

Paulo Freire, Education and Transformative Social Justice Learning¹

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Abstract

Freire addresses a serious dilemma of democracy, the constitution of democratic citizenship. He suggested in the sixties a model of diversity and crossing borders in education which became a central tenet in the discussion of transformative social justice learning. As a social, political and pedagogical practice, transformative social justice learning will take place when people reach a deeper, richer, more textured understanding of themselves and of their world and when they are prepared to act upon this new understanding. Based on the normative assumptions of critical theory that most social exchanges involve a relationship of domination, and that language constitutes identities, from a meaning making or symbolic perspective, transformative social justice learning attempts to recreate the various theoretical contexts for the examination of rituals, myths, icons, totems, symbols, and taboos in education and society seeking to understand and transform social agency and structures.

Keywords: Transformative Social Justice Learning, Paulo Freire, conscientização.

Freire addresses a serious dilemma of democracy, the constitution of a democratic citizenship. Second, he has advanced in the sixties, quite early compared with the postmodernist preoccupations of the eighties, the question of diversity and border crossing in education, central tenets of transformative social justice learning. Freire taught us that domination, aggression and violence are intrinsic part of human and social life. Freire argued that few human encounters are except of one type of oppression or another; by virtue of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, people tend to be victims or perpetrators of oppression. Thus, for Freire, sexism, racism, and class exploitation are the most salient forms of domination. Yet exploitation and domination exist on other grounds including religious beliefs, political affiliation, national origin, age, size, and physical and intellectual abilities to name just a few. ⁱ

Starting from a psychology of oppression influenced by psychotherapists like Freud, Jung, Adler, Fanon and Fromm, Freire developed a pedagogy of the oppressed. With the spirit of the Enlightenment, he believed in education as a means to improve the human condition, confronting the effects of a psychology and a sociology of oppression, contributing ultimately to what Freire considered the ontological vocation of the human race: humanization. In the introduction to his highly acclaimed Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire states, "From these pages I hope it is clear my trust in

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the people, my faith in men and women, and my faith in the creation of a world in which it will be easier to love."ⁱⁱⁱ

Freire was known as a philosopher and a theoretician of education in the critical perspective; an intellectual who never separated theory from practice. In Politics and Education he forcefully states that "Authoritarianism is like necrophilia, while a coherent democratic project is biophilia."ⁱⁱⁱ *It is from this epistemological standpoint that Freire's contribution resonates as basic foundation for transformative social justice learning.* The notion of democracy entails the notion of a democratic citizenship in which agents *are active participants in the democratic process*, able to choose their representatives as well as to monitor their performance. These are not only political but also pedagogical practices because the construction of the democratic citizen implies the construction of a pedagogic subject. Individuals are not, by nature themselves, ready to participate in politics. They have to be educated in democratic politics in a number of ways, including normative grounding, ethical behavior, knowledge of the democratic process, and technical performance. The construction of the pedagogic subject is a central conceptual problem, a dilemma of democracy. To put it simply: democracy implies a process of participation where all are considered equal. However, education involves a process whereby the 'immature' are brought to identify with the principles and life forms of the 'mature' members of society.

Thus, the process of construction of the democratic pedagogic subject is a process of cultural nurturing, involving cultivating principles of pedagogic and democratic socialization in subjects who are neither tabula rasa in cognitive or ethical terms, nor fully equipped for the exercise of their democratic rights and obligations.^{iv} Yet in the construction of modern polities, the constitution of a pedagogical democratic subject is predicated on grounds that are, paradoxically, a precondition but also the result of previous experiences and policies of national solidarity (including citizenship, competence-building and collaboration).^v

A second major contribution of Freire is his thesis advanced in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and reiterated in countless writings, that the pedagogical subjects of the educational process are not homogeneous citizens but culturally diverse individuals. From his notion of cultural diversity, he identified the notion of crossing borders in education suggesting that there is an ethical imperative to cross borders if we attempt to educate for empowerment and not for oppression. Crossing the lines of difference is, indeed, a central dilemma of transformative social justice learning.

