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# Critical Literacy, Breadth of Perspective and Universities: applying insights from Freire

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper considers one feature of recent debates over core curricula and canons in higher education—the problem of finding the right balance between breadth and depth in reading—from a Freirean point of view. The paper falls into two major parts: the first explores the Freirean notion of critical literacy; the second applies Freire's ideas to the question of what, how and why students in universities ought to read. Freire promotes a dynamic linking of 'word' with 'world'. Critical reading, for Freire, demands a restless, curious, probing stance toward both texts and contexts. While Freire advocates a slow, careful, in-depth approach to the study of texts, he also stresses the importance of encountering and addressing a broad range of theoretical perspectives. Noting the importance of time in planning reading requirements, the author sketches three levels at which a core course based on Freirean principles might proceed. At each level, the aim is to enhance breadth of perspective through critical reading. Freirean critical literacy is seen as both the ideal on which core courses might be founded and the means through which students might go beyond such courses to other worthwhile forms of learning.*

The question of what, how and why students ought to read in universities has become a major topic for scholarly and popular discussion in recent years [1]. In the USA particularly, debates over 'the canon' and core 'Western Civilisation' courses have been furiously waged against the background of wider controversies over 'political correctness'. Two broad oppositional groups in the battle over canons and core curricula can be identified. First, there are those who seek to defend a 'traditional' programme of 'Great Books', concentrating on philosophical works by Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx and Nietzsche, among others, together with literary classics by Shakespeare, Proust, Dickens, Milton, Joyce, Tolstoy, etc. Opposing the traditionalists is a coalition of diverse reformists calling for representation of a wider variety of authors (more women, more authors from ethnic minority groups, and so on) in core reading lists. While many dimensions of the controversy over the university curriculum are of interest to educationists, this paper concentrates on the problem of finding the correct balance between breadth and depth in reading. This issue will be addressed from a Freirean point of view.

Paulo Freire first gained international acclaim for his efforts in adult literacy education in Brazil. The dynamic synthesis of theory and practice in Freirean pedagogy has served as a model for other educators committed to the transformation of oppressive social conditions over the past two decades. While Freire's practical work with Brazilian and Chilean adults has attracted extensive comment [2], his later (post-1980) theoretical work on literacy has been less thoroughly investigated in the literature. To date, few scholars have incorporated ideas

from Freire in discussing questions about 'Great Books' and core curricula in universities. When Freire's name is mentioned, there is, for many people, an immediate association with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and with themes such as 'revolution', 'conscientisation', and 'the Third World' [3]. The relative invisibility of Freirean theory might also be partially attributable to Freire's somewhat disjointed treatment of higher educational issues; with one important exception [4], Freire has never undertaken a detailed, systematic analysis of universities (in either their historical or contemporary forms) or other tertiary institutions. This may be frustrating for those seeking an integrated analysis of higher education from a Freirean point of view. Freire has not analysed, or even commented on, contemporary debates over 'Western Civilisation' courses, the canon, and political correctness. In considering the contribution a Freirean perspective might make to such debates, therefore, much must be drawn by inference. With so many rigorous studies of controversies in this area already available it is perhaps hardly surprising that so few references to Freire's writings have been made.

What, then, does Freire have to offer? While there are arguably many features of Freire's work which might be of value to educationists and others with an interest in universities [5], this article limits its focus to the Freirean concept of critical literacy. The paper comprises two broad parts. Beginning with the notion of 'reading the word and the world', the first part of the article explores Freire's approach to reading and the act of study. Freire encourages readers to adopt an investigative, inquiring, questioning posture. Critical reading, for Freire, is a demanding but potentially joyous process, in which 'texts' are related to 'contexts', and through which the reader's understanding of social reality is progressively deepened and extended. The second part of the paper addresses the question of how depth might be balanced with breadth in core courses based upon the Freirean ideal of critical literacy. It is argued that if the constraints imposed by time are to be properly recognised in the curriculum, university teachers need to reduce the number of texts on core reading lists to a minimum while nevertheless attempting to enhance breadth in theoretical perspective. A three-tiered proposal for addressing this objective is advanced.

### Freirean Critical Literacy

In the past decade, the notion of 'critical literacy' has gained increasing prominence in discussions of reading, writing and education. While the term has been employed in a number of different ways, two major perspectives can be distinguished in the existing literature. The first draws on Freirean, neo-Marxist, and other radical strands of modernist social criticism; the second develops ideas from discourse analysis, the work of theorists such as Halliday and Gee, post-structuralist currents in literary theory, and post-modernist scholarship in a variety of fields [6]. This article concentrates exclusively on the Freirean view of critical literacy [7]. Freire's position is elaborated through three related themes: the notion of reading the word and the world; reading and the act of knowing; and the theory-practice link in Freirean critical literacy.

#### *Reading the Word and the World*

In the past decade, Freire's central theoretical construct (as far as literacy is concerned) has been the notion of 'reading the word and the world'. In his essay, 'The importance of the act of reading' [8], Freire discusses the way in which his early experience of learning to read words and books was preceded by a certain awareness or growing understanding—i.e. a form of 'reading'—of the world around him. Freire describes the house in Recife where he grew

up, with its bedrooms, hall, attic and terrace. He talks about his backyard, his mother's ferns, and the trees surrounding the house. It was in this world that he first learned to walk, to talk—and to read.

Truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perceptual activity, and therefore as the world of my first reading. The *texts*, the *words*, the *letters* of that context were incarnated in a series of things, objects, signs. In perceiving these, I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perceptual capacity increased [9].

