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Radical Education: An Introduction to Paulo Freire

Bryan Wisch

In winter 2011, the Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Huppenthal, a former state senator, **tried to ban a popular Mexican American Studies program** that was being taught in the Tucson Unified School District. He claimed that the course was in violation of **AZ House Bill 2281**, which prohibits classes that: advocate ethnic solidarity, are designed for pupils of a particular ethnic group, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, or promote the overthrow of the United States government.

To support his claim, Huppenthal pointed to the materials that students were reading. He specifically cited a book called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was

written by the Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire. Huppenthal argued that the text was inflammatory and promoted racial hatred. The hypocrisy of this charge was revealed when Huppenthal himself **was later found to have anonymously posted several racist and conspiratorial screeds online.**

And even though AZ House Bill 2281 was struck down by a federal judge in 2017, it's worth asking why a run-of-the-mill racist Republican like John Huppenthal found the work of a long-dead Brazilian educator so threatening.

Poverty, Education, and Exile

To understand why the right might so virulently oppose exposing students to Paulo Freire's work, we'll outline his beliefs and the context in which they were forged. Freire was born in 1921 to middle-class parents in Recife, Brazil. He was eight years old when the Great Depression ravaged the world economy, and his father died just five years later, plunging the family into poverty. This made paying attention in school difficult for Freire, and he ended up several grades behind. Later in life, he reflected on his childhood education, stating:

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“I wanted very much to study, but I couldn't as our economic condition didn't allow me to. I tried to read or pay attention in the classroom, but I didn't understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education.”

This early experience with poverty proved pivotal for Freire. It demonstrated that what happens in the classroom cannot be disconnected from what happens outside of it. Education is always shaped by the conditions under which it takes place.

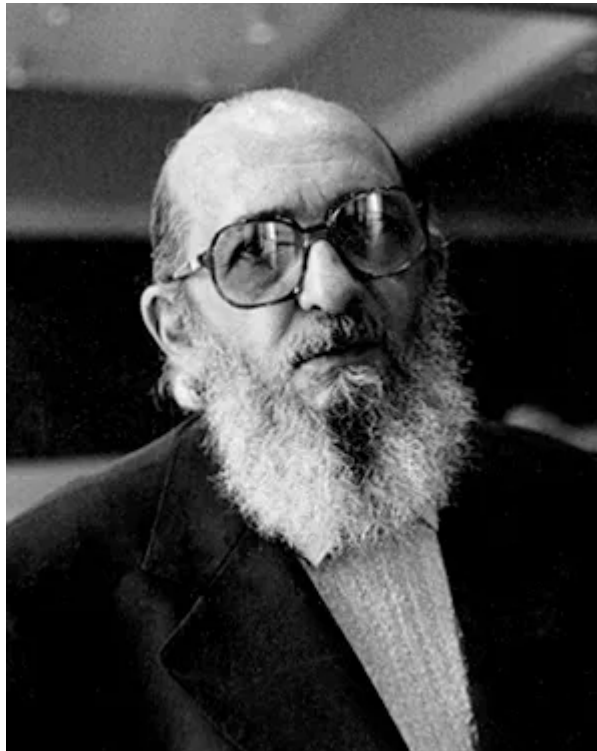
This analysis was developed further when, as a young adult, Freire became a teacher at a private nonprofit organization called the Social Service of Industry (SESI). SESI's goal was to assist workers and their families through the education process. But Freire soon noticed a divide between the language used by the mostly well-to-do SESI instructors and that of the lower-class workers they sought to educate. This difference in language presented a barrier for the workers and hindered their ability to learn.

Freire's experiences at SESI led him to the conclusion that elitist institutions are ineffective in addressing the needs of the working class. Instead, he believed that educators needed to start from a place of humility and learn about the people they wish to teach. This meant understanding their language, their culture, their community, and the unique problems they faced. Only then, once the students'

social context was taken into account, could real education take place. This line of reasoning provided the basis for Freire's thesis, *Present-day Education in Brazil*, which earned him his Ph.D from the University of Recife.

The first major test of Freire's educational theories took place in 1962 in the state of Rio Grande do Norte in Northeastern Brazil. There, he and his team implemented his revolutionary pedagogy with a group of 300 impoverished farm workers, all of whom were illiterate. After just forty-five days, every worker was able to read and write. The experiment was such a success that the Brazilian President, João Goulart, invited Freire to adopt his approach to teaching adult literacy on the national level. By 1964, Freire's programs were set to educate two million of Brazil's illiterate poor.

Unfortunately, the programs were interrupted by a U.S.-backed military coup, which installed a brutal dictatorship that would rule over Brazil for twenty years. Soon after the new government took power, Freire was accused of being an "international subversive" and arrested. After seventy days of incarceration, he was exiled from the country.



Paulo Freire in 1977.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed

It was in his exile that he began working on the book that would end up becoming his most valuable contribution: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In it, he pulls from his Catholic faith and a variety of influential philosophers. One can find traces of Fanon's anti-colonialism, Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Marx's class consciousness, and Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual. Central to the text is the idea that teaching and learning are inherently political acts. They can either be used to reinforce the status quo, or they can help people understand and critique the social and historical context in which they live, the first step in empowering them to effect change.

By recognizing the political nature of education, Freire identifies how oppressive structures are replicated in the classroom. He argues that in the traditional

educational model, the teacher is the subject who acts upon the students, who are treated as objects. The teacher possesses knowledge, and the students are empty vessels to be filled. Freire deems this the “banking model” of education:



“In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as a process of inquiry.”

