and on its edges are monitoring the gang films . . . there's the question of whether they'll make more . . . no one has announced another gang film." The writer also quoted a Universal Pictures spokesperson, who said, "It's possible that adverse reaction by the splinter groups may very well turn the studios sour about films relating to these groups" (Schreger 1979).

Despite the controversy, Universal Pictures released *Walk Proud* in May 1979. Without explanation, however, the film was not released in any of the major Latino media markets in the southwest United States. Furthermore, none of the other Chicano gang genre movies cited in the *American Film* article were released to the general public (Jeffries 1979).

After the action was complete, the ELAC committee went before the California MECHA organization to report on its successes and failures. It was clear that as an informational tactic, the word on negative stereotypes of Chicanos in the media had been projected to the general public in an organized and documented fashion. Many students also credited the committee with doing something positive about the release of these negative films. It was also clear, however, that *Boulevard Nights* received free publicity; and many people felt that the action brought too much attention to a "B" film. Other students argued that the committee had called negative attention to Latino actors who were only trying to showcase their professional talent, albeit in negative roles. To reinforce this point, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted a Universal Pictures senior vice-president as saying, "In the end, it may very well hurt the job market for (Hispanic) actors and technical people who work in these pictures" (Schreger 1979). The tactical question of whether to take action, or what type of action to take, must be discussed and dealt with if the problem-posing process is to be effective.

Because of the publicity and the action by

the studio, the boycott was fulfilling its two major goals: first, to bring the negative image of Chicanos in the media to the attention of both the Chicano and the non-Chicano community, and second, to stop (albeit temporarily) the further release of media that reinforced a negative image of the Chicano population.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEM-POSING PROCESS

The Hollywood studios' decision to put the Chicano youth gang theme on the back burner was probably based on a sound financial decision. Though the students and the community members could not take full credit for this decision, their actions surely had some effect (see Schreger 1979).

From their interactions with a variety of people, it was apparent that the students developed commitment to and confidence in their own ideas, as well as research, organizational, and communication skills to test those ideas. They had become empowered for the "moment." In that moment they had exposed the larger community to an organized group of people who felt, acted, and succeeded in doing something they considered positive about a genre of films that reinforced the negative stereotypes of Chicano youth. As an educator I can only hope that the students' critical curiosity, their new problem-solving skills, and the related sense of empowerment remain with them as they meet other personal and social problems. If they do remain, the Freirean approach has achieved its major goal of empowering students to reflect and act on real-life problems on a sustained basis.

Moreover, to my knowledge—as of summer 1988—no major motion picture studio has released a major film exclusively on Chicano youth gangs. (Although Chicano gangs are a part of the plot, the major focus of *Colors* (1988) is on black gangs in Los Angeles.) For 10 years the image of Chicanos in major films was largely ignored or remained on the periphery, but in the recent films *La Bamba* (1987), *Born in East L.A.* (1987), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), and *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1988), the major themes and characters are Latino-oriented. The Latino characters range from the narrow and stereotypic to the broad and profound; the messages are relevant and positive. In addition,

in recent minor films such as *Zoot Suit* (1981), *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortes* (1982), *El Norte* (1983), and *Latino* (1985), the Latino roles have depth and range; the overall image and messages are relevant, positive, and powerful (Keller 1985). Because of the nature and number of these Latino-related films, this period should be seen as a significant benchmark in Chicano filmmaking.

CRITIQUE OF THE PROBLEM-POSING PROCESS

Several problems emerged both during and after the course. The first problem concerned students who felt uncomfortable with the critical nature of the Freirean pedagogy. As a personal policy, I do not require students to participate in activities to which they feel strongly opposed. Usually I offer alternative ways of meeting the course requirements. In this course, three students reacted negatively to Paulo Freire's radical theory and chose not to participate in any of the political activity. In preparation for each of our discussions, however, I successfully challenged them to bring to the class alternative views on the topics. These challenges supplied important learning exercises for the other students, who later would meet similar skeptics on the picket line and in the press.

A second problem concerned Freire's "action" phase. Because it is the students who decide what actions to take, their range of responses to the problem posed has included the action described in this paper, letter-writing campaigns, and discussions of the problem in class with no outside action. I believe that to understand the problem posed and to empower students, one must take action on the problem and reflect critically on the action taken. Therefore it is my responsibility as the coordinator to challenge students to resist passivity, to take a more active role in their education generally, and to address the specific social problems they have identified. In some of my courses I have failed to do this, but, as most educators know, each class has a different personality and will react to issues differently.

A third problem relates to time; I had the benefit of working with a group of students for two semesters. The action I describe in the paper might not work as effectively in a 10-week quarter or a 16-week semester.

The final problem concerns control of the

course; in the Freirean method, the teacher loses much of the control of the classroom. At first I found this situation very disorienting, but as I watched and encouraged students to take control of the course, some of the stability returned.

Despite these problems, the approach described in this paper is a pedagogic method for examining critically and taking action on social problems that students view as significant. Therefore the method can be used—with modifications—in such sociology courses as social problems, social change, and race, ethnic, and gender relations.

CONCLUSIONS

When I worked on this project 10 years ago, only a small number of educators were using the Freirean method in college- and community-based settings. Since that time the number has increased modestly to include Shor's work with college students in an English curriculum (Shor 1980; Shor and Freire 1987); Fiore and Elasser (1982) and Holzman (1988) in advanced literacy; Wallerstein's (1983) work with English as a second language for adult students; Hodder (1980) in art education; Frankenstein (1983) in the mathematics curriculum; Moriarity and Wallerstein's (1980) work in teacher training and staff development; Crawford-Lange (1981) in foreign language instruction; and Alschuler (1980) in school discipline. Mackie (1981) is a good source for understanding Freirean pedagogy critically, albeit sympathetically. Freire's most recent collaborative works with Macedo and Shor on the politics of education, adult literacy, and transforming education are up-to-date references on the current state of the method (Freire 1985; Freire and Macedo 1987; Shor and Freire 1987). Also, the publication *Radical Teacher* consistently has information on Freirean pedagogy. Although I'm not sure they still exist, the newsletters *Educacion Liberadora (Liberating Education)* and *Second Thoughts* were excellent sources for people networking in the Freirean method.

Finally, Herbert Gintis (1984) states, "The political economy of learning . . . is based on the principle that learning occurs most effectively, and with the greatest positive acceptance on the part of the learners, when the educational environment empowers the learners, and engages them in the active exercise of their individual and collective

powers." In this paper I have tried to show that the problem-posing approach has the potential to challenge the problem posed, and to engage, challenge, and empower the students who pose it and the educators who initiate the process.

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