Freire paints a picture of a rich world of early observations and activities. He speaks of the songs of the different birds in his area, of the movements in the sky, of the changing of the mango as it ripens, of the habits of the family animals, of the 'ghosts' which were said to haunt the neighbourhood. All of these experiences formed a deep impression on Freire. His reading of this world—his emerging interpretation and understanding of his surroundings—was accompanied by a form of 'writing' reality [10]. For it was not only the trees, the animals, the clouds, and the ghosts which imprinted themselves on Freire's inner world of experience (and which remained with him as he grew older); Freire himself, as a young boy growing up in his house, his backyard, and his neighbourhood in Recife, played a part in shaping, or 'writing', that world. Freire expresses this process as follows: '... reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but a certain form of *writing* it or *re-writing* it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious practical work' [11]. When it became time for Freire's parents to introduce him to the world of print, his learning of the *word* was a simultaneous extension of his reading of the world. He recalls,

I learned to read and write on the ground of the back yard of my house, in the shade of mango trees, with words from my world rather than from the wider world of my parents. The earth was my blackboard; sticks, my chalk [12].

Of course, Freire does not claim that his reading of either the word or the world at this stage was an especially critical one; indeed, he makes it plain that his encounter with these early forms of experience 'did not make ... [him] grow up prematurely, a rationalist in boy's clothing' [13]. But the seeds were sown for the development of his later work with adult illiterates. Reading and writing, Freire discovered at an early age, only make sense when they relate to something within the realm of a person's lived experience [14]. It was the expression of a *curious* attitude toward the world which characterised Freire's reading of his childhood environment. This curiosity forms the basis of a deepening restlessness—a searching—which is essential for the formation of a critical approach in reading the word and the world [15].

Reading the world, Freire argues, is always *prior* to reading the word [16]. Freire's conceptualisation of the sequence of experiences—reading the world first and the word second—has an anthropological and historical basis. Human beings first learned to act on their environment, using and modifying the products of nature, altering the material world. Freire conceives of this transformation of the objective world as a form of 'writing reality' [17]. As humans began to change the natural world, the reality they had created through conscious practical activity 'acted back' on them, modifying their ideas, conceptions and attitudes [18]. From this process of continual reciprocal transformation, human beings emerged as 'writers' and 'readers' of the world—long before they became writers and readers of the word [19]. The same ordering of moments in human experience occurs within the individual human being. The child first learns to relate to his or her environment, then to speak and communicate with others. It is only at this point—once a complex but as yet incomplete relationship with the world and others has been established—that the child

becomes ready to learn to read and write. Freire's preference for basing literacy on the lived histories and experiences of learners is thus grounded in an understanding of human evolution and development.

### *Critical Reading as an Act of Knowing*

Freire makes it clear that he is opposed to a mechanistic approach to reading and writing. Simply learning how to copy words, combine syllables, form sentences, or structure paragraphs, becomes—at best—a lifeless exercise in drill and memorisation. At worst, such a strategy represents a manipulative exercise in domestication: it signifies an attempt to impede the possibility of dealing critically with words, and it effectively precludes the possibility of moving beyond the words to a critique of (social and political) reality. For Freire, a mechanistic approach to the written word—where learners are encouraged to repeat phrases, to memorise words, to learn the techniques for making sentences, without at the same time going beyond mere technique and memorisation to a critical engagement with the text and the world—does not constitute an act of knowing [20]. Knowing demands a conscious effort to get beneath the surface of the object of study—whether in the process of reading the word or in the act of reading the world—to uncover deeper and deeper layers of meaning. Reading, in Freire's view, is 'not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them' [21].

Taking a critical approach to reading involves 'seizing' the text and 'wrestling' with its ideas and themes: 'The thing is to fight with the text, even though loving it ... To engage in a conflict with the text' [22]. Adopting such a stance requires a (considerable) degree of intellectual discipline, which Freire believes can only be acquired through practice [23]. 'Banking' education is by nature antithetical to critical reading: it depends for its very existence on passivity in the act of study [24]. While under the banking system the student waits to be 'given' the meaning, the answers, or the message behind a text, under problem-posing education active *engagement* with an author's ideas is encouraged from the very setting up of a 'problem' to be (dialogically) investigated in the first place.

From Freire's point of view, a reader ought to assume the role of a *Subject* in approaching a text. He or she should never simply *accept* what has been presented in a book, as though 'mesmerized by a magical force' [25]. The act of reading demands a 'permanent intellectual disquiet' [26]: a curious, restless, probing, searching, questioning approach to study. For Freire, a critical posture also requires a sense of modesty. Notwithstanding the imperative to challenge the text, a reader ought to be humble enough—and sufficiently *critical*—to recognise (and respond to) difficulties in interpretation and understanding [27].

### *Theory and Practice in Freirean Critical Literacy*

Freire is critical of the artificial separation of 'word' and 'world' in North American educational institutions. Economic crises, discrimination, struggle: all of these things, Freire points out, features of the social world, but rarely do they become the object of critical reading, study and debate within schools [28]. Students seldom transcend a surface-level understanding of either the word (i.e. school texts) or the world (i.e. social and political reality outside the classroom). The emphasis in schooling is on description rather than interpretation and critical understanding. This tendency reinforces the split between the word and the world for those responsible for teaching the students, with teachers and academics becoming ever more preoccupied with concepts and increasingly less interested in social transformation. Freire gives the example of theorists who call themselves Marxists, but who 'have never drunk coffee in the house of a worker' [29]. The gulf between theory and practice



in such cases is, for Freire, intolerable. Dealing with the word-world relationship in this way, Freire claims, amounts to nothing more than theoretical 'play': theorists become 'Marx experts' but not 'Marxists' [30].

