Freire for the Classroom

A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching

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Afterword by
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A Pedagogy for Liberation (with Paulo Freire)
Editor’s Introduction: Using Freire’s Ideas in the Classroom—How Do We Practice Liberatory Teaching?

IRA SHOR

Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire has a growing audience in North America. On his visits to the United States and Canada, Freire’s seminars have been noted for their lively crowds. Can a social pedagogy emerging from the Third World truly work in the North? What are Freire’s ideas? How do we adapt them for our classrooms? These are some of the questions this book will try to answer. In the coming pages, creative teachers influenced by Freire’s methods will report on their classrooms. They and others are pioneering an area of education that is still a frontier.

This is a good moment to strike forward in new directions. An education crisis has been declared in the United States by the highest policy-makers and authorities, since the landmark report A Nation at Risk burst from the Reagan White House in 1983. The years following brought a flood of further reports, task forces, commissions, and legislation. But several waves of reform may make a bad situation worse. The mechanical, authoritarian remedies offered by the new reformers cannot solve the current dilemmas of education. They were developed without teacher-student involvement, in a routinely undemocratic fashion. Official circles and thinkers failed to come up with creative answers. Their efforts need to be replaced by critical approaches to learning and democratic models of social change. Freirean methods for empowering education are hopeful avenues worth exploring, as counters to the conservative reforms of the Reagan era. This current volume is one effort in that direction. It joins a body of knowledge and experience accumulating among liberatory teachers despite the regressive trends of the recent period.
access to student concerns. By using these phrases and themes, Linda and Valerie offer a step-by-step example of how uncritical perceptions of experience can be transformed into critical understanding.

The generative-theme method is fundamental to Freirean literacy programs. It reappears in the next essay, “Strangers No More: A Liberator Literacy Curriculum” (Chapter 5), by Kyle Fiore and Nan Elasser. This is perhaps the most moving and poignant testimony in this book. Kyle and Nan tell about a writing class Nan taught for adult black women at the College of the Bahamas. This is a fine example of how to situate a course in the thematic concerns of the students while structuring academic exercises that develop critical literacy. The women were preoccupied with themes of domestic violence, rape, and sexual inequality in their society. The way Nan skillfully guided these generative themes into critical reading and writing is a real education for teachers.

The next essay continues demonstrating the generative-theme method for critical literacy. My report, “Monday Morning Fever: Critical Literacy and the Generative Theme of ‘Work’” (Chapter 6), is taken from my book (Shor, 1987). In this selection, I use the generative theme of “work” to develop critical consciousness in class. Teachers in professional programs or in career courses might especially examine this report to see how the routine experience of “work” can be problematized in a critical literacy format. I present in detail how the course progresses through a variety of small and large intellectual exercises that offer students some critical detachment on a rather ordinary piece of life. For me, the helpful parts here are the ways in which literacy techniques are integrated into a consciousness-raising study of work.

The ideas of pedagogy situated in the real issues of student life and of critical curriculum inserted into the widespread problems of alienation and disempowerment reappear in Nancy Zimmet’s essay “More Than the Basics: Teaching Critical Reading in High School” (Chapter 7). Nancy’s report demonstrates an application of Freirean ideas in a public school. Her students at Newton North High are not the top 15 percent who so interested patrician reformer James Bryant Conant when he toured the nation’s schools in an earlier period of reform in the 1950s. Nancy does not teach the cream of the crop who will be bullied and nurtured into becoming the future elite. She uses the immediate context of lesser status, inferior feelings, anger, and alienation as themes that help reverse some anti-intellectual results of mass education.

Following Nancy’s report, Nan Elasser returns with coauthor Patricia Irvine for an account of their teaching at the College of the Virgin Islands, “English and Creole: The Dialectics of Choice in a
College Writing Program” (Chapter 8). They make no direct reference to Freirean methods in this paper, but their teaching demonstrates their long-term study of Freirean approaches. Freire discusses (Shor & Freire, 1987) the need to critically study the everyday idioms of non-elite students at the same time the literacy class studies the standard usage of elite idioms of society. Nan and Pat offer an excellent example of how to do this. Ordinarily, non-elite students, both white and non-white, are at a disadvantage in school and society because their everyday language is different from the elite usage favored in the classroom and in the business world. However, a critical study of a native idiom, in this case Creole, simultaneous with a critical inquiry into Standard English, proves to be an empowering experience for the students. This report is a rich example of how to deal concretely with the language differences between teachers and students, while keeping in the foreground the social aspects of language use.