According to Freire, the banking model is not just oppressive—it is also ineffective. It decontextualizes knowledge, leading students to merely memorize the material by rote, rather than understanding it conceptually. This discourages critical thinking and conditions people to accept authority without question.

As an alternative, he argues that true knowledge must arise from a process of inquiry that is co-created by both teacher and the student. In order for this to occur, the relationship between the two must be reciprocal, rather than hierarchical. The teacher must acknowledge that there are things they do not know, and they must be willing to learn from and with the student. This allows for the student to teach the teacher and creates an environment of mutual respect and ongoing dialogue.

To facilitate such a relationship, the teacher must not present material as if they have all the answers. Rather, the material should be conveyed to the students as a problem to be solved collaboratively by the group. In doing so, teachers model the behavior of an active learner who is humble and receptive to the thoughts of others. By working collaboratively to solve problems, the students become more confident in their ability to think critically and pose problems of their own.

Unlike the banking model, which mirrors an authoritarian power structure, the “problem-posing model,” as Freire terms it, reflects a democratic structure. It promotes collaboration and tolerance of others while encouraging learners to question authority. Furthermore, it emphasizes dialogue as a necessary tool to combat alienation both inside and outside of the classroom. By engaging in open and honest discussion that involves sharing their individual perspectives, students gain a more accurate and empathetic assessment of the world.

Developing a Critical Consciousness

The goal of Freire’s educational method is to promote what he calls *conscientização*, or “critical consciousness.” This refers to one’s awareness of the social and political forces that create oppressive structures. In practice, the analyses

T mobilized by critical consciousness will vary depending on circumstance. For example, many of the agrarian laborers Freire worked with were the children and grandchildren of African and Indigenous slaves. And although the institution of slavery had been officially abolished decades before they were born, many still lived and worked in conditions that were similar to those of their enslaved ancestors. In this instance, the development of critical consciousness might include critiques of racism, colonialism, and Brazilian capitalism. It is only when these forces are understood by the people that a meaningful revolution against those unjust systems can take place.

Yet, developing critical consciousness can be difficult, as people raised in oppressive contexts will often internalize their oppression. In his writings, Freire notes that many of the workers he spoke to were able to recognize that they were oppressed but, because of how they had been socialized, they could at first imagine no way to improve their own condition except to oppress others in turn.

“It is not to become free that [the peasants] want agrarian reform, but in order to acquire land and thus become landowners— or, more precisely, bosses over other workers. It is a rare peasant who, once “promoted” to overseer, does not become more of a tyrant towards his former comrades than the owner himself.” This is why Freire emphasizes the need for critical consciousness. Without it, any reforms or revolutions are at a high risk of reestablishing the same oppressive structures that preceded them.

The Politics of Education

In identifying the connection between critical consciousness and revolution against oppression, Freire once again makes the link between education and politics explicit. This also explains why those in power frequently try to undermine educational institutions. If critical thinking were taught to everyone, many of those in power would be exposed as oppressors.

To illustrate this point, one need only look at how the struggle to expand public education to the working class has been so often opposed by the wealthy. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire points to a speech delivered in the Parliament of the United Kingdom in 1807 by a Mr. Davies Giddy that exemplifies this sentiment:

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“However specious in theory the project might be of giving education to the labouring classes of the poor, it would, in effect, be found to be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them

to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture, and other laborious employments... it would render them factious and refractory... the result would be, that the legislature would find it necessary to direct the strong arm of power towards them.”

Mr. Giddy (who later served as President of the Royal Society) was explicit in his desire to maintain an oppressive system. But denying access to education is not the only way that the powerful can stifle the development of critical consciousness.

Learning in America

The Mexican American Studies program in Tucson, AZ was designed to promote critical thinking among the students by using Freire’s methods to teach American history from a Mexican perspective. It was offered at a school with a large Mexican-American population, and the voluntary program demonstrably boosted student performance and reduced the achievement gap between white and minority students. Unmoved by the measurable improvements it offered, the reactionary Superintendent of Public Instruction, John Huppenthal, attempted to ban it. But this is an issue that holds relevance far beyond a single school district in Arizona.

Those in positions of power often act to undermine any form of education that promotes critical consciousness. In the United States, every person is guaranteed schooling up to the high school level—but the quality is often poor. This is because the American education system exemplifies the banking model. In most schools, instruction is based around a rigid set of standardized tests that emphasize memorization over the development of creativity, social skills, and critical thinking. As a result, the chief function of American education is to reinforce the status quo and create a population conditioned to uncritically obey authority.

Furthermore, in the United States, the quality of education that one can access is determined largely by socioeconomic factors like class and race. It’s no secret that schools in poor minority neighborhoods are significantly more likely to be overcrowded, understaffed, and underfunded than those in wealthy white areas. This has the effect of reproducing the same inequalities that have been rooted, often by design, in the sociopolitical structure of the United States since its creation.

Consequently, an implementation of educational practices based on the framework provided by Paulo Freire would represent a revolution in the American school system, with positive ramifications for society as a whole. An

appreciation of the interconnections between education and political consciousness is instrumental to any project that seeks to dismantle oppression and bring about justice. Perhaps Freire's most powerful insight is the notion that to be a revolutionary, one must be a teacher. And to be a teacher, one must be a student of and for the people. ♦

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