Freire is similarly scathing in his attack on the myth of neutrality in the teaching of reading and writing. Working with texts is, in Freire's view, never a neutral process. Students are often encouraged to simply *describe* what they see in a text, in the belief that if they are to be 'scientific' (or 'objective') they must avoid *interpreting* the material [31]. The better one is able to avoid clouding investigation with 'political' questions, so the argument goes, the better scientist one is taken to be. The influence of positivism generally, and those strands derived from the natural sciences in particular, is obvious here. Scientists, it is thought, should deal *just* with the text, not with the text in its social, political, cultural and historical *context*. Freire objects to this and argues that nothing can be written, taught, read, or studied in a neutral manner. *All* forms of textual engagement—literary, scientific, philosophical, sociological, etc.—are structured and informed by presuppositions about the way the world is and ought to be. This is also true of any mode of teaching and learning which involves the written word: deciding what, how and why texts should be read is a necessarily non-neutral, political, interest-serving process.

In later works, Freire has touched on the possibility of reading becoming an 'aesthetic' experience. Whether reading a novel, a poem, Marx, or Gramsci, encountering a text ought to be a loving event. Reading should be a joyous, if demanding, activity [32]. The beauty of the text—or, more precisely, of *reading* the text—lies in the possibility of reading becoming an act of knowing:

... I have to grasp in between the words some knowledge that helps me not exclusively to go on in the reading and in *understanding* what I'm reading, but also to understand something beyond the book I am reading, beyond the text. It is a pleasure. [33]

Finding the aesthetic moment in reading the text does not come easily. Getting started on the task of reading—reading seriously—is especially difficult [34]. Part of the reason for this is that reading implies *risking* [35]. To engage a text is, among other things, to risk 'being convinced by the author' and 'being angry' [36]. Reading critically is demanding because it necessitates facing up to these 'risks' and confronting them by rewriting not only the word (through interpretation) but also the world (through transformative action inspired by the text). This responsibility is fraught with dangers and fears, and is charged with emotion. For Freire, 'Knowing ... is not a neutral act, not only from the political point of view, but from the point of view of my body, my sensual body. It is full of feelings, of emotions, of tastes' [37]. Freire recounts his experiences with books as a young man, reading and studying into the early hours of the morning, and remarks that he had '... an almost physical connection with the text' [38]. This, exactly, is the moment of joy, of happiness, of knowing—of being *critical*—that signifies reading as an aesthetic, loving event: it is the moment of *entering into* the text, curious, searching, and exploring, all the time linking the word in the text to the wider text that is the world itself.

Freire also speaks of the need for writing to be beautiful. He challenges the notion that the only place for elegance and beauty with the written word is in literature. Scientists, too, must take hold of the 'aesthetical moment' in language and write beautifully [39]. A written text, whether by a novelist, a scientist, or a philosopher, should embrace a clarity and simplicity (without being *simplistic*) which aids understanding. Writing should become a 'noble form, as serious as science' [40] (though, interestingly, Freire says of his own work, 'I do not write beautifully') [41].

The value of books abides in their potential—realised only through critical reading—to serve as vehicles for re-creating practice. Freire insists that a dialectical unity be maintained between theory and practice, between reflection and action [42]. Reading books allows one the opportunity of ‘remaking’ one’s practice theoretically [43]. That is, the act of reading—when it moves from a mere ‘walking over the words’ [44] to the active, critical engagement with the text necessary for theorising—encourages one to re-examine or ‘reread’ one’s practice and, if necessary, to change (‘rewrite’) it.

### **Balancing Breadth and Depth in Reading at the University Level**

The battle between traditionalists and reformists in recent debates over the canon can be conceived as a struggle for ‘voice’ and political influence through the curriculum. There is, of course, only so much ‘educational space’ available. Given the tight constraints imposed by university timetables, time for reading is in short supply. To read texts *well*—by which I mean, among other things, reading them critically (in the Freirean sense)—takes far more time than the creators of ‘Western Civilisation’ courses (and their successors) sometimes seem to presuppose [45]. In an insightful examination of workload and student learning, Ellie Chambers observes that, ‘when teachers overburden students, demanding more work of them than they might have time to do, they create conditions in which what is to be learned is likely to be unintelligible, and in which students cannot possibly learn well’ [46]. Teachers have a responsibility not just to convey essential subject matter in their domain of expertise, but to consider how much time is likely to be necessary, given the difficulty of the material, for effective learning to take place. Calculating the time required for reading, writing, thinking, and completing assignments is thus an essential part of course planning. In Chambers’s words, “having sufficient time” to do the work required should be seen as a *pre-condition* of good learning, rather than just one among many conditions in which it may flourish’ [47]. As a preliminary exercise, then, it is instructive to contemplate how many books university teachers might reasonably expect students to read given the constraints dictated by the university teaching year.

#### *Time: a fixed constraint*

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that students are required to complete one compulsory course in which a number of key philosophical texts are to be read. Let us assume that for the bulk of the students, this is one course among seven (of equal weighting) to be completed in an academic year. Now, if approximately equal time is to be devoted to each of the seven courses, and if it is taken as given that students will have an average of 50 hours per week to devote to their studies, then—even allowing for the possibility of students stretching their reading time across a full calendar year instead of a university teaching year—this leaves only 371 hours per course available for study. Not all of this time, though, can be devoted ‘purely’ to reading: several written assignments based upon the set texts are likely to be necessary given the standard university assessment requirements. This could conceivably cut back enormously the time available for actually reading the words on the pages of texts, but let us suppose (optimistically) that there are still 250 hours left. If an average university student is able to read with reasonable comprehension at a rate of 250 words per minute, this translates to 15,000 words per hour. Taking some time off for fatigue and distractions here, it might be safe to assume that perhaps 12,000 words per hour would be an acceptable maximum. Given the remaining 250 hours, then, students could read no more than 3 million words per course

per year. If the set texts average 100,000 words in length, this allows a maximum of 30 books to be set.