The problem of nonstandard speech in students versus standard usage in school and official life is only more exaggerated in the case of ESL classes. In the next essay, Elsa Auerbach and Denise Burgess offer a thoughtful and extensive survey of traditional texts in programs for nonnative speakers, “The Hidden Curriculum of Survival ESL” (Chapter 9). The authors reject mechanical and manipulative varieties of problem-solving and survival ESL. They reveal the racial and class bias behind these apparently helpful materials. Instead, they urge a Freirean problem-solving approach authentically grounded in the situations faced by ESL students.

The Freirean notion of situating pedagogy in the real needs of the learners informs Nancy Schniedewind’s “Feminist Values: Guidelines for Teaching Methodology in Women’s Studies” (Chapter 10). Nancy has written extensively on desocializing students from the sexism, racism, and class bias we all inherit from mass culture (Schniedewind, 1984). Her essay in this book is a helpful blend of theory and practice. She describes her courses in detail after discussing the pedagogical principles she is trying to implement. Nancy has been influenced by Freirean approaches and makes direct reference to Freire in this paper. Besides being of concrete value to teachers, her report shows the intersection of women’s themes, feminism, and Freirean learning styles. This book, also, demonstrates the major contribution made by women in developing Freirean applications of liberatory education. The common ground on which feminism and Freirean education meet may be the mutual interest in participatory politics, in the integration of social issues with subjective experience, in the use of interactive formats for consciousness-raising, in democratic social relations for school and society, in the empowerment of non-elite groups, and in the critique of domination by elites.

The final selection in this anthology is Marilyn Frankenstein’s “Critical Mathematics Education: An Application of Paulo Freire’s Epistemology” (Chapter 11). Marilyn’s essay has unusual depth. She demonstrates that Freirean problem-posing can be applied outside language, literacy, literature, and communications classes. These latter disciplines have made the most progress in the field of liberatory teaching. This makes sense given that language courses were the scenes of Freire’s original literacy programs for peasants and workers in Brazil, in the 1950s and early 1960s. The extension of these methods to nonlanguage courses is needed to balance the push forward into critical literacy classes. Marilyn is a leader in this project. Her essay offers a concise summary of Freirean theory underlying our practice. Then, she concretely shows how to design practical curriculum from these concepts, in a math course. Perhaps a second volume can follow this one—devoted to applications in the natural and social sciences, in professional programs, and in career courses. There are teachers like Marilyn who are experimenting in nonlanguage courses, whose work I would like to learn from. I would be grateful to receive teaching reports at the Department of English, College of Staten Island, Staten Island, NY 10301.

Concluding this volume is an afterword by Paulo Freire, “Letter to North-American Teachers” (Chapter 12), written especially for this book. Paulo begins by asserting the political dimension of education. He goes on to consider differences between progressive and reactionary teachers. Further, he writes about our need to make the social relations of the classroom consistent with our democratic values. Following Paulo’s letter is Cynthia Brown’s essay, “Literacy in 30 Hours: Paulo Freire’s Process in Northeast Brazil.” I include this paper here because it is the best brief presentation of the classroom method originally used by Freire and his literacy teams. Cynthia’s essay includes the drawings used by Freire to stimulate discussion in literacy circles for illiterates. This report first appeared in 1974 and has offered many teachers a lucid contact with the origins of Freirean methods.

We teachers have many needs and face many demands. Our classrooms are busy, complicated places requiring ingenious, agile minds. Hopefully, this book will be of some help to teachers who want to experiment with liberatory learning. This has been a difficult, degenerate period in school and society, so rich in budget cuts and official alarms and accusations of teacher-student mediocrity, and so poor in creative ideas and in resources directed to classrooms. This age may give way to forward-looking renewals and to progressive politics, or it may decline into even worse conditions and more austere conservatism in and out of education. No one can predict the future and no one book can solve all our day-to-day challenges in the classroom. We
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Educating the Educators: A Freirean Approach to the Crisis in Teacher Education

IRA SHOR

Teacher education programs are disturbingly alike and almost uniformly inadequate.... This nation cannot continue to afford the brief, casual, conforming preparation now experienced by those who will staff its classrooms.... We will only begin to get evidence of the potential power of pedagogy when we dare to risk and support markedly deviant classroom procedures.