How can we define transformative social justice learning from a Freirean perspective? As a social, political and pedagogical practice, transformative social justice learning will take place when people reach a deeper, richer, more textured and nuanced understanding of themselves and their world. Not in vain Freire always advocated the simultaneous reading of the world and of the word. Based on a key assumption of critical theory that all social relationships involve a relationship of domination, and that language constitutes identities, transformative social justice learning, from a meaning making or symbolic perspective, is an attempt to recreate the various theoretical contexts for the examination of rituals, myths, icons, totems, symbols, and taboos in education and society, an

examination of the uneasy dialectic between agency and structure, setting forward a process of transformation.

Language constitute identities. However language works through narratives and narrations, themselves the product of social constructions of individuals and institutions. Social constructions which need to be carefully inspected, both at their normative as well as at their conceptual and analytical levels. From a sociological perspective, transformative social justice learning entails an examination of systems, organizational processes, institutional dynamics, rules, mores, and regulations, including prevailing traditions and customs, that is to say, key structures which by definition reflect human interest.

Though they represent the core of human interests, expressing the dynamics of wealth, power, prestige and privilege in society, these structures constrain but also enable human agency. Therefore, a model of transformative social justice learning should be based on unveiling the conditions of alienation and exploitation in society. That is, creating the basis for the *understanding and comprehension* of the roots of social behavior and its implications in culture and nature. This understanding could be enhanced if one considers both the theoretical contributions of Pierre Bourdieu on habitat and habitus, and how social capital impacts and is impacted by the construction of ideology in education.^{vi} Likewise, one may resort to Basil Bernstein's analysis of class, codes and controls, which offer, particularly linked to class analysis, an horizontal and a vertical modelling of social interactions in education.^{vii}

Transformative social justice learning is a teaching and learning model that calls on people to develop a process of social and individual conscientization. A process encapsulated in the famous term of 'conscientização,' popularized in the sixties in Brazil by the Bishop of Olinda and Recife Helder Camara. Paulo Freire himself adopted the notion of conscientização at some point in his work calling for a comprehensive challenge to authoritarian and banking education, but he gave up its use when he saw that it was being employed as a ruse to mask the implementation of instrumental rationality under the guise of radical education.^{viii}

Reclaiming conscientização as a method and substantive proposal for transformative social justice learning entails a model of social analysis and social change that challenges most of the basic articulating principles of capitalism, including frivolous hierarchies, inequalities and inequities. This poses an interesting contradiction in teachers' training. One may argue that a principle of social organization of schooling in capitalist society is to reproduce the conditions of production of such society, hence how could one advocate and in fact produce social change?^{ix}

Conscientização is not only a process of social transformation. Conscientização is also an invitation to self-learning and self-transformation in its most spiritual and psychoanalytical meaning. A process in which our past may not wholly condition our present. A dynamic process which assumes that by rethinking our past, we can fundamentally gain an understanding of the formation of our own self, the roots of our present condition, and the limits as well as the possibilities of our being a self-in-the-world, reaching the 'inedito viable', that powerful concept elaborated by Freire in the sixties.^x

Thus conscientização as a process of social introspection and self-reflectivity of researchers, practitioners and activists invites us to develop a permanent ethical attitude of epistemological and ethical self-vigilance. Concientização invites us to be agencies of social transformation facing potentially transformable structures. To this extent the notion of dialogue, so well developed in the Freirean opus, becomes an agonistic tool of social agency, critically emblematic of its limits and possibilities.

Dialogue appears not only as a pedagogical tool, but also as a method of deconstruction of the way pedagogical and political discourses are constructed.^{xi} More than thirty years after Freire's main books were published,^{xii} the concept of dialogical education which challenges the positivistic value judgement-empirical judgement distinction appears as a democratic tool for dealing with complex cultural conflicts in the context of unequal and combined development of Latin American education though its applicability in industrial advanced societies could be documented by many experiences.