These calculations are premised on artificially 'pure' reading conditions. In practice, students must weather a wide variety of pressures upon their concentration and time. These might include struggling to find and stay in part-time employment in a shrinking (or already drastically contracted) job market, juggling very limited finances, attending to the myriad chores of everyday life in a flat or house (washing, cooking, ironing, cleaning, etc.), maintaining personal relationships, and attempting to stay moderately fit and healthy. Students who are parents or care-givers have added responsibilities. Becoming involved in social causes, pursuing sporting interests and hobbies, or continuing a social life can seem like luxuries. It is difficult to maintain a steady focus on one's studies under any circumstances, but given the pressures many contemporary students endure, it is perhaps surprising that more do not fall by the wayside.

The estimates formulated above assume a 'best case' scenario in almost every respect. Written assignments and other assessment tasks might more realistically be expected to cut reading time back to 100–150 hours per course, and for those fortunate enough to find employment over the summer period, there is likely to be little spare time for reading. The calculations also assume far more continuity in reading intensity than is realistic, given other distractions, over a sustained period of time. While it may not be difficult for a student at university level to read 12,000 words in any given hour, it seems unlikely that this rate could be continued hour after hour, week after week. The whole process would almost certainly be far more disjointed and discontinuous than the above characterisation suggests. In light of all of these factors, 20–25 books per course per year seems more plausible.

This estimate is still generous, however, given the nature of the reading material in question. It is one thing to ask students to read 20 romance novels (as a form of light relief) in a year, but it is quite another to demand of them that they do the same with philosophical texts. It may be possible for a student to read Plato's *Republic* in 2 days in the sense of decoding each word in the text, but to suggest that the book could be properly comprehended in this time is preposterous. For undergraduates with little or no background in philosophy, the task of getting to grips with complex arguments and ideas is doubly difficult. For most students at this level, attempting to understand Plato is likely to involve reading many sentences several times, revisiting whole sections, and rereading the book in its entirety at least once. Some would argue that Plato is one of the 'easier' thinkers to read: grappling with Hegel or Heidegger, for example, could prove even more burdensome. Allowing for at least some rereading, then, the number of books on our 1-year list might be whittled down to perhaps, at most, 15.

The magnitude of the task has still not been adequately conveyed, though, for thus far we have only considered what might be involved in 'reading for comprehension' in the narrowest sense. By this I mean that if a student had read a book in the terms articulated to this point, he or she should have comprehended enough of the detail in the text to be able to recount some of the main points if asked to do so in an examination. To be able to do this with 15 books—remembering that this is only one course among several, and mindful also of the other activities competing for a student's time—is a respectable achievement by any scholar's standards. Yet it is surely desirable that students go beyond mere comprehension in this narrow sense to some form of reflective or critical engagement with an author's ideas. Modes of critical engagement vary widely, but all imply a more time-consuming process than the form of reading alluded to thus far. For theorists as different as Freire and Allan Bloom, the idea of students reading 15 philosophical or literary texts for a course which constitutes



only one-seventh of a student's programme would seem nightmarish [48]. What, then, might be considered a reasonable workload, if the Freirean ideal of critical literacy is to be upheld?

### *Quality and Quantity in Freirean Critical Reading*

In *A Pedagogy for Liberation* Freire outlines the case of a student who once approached him in desperation after enrolling in a course which had, for one semester, a bibliography of 300 books [49]. The student found he had no time for anything but reading, and the situation was creating problems for him at home. Freire questions whether the professor who set the reading list would have read all of the books, and goes on to imply that even if the books had been read they may not have been understood [50]. In stark contrast to this excessive emphasis on quantity, the case is given of a six-page transcript of an interview with a Brazilian peasant, used by Freire in one of his graduate classes. The interview, which was a critique of Brazilian education in the 1980s, served as the focus for class reading and discussion. Freire describes how (in his efforts to encourage a critical stance in the act of reading) he would read a sentence of the text of the interview, pause, then reread the sentence to show how he might attempt to understand and interpret what the peasant was saying. After several demonstrations of this slow, reflective mode of reading, he handed the task over to the students to continue. The class ended up spending 12 hours studying this single, six-page text. In Freire's estimation, after this exercise, members of his class would have understood 'what it means to read' [51].

It is difficult to imagine students being able to read more than half a dozen texts in a single course in this manner; indeed, depending on the texts, even this estimate is likely to be excessive. Freire clearly wants students to read slowly and carefully. The critical reader penetrates beneath the surface appearance of words, stops to ponder the meaning of passages, questions assumptions and arguments, and relates ideas in the text to the wider (con)text of their social world. If students are to engage texts with such rigour, the number of books on reading lists must, it seems clear, be far fewer than many commenting on the debates over the canon appear to suggest. The emphasis in Freire's work is on quality rather than quantity, on in-depth analysis in place of superficial skimming or 'reading for entertainment', on a complex and intimate relationship between text, reader and world.

Yet, if critical reading of the kind promoted by Freire is to proceed, a certain breadth in prior reading seems imperative. Breadth is necessary in order to 'make the connections' between different ideas and theorists, to understand why something is this way rather than that, and to place what one is studying in its broader (disciplinary, social, historical, etc.) context. An in-depth understanding of a text requires some sort of knowledge of what it *is not*. We cannot fully understand what is distinctive, special or valuable in Marx unless we have some knowledge of thinkers *other* than Marx. In particular, we need to know something about those theorists who offer opposing points of view on questions similar to those addressed by Marx. To better appreciate Marx's critique of capitalism, then, some knowledge of Adam Smith's work is necessary. Similarly, to grasp the significance of Marx's stance on the dialectical relationship between ideas and material reality, it is essential to know something of Hegel (for whom Marx believed the dialectic was standing on its head). In broader terms, a Marxist position on ethics and politics cannot be deeply comprehended without consideration of other conflicting ethical traditions (e.g. liberalism). At a wider level still, students cannot be expected to make much sense of, say, post-modernist theory unless they have some idea of the elements of modernist thought post-modernists oppose.