John Goodlad (1983)

Only a few teachers used the difficult decade of the 1970s to teach themselves and their students with some new methods.... It is easy to claim that a radical restructuring of society or the system of education is needed for the kind of cultural bridging reported in this book to be large scale and continuous.

Shirley Brice Heath (1983)

It is astonishing that so few critics challenge the system.... When one considers the energy, commitment and quality of so many of the people working in the schools, one must place the blame elsewhere. The people are better than the structure. Therefore the structure must be a fault.


[For too many teachers give out directions, busywork, and fact-fact-fact lectures in ways that keep students intellectually passive, if not actually deepening their disregard for learning and schooling.

The Holmes Group (1986)
Reform in the Name of Authority Since 1983: The Roots of the Crisis in Teacher Education

Wisdom says there is light there is heat, but experience shows that the opposite is not always true. The post-1983 waves of reform, "the great school debate" chronicled by Gross and others,1 created the context for examining teacher education, but the reform movement so far has generated more heat than light. Perhaps it is understandable for discussion of root causes and forward-looking solutions to languish in conservative years. The Reagan Administration, which once declared ketchup a vegetable when it sought to cut school lunch budgets, released a report, A Nation at Risk in 1983, accusing students and teachers of an alarming mediocrity. Apparently, this mediocrity was helping Japan and Germany outpace our economy, even threatening national security. The antidote fit the regressive tenor of the times—more traditional courses, more mechanical testing, and a lust for excellence coupled with a token glance at equality.

After A Nation at Risk appeared, a second major salvo was fired by the influential Education Commission of the States in its report Action for Excellence (1983). It repeated the White House alarms on school decline and teacher quality, highlighting the teacher gap, that is, the shortage of qualified teachers to fill classrooms and the lower achievement of those entering the profession. Joining these key statements in that same year were many studies and documents; among the more widely-discussed were Academic Preparation for College (1983), Making the Grade (1983), Educating Americans for the 21st Century (1983), and America's Competitive Challenge (1983). This great stir from above provoked state-wide legislation and reviews of curriculum in its first assault on the crisis. Eventually, the reform campaign swept the sad condition of teacher education into its nets, in a "second wave" of the great school debate.

Fishy Nets: Why the Authorities Launched Their Reforms

Unhappy with the costs and the outcomes of schooling, the highest policy-makers turned their attention after 1983 to curricular reform, to restructuring their management of the teaching profession, and to teacher education. At this juncture, business and the military complained about the quality of graduates entering the workforce and the service, especially in regard to literacy and to work discipline.2 From another angle, the new arms race and the high-tech boom in the economy created in the early 1980s an undersupply of computer workers and engineers (estimated at some 40,000 a year by the Business-Higher Education Forum). This labor shortage could be solved by tipping curriculum towards technology and computer studies. Unfortunately, by 1986, sectors of the electronics industry were laying off workers in a period of economic recovery, sorry news for students who rushed to computer majors and for college planners who promote business needs through curriculum.

Still another labor factor brought curriculum and teacher education into the spotlight. By 1984, the teacher surplus of the 1970s had become a teacher shortage. Even though education programs had grown by 113 in number since 1973, by the 1980s they were producing 53 percent fewer teachers.3 Schools were experiencing disruptive spot shortages of teachers, especially in math, science, and foreign languages. Inner-city schools had unusually high turnover rates in their staffs each year. Substantial portions of the teacher corps were teaching out-of-license, with music majors instructing math courses, for example, as stopgap measures, in nominally temporary arrangements that became a permanent and irrational way of life. This teacher supply problem is expected to grow worse in the coming decade, so official "manpower" planning required a look at what the professional pipeline can do to train new teachers and how the profession can be reorganized to get more from current staff.