In summary, Freire's contribution provided us with a pedagogy that expanded our perception of the world, nurtured our commitment to social transformation, illuminated our understanding of the causes and consequences of human suffering, and inspired as well an enlivened ethical and utopic pedagogy for social change. With Freire's death we were left with the memory of his gestures, his passionate voice, his prophetic face accentuated by his long white beard, and with his marvelous books of Socratic dialogue.

As an appreciation and celebration of his work, and his contributions to transformative social justice learning, I would like to quote Paulo Freire himself when he spoke at the University of San Luis, Argentina, in 1996. He remarked: "...as an educator, a politician, and a man who constantly re-thinks his educational praxis, I remain profoundly hopeful. I reject immobilization, apathy, and silence. I said in my last book, which is now being translated in Mexico, that I am not merely hopeful out of capriciousness, but because hope is an imperative of human nature. It is not possible to live in plenitude without hope. Conserve the hope."^{xiii} A mystique of hope is another fundamental principle of transformative social justice learning.

ⁱ In this paper I focus on transformative social justice learning but I am aware that this construct needs to be enriched reflecting the diversity of oppressive situations.

ⁱⁱ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Montevideo, Editorial Tierra Nueva, 1972, page 19.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy and Politics*. Los Angeles, Latin American Center, 1998, p. 56.

^{iv} We are thankful to Walter Feinberg for this suggestion in personal communication to the author.

^v O'Cadiz, M. P., and C. A. Torres. "Literacy, Social Movements, and Class Consciousness: Paths from Freire and the São Paulo Experience." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 25, no. 3, 1994; Torres, C. A. *Pedagogia da luta. De la pedagogia do oprimido a la educación publica popular*. São Paulo, Brazil: Cortes Editores and Institute Paulo Freire, 1998; Pilar O'Cadiz, Pía Linquist Wong, and Carlos Alberto Torres. *Democracy and Education. Paulo Freire, social Movements, and Educational Reform in São Paulo*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998.

^{vi} See Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction, critique sociale du jugement*, Minuit, 1979. See also the 30th anniversary edition of Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*. New York, Routledge, 2003.

^{vii} Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control* (4 volumes). London, Routledge, several years.

^{viii} See Carlos Alberto Torres Torres, C. A. *Education, Power and Personal Biography: Dialogues with Critical Educators*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

^{ix} Carlos Alberto Torres, "Schooling in Capitalist America: Theater of the Oppressor or the Oppressed?" In Dennis Carlson and Greg Dimitriadis (editors), *Promises to Keep: Cultural Studies, Democratic Education, and Public Life*. New York, Routledge, 2002, pages 263-275.

^x Jose Eustaquio Romão aptly distinguished three sociological categories associated to Freire's notion of the '*inédito viable*', *incompletude* (incompleteness), *inconclusão* (inconclusiveness), and *inacabamento* (unfinishness). "Pedagogia Sociológica ou Sociologia Pedagógica." Paper presented to the Mid-Term Conference of the Research Committee of Sociology of Education, International Sociological Association, Lisbon, Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias, September 18-20, 2003. See also Isabel Bohorquez "Lo inédito Viable en Paulo Freire. Tras el perfil de un sueño." Cordoba, Argentina, unpublished paper.

^{xi} See Carlos Alberto Torres and Adriana Puiggrós editors, Education in Latin America: Comparative Perspectives. Boulder, Colorado, Westview University Press, 1996.

^{xii} Paulo Freire, La educación como práctica de la libertad, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 1978; Pedagogía del Oprimido. Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 1978; Carlos Alberto Torres, Estudios freireanos. Buenos Aires, Ediciones del Quirquincho, 1994.

^{xiii} Varios. El grito manso, Paulo Freire en la Universidad de San Luis. Unpublished manuscript, 1996.