Freire's appreciation of the need for students to have some understanding of a range of theoretical positions and perspectives is evident in his statements on the reading of key works

in given subject areas. He argues that students ought to read 'the classics' in their field of study, but stresses the importance of grasping a sense of conflicting intellectual traditions. Hence, in a sociology class, the work of positivists, structuralists, functionalists, Marx and various Marxists, etc. would be indispensable, irrespective of one's acceptance or rejection of any of these perspectives [52]. Attempting to read the classic texts within each of these traditions by focusing, for example, on a selection of books by Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and so on, is likely to prove a demanding if not impossible process if the depth of critical engagement advocated by Freire is applied in every case. This, of course, relates to just *one* field of study: those embroiled in debates over the canon are generally dealing with the problem of what to include and exclude in a single course (traditionally organised around themes such as 'Western Civilisation' or 'Western Culture') to be taken by students from a multiplicity of disciplines and programmes. If the Freirean approach to critical reading is taken seriously in these courses, the number of books that might be 'truly' read (in the Freirean sense) would be so few—around half a dozen (or less), perhaps—that, paradoxically, the breadth of perspective necessary for critical reading could readily be compromised.

The problem of finding the right balance between breadth and depth has its genesis in debates which stretch back to the earliest medieval universities, and goes to the heart of degree planning in modern institutions of higher education. Even in universities which do not have compulsory 'Western Civilisation' or 'Western Culture' courses (or anything like the successors to these: e.g. Stanford's 'Cultures, Ideas and Values' course), issues of breadth and depth are central in structuring degrees. In contemporary Bachelor of Arts degrees in many countries, for example, students are required to complete a certain number of papers in given subjects at each of three stages. In their first year, students are typically advised to take one or two papers at stage one level in three or four subjects, nominating one or two of these as their 'major' or 'double-major'. In the second and third years, the spread of subjects is usually reduced, and an increasing number of papers in the major subject(s) are taken. By the end of their degrees, Bachelor of Arts students might have completed at least one paper in perhaps half a dozen subjects, and at least eight papers in one or two of those subjects. Breadth at the beginning of the degree thus gives way to greater depth in later stages. For students who progress on to masters and doctoral degrees, this trend continues, with increasing specialisation the further a student goes. The path from year one of a bachelor's degree to the completion of a doctorate is neatly captured in the colloquial expression that at the beginning of a first degree a student knows 'nothing about everything' whereas at the end of a doctoral thesis he or she knows 'everything about nothing'!

Of course, students have lives beyond one course or programme in a given year of their academic studies. Other opportunities for reading the 'classic' works in given fields of study exist—at least potentially—later in degrees: compulsory courses do not have to be confined to the early stages of a student's career. Additionally, students have their whole lives after they leave university to lead: if they so wish, their reading might (circumstances permitting) continue for 50 years or more. Given the time constraints imposed by a 3- or 4-year degree (or even a 6–8 year period of several degrees), educators must face the possibility that they cannot promote *both* breadth and depth in reading at all stages in the student's total period of study. Courses of the kind under discussion in debates over canons and core curricula generally occur in the early stages of a degree or programme. If it is this period with which we are dealing, and if the aim is to consider the issue from a Freirean point of view, then there are at least two possible responses to the problem of balancing breadth with depth in reading. From one vantage point, it might be argued that depth must initially, and of necessity, be sacrificed in favour of breadth, for without a certain breadth of perspective critical reading (of the Freirean variety) is impossible. From a different angle, however, the claim might be made

that a student must learn to read *something* critically before proceeding to other reading [53]: this demands that breadth give way, in the first instance, to depth. The discussion that follows attempts to address the tension between these two positions.

### *Few Books, Multiple Perspectives?*

'Breadth' and 'depth' can both be maintained, in one sense, if we think of the former in terms of 'perspectives' and the latter in terms of the number of books one reads. Elsewhere, I have argued that instead of trying to read books from every major political and ethical position, core courses might serve a more useful purpose (and keep the Freirean ideal of critical literacy intact) if they concentrated on a few texts but examined them from a variety of perspectives [54]. Plato's *Republic* was used as an example of a text which might be suitable for this kind of approach (though many other books might serve equally well). Accepting the view that certain metaphysical, ontological, ethical, and political questions are of enduring human importance, I suggested that a multiplicity of perspectives—feminist, Marxist, liberal, conservative, etc.—could be brought to bear on a small number of key texts in which questions of this kind are addressed. These books would be debated and discussed in detail, from a variety of different angles. Students would be encouraged to relate the themes addressed in these books to contemporary social problems, practices, structures, and struggles, and to place the texts in their appropriate historical and social contexts.

While I believe the general principles underlying this proposal are sound, there are some serious risks in adopting such an approach. Of greatest significance for present purposes, there is a danger that the maximisation of breadth will lead to superficiality, with an apparently seamless smorgasbord of perspectives and questions. This danger might be only partially avoided were a university classroom to take on the liberating form Freire espouses as an ideal. Liberating education demands, among other things, dedicated teaching, enthusiastic participation by all, a passion for ideas, discipline and rigour in critical reading, a willingness to question, and a commitment to understanding and changing the world for the better. An educative situation with these characteristics is, of course, seldom easy to create! However, even if such circumstances did eventuate, the range of questions around which discussion would be based might easily become excessive if the requirements of critical reading in the Freirean sense were to be met. Conceivably, students and teachers might be unable to 'finish' reading *one* book if the full range of questions outlined in the other paper were to be thoroughly addressed from a multiplicity of perspectives. This difficulty could, ironically, be *exacerbated* rather than overcome if a university class displayed the ideal qualities noted above. For, the more closely a class follows the Freirean ideal of liberating education, the more thorough (and hence time consuming) reading, questioning, and dialogue are likely to be.