With few exceptions,4 the official reports explained away the real issues in the teacher shortage and in the decline of education, choosing instead "blaming-the-victim" formulas such as student-teacher "mediocrity," the need for "excellence" and higher "standards," the softness in a "cafeteria-style" high school curriculum, and the "breakdown of discipline" in school and the family. In reality, the current crisis was invited by budget cuts in public schools and colleges, which left class size too large, school buildings shabby, instructional materials in short supply, education programs unable to afford careful mentoring of student teachers, and new blood not coming into aging academic departments. Further, conservative educational policy imposed depressing programs of careerism and back-to-basics in the 1970s, making intellectual life in the classroom dull, vocational, and oversupervised.5 These new curricula discouraged creativity and liberal education, inviting gifted teachers to leave the profession, while dissuading students from thinking of education as an exciting career. The vocational imbalance in college curriculum in the 1970s, when the job market for liberal arts majors and for teachers collapsed, when business and computer majors expanded wildly, steered a generation away from education as a forward-looking job. Those teachers already in-service faced austerity from Nixon through Reagan, leading to wage losses and to decay in their worsening schools. These depressing conditions in the public sector were characteristic of the recent conservative resurgence against the egalitarianism of the 1960s.
Two other factors in the teaching crisis are higher wages in the private sector for some college graduates and the appearance of a new baby boom. Wages for technical-scientific graduates are better in the private sector than in education or in public sector jobs. This difference draws labor to industry, attracting teachers out of low-paying education jobs into better-paying corporate ones. In an economy unbalanced by military spending, there is a domestic "brain drain" of math, science, and engineering teachers from education into the booming military and electronics sectors of the economy.6 Secondly, the rising birthrate made its predictable impact on the elementary grades by 1984, creating a demand for new teachers after a decade of economic and social policy that undermined public education. A sudden demand for labor is a crisis in education as in any other labor-short part of the economy. The $180-billion-a-year school system needs about one million new teachers, according to the NIE report, The Condition of Education (1984).

Evolving issues of economic policy and the arms race, the "excellence" reformers promised a renewal from high-tech, traditional subjects, more required testing, career ladders in the teaching profession, and something called "education for economic growth." Such myths hid the causes of school decline, due not only to budget cuts, to the withdrawal of federal support for equality, and to the redirection of funds from social services to the military, but also to the dramatic failure of the corporate job market to inspire graduates with employment equal to their educations.7 Only a few years before the White House initiative in 1983, the education scene was debating the terrible predicament of "the overeducated American." Besides Richard Freeman's 1976 book of that name, other studies by Ivar Berg, James O'Toole, Harry Braverman, Henry Levin, and Russell Rumberger pointed to a workforce gaining more education while the job market deskilled work through automation and raised the credentials needed for routine jobs.8 Just how "overeducation" turned overnight into "mediocrity" was not addressed in the official reports. This would require less blaming of individuals and more critical looks at the corporate-education system. For example, the corporate policy of deindustrializing the United States in favor of cheap-labor sanctuaries in the Third World has profoundly affected education policy. Underlying the new reform wave is the corporate need for a new outcome from schooling - graduates ready for the narrow literacy needs of a computerized economy and workers adjusted to frequent job changes, lower wages, and routine labor, in a "high flex" business world. The major reports after 1983 look for granted that this brave new system would benefit teachers and students as well as business.

The System of Silence: Pushing Liberal Values to the Margins

By ignoring uncomfortable political questions, the recent reform wave had a remarkably unbalanced debate and legislative season. Official commissions and legislative groups, along with media coverage, followed a narrow line of traditional frameworks and authoritarian remedies. These "get-tough" approaches caused visible dismay in out-of-favor liberal circles. Ernest Boyer (1983) complained in his Carnegie report that the new regimens forgot that "education is to enrich the living individual," while Theodore Sizer declared that the current reform wave lacked the compassion for students present in earlier periods of change.9 Boyer, Sizer, and other skeptics like John Goodlad and Harold Howe II doubted the claims of the "excellence" camp with regard to illiteracy, the SAT decline, and the need for heavy doses of back-to-basics.10 The liberal dissenter observed the strident emphasis on more testing of teachers and students, more required courses, fewer electives, a reduced federal role in guaranteeing equity, and the call for Standard English over bilingual teaching.

In a period dominated by conservatism, the liberal dissenters were worthy of more attention than they received. Besides Boyer's report High School (1983), liberal departures can be found in studies by Sizer (1984) and Linda Darling-Hammond (1984, 1984b). Two "premature" liberal statements from 1982 were Herb Kohl's (1984) helpful book on basic skills and Gene Maeroff's Don't Blame the Kids (1982), which offered critiques of the conservative politics behind the back-to-basics movement. These works appeared at the same time as Mortimer Adler's The Paideia Proposal (1982), but got far less attention than Adler's traditional proposals. Further among the liberal departures, Shirley Brice Heath's pathbreaking Ways with Words (1983) offered a nontraditional ethnographic model of teaching and learning that unfortunately had no impact on state legislation or on district-wide curricular policies. Another pedagogical challenge was offered by Richard Richardson, Literacy in the Open-Access College (1983). Richardson did not blame working students for their learning deficits; instead, he pointed to mechanical teaching, which ladled knowledge out as "bits" of information, to state under-funding of mass higher education, and to the vocational bias of the community college as obstacles to the "critical literacy" needed by students.