### *Narrowing the Focus*

One way of dealing with this problem, should time be particularly limited in a given programme, would be to narrow the full range of key questions down to a single, overriding question, namely: 'What human ideal(s) ought we to work toward?' This question lies at the heart of Freire's philosophy, and his response to it informs every pedagogical decision he makes. Although overtly ethical, the question also allows metaphysical, ontological, epistemological, political, and aesthetic concerns to be addressed. Asking what *ought* to be the case requires some reflection on that which might prevent or impede an ideal being realised or pursued: political questions become significant here. Similarly, before we can ask what *ideals*

we wish to work toward as human beings, we need first to pay some attention to the question of what it means to *be* human: ontological and metaphysical themes would thus also almost certainly be traversed. There would, however, be a single question at the *centre* of classroom dialogue and student reading. This would act as the pivot around which all aspects of the educative situation would revolve.

The question, 'What human ideal(s) ought we to work toward?' is sufficiently broad in scope to allow a diverse array of theoretical perspectives to be brought to bear on key texts. Indeed, it might be claimed that this question lies behind many theoretical perspectives in the social sciences and humanities; certainly the question provides at least an *implicit* focus or 'reason for being' in many cases. Any rigorously developed theoretical perspective which has something to offer in addressing this question might be included. The question is obviously vital in many strands of feminism, Marxism and liberalism. Feminists concentrate on building a world free of patriarchy, Marxists posit an ideal of socialism, and liberals value individual rational autonomy. However, there would also be merit in problematising the question itself, via, for example, various post-modern positions.

To speak of 'human ideals' is to permit discussion of both 'individual' and 'social' ideals. For Freire, liberation is always a social process [55]. However, not all thinkers see it this way, and Freire would be among the first to argue that perspectives other than his own ought to be given careful consideration. Indeed, it cannot be presupposed that 'liberation' of any kind should necessarily be the goal. Using the term 'human ideals' does not prejudice the inquiry in favour of a particular construct, but leaves the door open for any number to be examined. Whatever concepts are explored, it seems probable that many of the themes which might be addressed would overlap with fundamental concerns in Freire's work.

Without denying that many theorists use categories other than those Freire employs in addressing questions about human ideals, the twin themes of 'oppression' and 'liberation' might feature strongly in a contemporary course of the kind envisaged here. Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the City* that liberation is 'the most fundamental task ... we have at the end of this century' [56]. If this assessment is correct, the possibilities for relating texts to contexts in addressing 'liberation' and 'oppression' as key themes become obvious. If the task is as pressing as Freire believes it to be, this process of linking 'word' with 'world' in the university curriculum assumes new significance. Classroom dialogue might address any number of contemporary issues of local, national or international interest. Students might, for example, examine problems of homelessness, poverty, starvation, unemployment, domestic violence, exploitation in the workplace, colonialism, and so on. All of these problems can be confronted from a range of perspectives on 'liberation' and 'oppression'.

Allowing the pressing social problems of the day to become the object of critical investigation is one way of linking 'word' with 'world' through core courses. This is not to say that course content should be determined purely on the basis of its perceived 'relevance' for contemporary issues (e.g. the environment, nuclear weapons, race relations, etc.) or for specific professional contexts (the classroom for teachers, the courtroom for lawyers, the boardroom for managers, and so on). The 'tailoring' of programmes of study toward directly vocational ends contradicts the purpose of having core courses, and should, if such courses are to have a distinctive place in a university curriculum, be resisted. The linking of texts with contexts, however, is an important aspect of Freirean critical literacy. Upholding this dimension of Freire's ideal while avoiding vocationalism and a 'trendy issues' approach is a matter of turning the question of 'relevance' on its head. It is not a case of making core courses relevant to something else, but of making elements of the students' world relevant to the purposes of core courses.

From a Freirean point of view, books become worthwhile when they are *engaged* in

particular ways. The extent to which critical engagement might take place, and the exact character of that engagement, will vary from one context to another. The one factor that remains fixed in all cases, however, is time (the lack of it). The *potential* value of certain texts, given that very few can be selected if the Freirean ideal of critical literacy is to met, must therefore be carefully considered. This is where Freire's insistence that teachers become conversant with key ideas in their field of study becomes important [57]. This is part of the directiveness of teaching in any educational programme, but in core courses such preparation is especially crucial. Teachers have a responsibility to select texts which appear to offer the greatest potential for allowing diverse perspectives to be brought to bear on the themes addressed in them, while *also* setting up a pedagogical environment which maximises the chances of this potential being realised.

### *A Third Level: the bottom line*

In some circumstances, even the more specific focus suggested above (concentrating on the theme of 'human ideals' instead of the full range of ontological, metaphysical, ethical and political questions) may be far too ambitious. Several variables become significant in setting limits here, including: the prior learning of students; the teacher's knowledge; the form of pedagogy fostered in the classroom; distractions and responsibilities outside the university; the relationship between the 'core' course and other courses; and so on. While there will obviously be wide variations in the impact these factors have on the learning process, a programme of the kind envisaged above could still prove too demanding for some students. I want, then, to suggest a third level at which a core course might proceed: this represents the 'bottom line' in addressing the need for both depth and breadth in Freirean critical literacy [58].

Instead of seeking to address one theme or question, via a handful of texts, from a multiplicity of perspectives, an ongoing debate might be set up between just *two* competing discourses. The programme would be built around two key texts, both addressing the ethical concerns articulated in the previous section, but from different points of view. Reducing the number of texts and ethical positions down to this bare minimum acknowledges the immensely demanding, and time-consuming, nature of Freirean critical reading, while nonetheless allowing students to see that different theorists can address the same question, theme or problem in quite distinct ways. Minimising texts and perspectives in this manner does not prohibit the teacher from alerting students to the existence of other theoretical positions; indeed, the creation of this form of awareness would be a necessity if the imperative for breadth as well as depth were to be upheld. Teachers would, however, have to recognise the difficulties involved in telling students 'about' other perspectives without making these perspectives the subject of extensive class debate. The whole point of this approach, though, is to make *sure* (as far as any teacher can) that students read in some depth, without the curriculum becoming 'cluttered' with a whole range of different texts, questions and positions. The aim is to promote the *habit* of critical reading—and, more profoundly, a critical mode of being—without trying to cover 'all the ground' from the start.

The emphasis, then, would be on fostering depth in early reading such that later reading, which would be progressively broader in scope, might have a better chance of being genuinely critical. The criterion of breadth would still be present in the programme; it would simply take on a slightly different form. Students would gain a sense of what 'breadth in perspective' might mean, *and* deepen their understanding of the texts under investigation, through the principle of 'contrast'. This is the idea, readily supported by Freire's educational theory, that one can gain a more critical comprehension of one book (or position) by comparing it to that



which it is *not*. With only two competing positions under (thorough) consideration, contrasts can, if anything, be sharpened. Provided students do not assume that *all* ethical and political perspectives fall into neatly contrasting categories, this sharpening of contrasts can serve a useful educational purpose.

### Concluding Comments

To a large extent, the number and range of themes, texts, questions, and perspectives which might be engaged depends on the time available, the students' other commitments, and the nature of the institution within which the course is operating. Obviously, if there is more than one course set aside for this sort of programme, greater breadth *and* depth in reading becomes possible. Whether the focus is on one question or several, on a single text or half a dozen, the key is to extend rather than restrict the range of possibilities open to students. Core courses, I want to suggest, have a potentially significant educational role to play in expanding the range of discourses within which students might critically participate. They are, it must be stressed, but a part—one 'moment' or 'layer'—of the wider process of liberating education. Their distinctive contribution to this process is to give students some sense of the different ways in which various groups have addressed questions of long-standing human interest. While there are real limits to what can be achieved given the time available, students might, if these courses are successful, be expected to at least develop a deeper appreciation of why it might be important to address certain questions. Of course, this notion would itself be contestable: it cannot be taken for granted that questions of the kind alluded to earlier *are* of (considerable) human significance. But teachers, from a Freirean point of view, must put something forward—that is, provide direction and structure in the programme. Questions about the human ideal, especially when coupled with wider meta-physical, ontological, and epistemological questions, provide a starting point from which deeper reflection—a crucial element of which is the development of *other* questions—can begin.

For Freire, learning how, why, when, and where to ask questions is an indispensable part of a university education. Freire does not issue a formula, or a set of fixed procedures, for addressing this objective, but he does develop a detailed view of critical reading which takes as its starting point the adoption of a curious, probing, searching, investigative stance toward the world. The Freirean ideal of critical literacy provides both the basis upon which a programme of the sort I have proposed is founded, and the means through which students might go *beyond* this programme to other worthwhile forms of learning. Knowing, through experience in core courses, what it means to pose, and address, questions lays the foundation for continuing critical inquiry.

No matter what approach is taken, there will always be (serious) limits to what can be achieved in a single course. From a Freirean point of view, the development of a critical orientation toward the world—a goal to which core courses might contribute—is a crucial part of the ideal of liberating education. Arguably, however, the habit of critical reading—once acquired—need not be applied to *every* text, in all situations [59]. Fostering breadth in reading, or literary enjoyment, sometimes demands the (temporary) suspension of critical judgement. Nevertheless, if the intention is to consider the distinctiveness of a Freirean perspective on canons and university curricula, the formation of a critical stance in reading, writing and studying must be regarded as pivotal. Freire's educational ideal demands an awareness of, and a willingness to pay respectful (but not reverent) attention to, alternative conceptions of human beings and the social world. If core courses were to encourage rigorous

study habits, enhance opportunities for dialogue and debate, and allow students to forge a dynamic link between 'word' and 'world', they would have Freire's unequivocal support.

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### NOTES

- [1] See, for example, the various essays in GLESS, D.J. & SMITH, B.H. (Eds) (1992) *The Politics of Liberal Education* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press); ROBERTS, P. (1995) Political correctness, great books and the university curriculum, *Sites: a journal for radical perspectives on culture*, 31, pp. 81–111; POLLIT, K. (1992) Why do we read?, and HOWE, I. (1992) The value of the canon, both in: P. BERMAN (Ed.) *Debating P.C.: the controversy over political correctness on college campuses* (New York, Dell); ADLER, M.J. (1992) Multiculturalism, transculturalism, and the great books, in: P. AUFDERHEIDE (Ed.) *Beyond P.C.: toward a politics of understanding* (Minnesota, MN, Graywolf Press); SEARLE, J. (1990) The storm over the university, *New York Review of Books*, 6 December; MURPHY, J.S. (1991) Some thoughts about class, caste, and the canon, *Teachers College Record*, 93, pp. 265–280; ATLAS, J. (1989) The battle of the books, *Dialogue*, 84, pp. 22–29; ADAMS, H. (1988) Canons: literary criteria/power criteria, *Critical Inquiry*, 14, pp. 748–764.
- [2] See for example, BROWN, C. (1974) Literacy in 30 hours: Paulo Freire's process in Northeast Brazil, *Social Policy*, 5, pp. 25–32; SANDERS, T.G. (1972) The Paulo Freire method: literacy training and conscientization, in: T.J. LA BELLE (Eds) *Education and Development: Latin America and the Caribbean* (Los Angeles, CA, Latin American Center); LLYOD, A.S. (1972) Freire, conscientization and adult education, *Adult Education*, 23, pp. 3–20; BEE, B. (1980) The politics of literacy, in: R. MACKIE (Ed.) *Literacy and Revolution: the pedagogy of Paulo Freire* (London, Pluto Press); ROBERTS, P. (1994) Education, dialogue and intervention: revisiting the Freirean project, *Educational Studies*, 20, pp. 307–327.
- [3] See further, ROBERTS, P. (1996) The danger of domestication: a case-study, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 15, in press.
- [4] ESCOBAR, M., FERNANDEZ, A.L. & GUEVARA-NIEBLA, G. WITH FREIRE, P. (1994) *Paulo Freire on Higher Education: a Dialogue at the National University of Mexico* (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press).
- [5] Compare, ROBERTS, P. (1995) Paulo Freire and political correctness, paper prepared for presentation at the *New Zealand Association for Research in Education annual conference*, Palmerston North, December.
- [6] Cf. McLAREN, P. & LANKSHEAR, C. (1993) Critical literacy and the postmodern turn, in: C. LANKSHEAR & P. McLAREN (Eds) *Critical Literacy: politics, praxis, and the postmodern*, p. 380 (Albany, NY, State University of New York Press).
- [7] The paper thus provides only a limited snapshot of one aspect of the wider literature; the conclusions I draw below would not necessarily follow from other approaches to critical literacy.
- [8] FREIRE, P. (1983) The importance of the act of reading, *Journal of Education*, 165, pp. 5–11.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- [10] Compare, FREIRE, P. & MACEDO, D. (1987) *Literacy: reading the word and the world*, p. 49 (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [11] FREIRE, P. (1983) The importance of the act of reading, *Journal of Education*, 165, p. 10.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- [14] FREIRE, P. & MACEDO, D. (1987) *Literacy: reading the word and the world*, p. 42 (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [15] Compare, FREIRE, P. (1983) The importance of the act of reading, *Journal of Education*, 165, p. 8.
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [17] See FREIRE, P. & MACEDO, D. (1987) *Literacy: reading the word and the world*, p. 50 (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- [18] Compare, FREIRE, P. (1972) *Cultural Action for Freedom*, pp. 29–30, 56–57 (Harmondsworth, Penguin) and (1976) *Education: the practice of freedom*, p. 145 (London, Writers & Readers).

- [19] BRUSS, N. & MACEDO, D.P. (1984) A conversation with Paulo Freire at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, *Journal of Education*, 166, p. 224.
- [20] FREIRE (1983) The importance of the act of reading, *Journal of Education*, 165, p. 9.
- [21] DILLON, D. (1985) Reading the world and reading the word: an interview with Paulo Freire, *Language Arts*, 62, pp. 15–21.
- [22] FREIRE, P. & SHOR, I. (1987) *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, p. 11 (London, Macmillan).
- [23] FREIRE, P. (1985) *The Politics of Education* p. 2 (London, Macmillan).
- [24] See FREIRE, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, ch. 2 (Harmondsworth, Penguin).
- [25] FREIRE, P. (1985) *The Politics of Education*, p. 2 (London, Macmillan).
- [26] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- [27] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [28] FREIRE, P. & SHOR, I. (1987) *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, p. 135 (London, Macmillan).
- [29] *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- [30] *Ibid.*
- [31] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- [32] HORTON, M. & FREIRE, P. (1990) *We Make the Road by Walking: conversations on education and social change*, B. BELL, J. GAVENTA & J. PETERS (Eds), pp. 23–27 (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press).
- [33] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- [34] *Ibid.*
- [35] BRUSS, N. & MACEDO, D.P. (1984) A conversation with Paulo Freire at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, *Journal of Education*, 166, p. 218.
- [36] *Ibid.*
- [37] HORTON, M. & FREIRE, P. (1990) *We Make the Road by Walking: conversations on education and social change*, B. BELL, J. GAVENTA & J. PETERS (Eds) (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press).
- [38] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- [39] *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- [40] BRUSS, N. & MACEDO, D. (1985) Toward a pedagogy of the question: conversations with Paulo Freire, *Journal of Education*, 167, p. 21.
- [41] *Ibid.*
- [42] HORTON, M. & FREIRE, P. (1990) *We Make the Road by Walking: conversations on education and social change*, B. BELL, J. GAVENTA & J. PETERS (Eds), p. 21 (Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press).
- [43] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- [44] Compare, FREIRE, P. & SHOR, I. (1987) *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, p. 10 (London, Macmillan).
- [45] Compare, for example, the number of books on the 'Required' and 'Strongly Recommended' lists of the Stanford 'Western Civilisation' course. See PRATT, M.L. (1992) Humanities for the future: reflections on the Western culture debate at Stanford, in: D.J. GLESS & B.H. SMITH (Eds) *The Politics of Liberal Education*, pp. 17–18 (Durham, NC, Duke University Press).
- [46] CHAMBERS, E. (1992) Work-load and the quality of student learning, *Studies in Higher Education*, 17, p. 144.
- [47] *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- [48] See BLOOM, A. (1988) *The Closing of the American Mind*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin); (1991) *Giants and Dwarfs* (New York, Touchstone); ROBERTS, P. (1993) Philosophy, education and literacy: some comments on Bloom, *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 28, pp. 165–180.
- [49] FREIRE, P. & SHOR, I. (1987) *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, pp. 83–85 (London, Macmillan).
- [50] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- [51] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- [52] Cf. *ibid.*, p. 83.
- [53] I am indebted to one of the referees of the original version of this paper for highlighting the importance of this line of argument.
- [54] See ROBERTS, P. (1995) Political correctness, great books and the university curriculum, *Sites: a journal for radical perspectives on culture*, 31, pp. 81–111.
- [55] See ROBERTS, P. (1996) Rethinking conscientization, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 30, in press.
- [56] FREIRE, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the City*, p. 84 (New York, Continuum).
- [57] For a succinct discussion of this issue and other matters pertaining to rigour in teaching, see FREIRE, P. (1987) Letter to North American teachers, in: I. SHOR (Ed.) *Freire for the Classroom: a sourcebook for liberatory teachers* (Portsmouth, NH, Boynton/Cook).
- [58] The ideas in this section were stimulated by helpful comments from a referee.
- [59] I owe this point to one of the referees of the original paper.