Other meagerly discussed reports in this dissenting group were the NIE's Involvement in Learning (1984), the New World Foundation's Choosing Equality (1985), the Association of American College's Integrity in the College Curriculum (1985), and John Goodlad's monumental A Place Called School (1983). These substantial documents presented alternate policy and pedagogy against the conservative tide of the 1980s. Choosing Equality boldly recommended
egalitarian federal funding, public economic development to create jobs, and student/teacher/parent “empowerment” as the foundations for educational reform. It was one “grass-roots” correction to an “excellence” mystique launched by A Nation at Risk and Action for Excellence, and promoted by “excellence” networkers like Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn.12

From the egalitarian side, policy issues were matched by presentations of alternative pedagogy. Heath’s work in the Carolina Piedmont demonstrated the power of student-centered teaching that broke the traditional separation of school and community. The NIE and AAC reports took stands for interactive, interdisciplinary curriculum. Goodlad supported experimental, participatory pedagogy against the traditional teacher-talk dominating the thousand classrooms his researchers visited. Sizer, Boyer, and Goodlad all acknowledged the failure of the regular school syllabus to address the needs and themes of adolescents. Darling-Hammond discussed the unequal curriculum offered to black students. The NIE and AAC reports acknowledged the failure of traditional curricula to serve the educational needs of college students, whose learning was hindered by the academy’s departmental sectionalism, preference for lecture methods, and rewarding of professors for narrow research instead of teaching.13 This dissenting body of literature did not support “get-tough” programs for the school malaise.

The Heart in the Dissenting Body: An Egalitarian Synthesis

The liberal dissents in this antiliberal period occupied marginal ground. Their defense of student-centered, egalitarian, and interactive values was a heroic holding action. In this dissenting margin, though, one undeveloped value was education as a change-agent. The New World Foundation report, Choosing Equality (1985), stands out here for its advocacy of community empowerment and community-based school reform. It called for including parents in school policymaking. This was a change-agency egalitarianism missing in the other documents. The issue here is linking education to local leadership and existing community organizations. A vision of the educator participating in social change was developed even further out in the margins, in energetic networks of “participatory researchers” and adult or community educators.14

In addition to the idea of change-agency, the heart in this dissenting body needed an egalitarian overview that did not articulate. Such a synthesis is too important to leave implicit or unrecognized.

I propose the following framework as one way to view egalitarianism and change-agency in education: 

**egalitarianism and change-agency in education: equality is excellence because inequality leads to alienation.**

Excellence without equality only produces more inequality. Inequality leads to learning deficits and to alienation in the great mass of students. Alienation in school is the number one learning problem, depressing academic performance and elevating student resistance. Student resistance to intellectual life is socially produced by inequality and by authoritarian pedagogy in school, worsening the literacy problem and the crisis in teacher burnout.15 Teacher burnout and student resistance are social problems of an unequal system and cannot be fully addressed by teacher-education reforms or by classroom remedies alone. Participatory and critical pedagogy coupled with egalitarian policies in school and society can holistically address the education crisis.

I am suggesting that the education crisis is thus an expression of the social crisis of inequality. As one solution, egalitarianism empowers people and raises aspirations in school and society. Power and hope are sources of motivation to learn and to do. Motivation produces student involvement and involvement produces learning and literacy. Student participation also supports teacher morale, making the hard work of teaching attractive and rewarding, lessening burnout. Teacher and student morale from the joy of learning will inspire more people to choose teaching as a career, and to stay in teaching once there, easing the teacher shortage. Inspiring classrooms can also encourage more teachers and students to take themselves seriously as intellectuals who can critically grasp any issue, technical process, body of knowledge, moment in history, or political condition in society. Teachers and students oriented to debate and critical study will be better able to act as citizens democratically transforming society. Democratic participation in society may include action against the arms race and budget cuts, potentially shifting wealth from guns to learning, improving the quality and appeal of intellectual life in schools.

The above synthesis recognizes that the fate of education is grossly influenced by economics, by community life and literacy, by commercial mass culture, and by political action outside the classroom. Besides the billions spent on weapons, the most glaring social inequity is the greater money invested in the education of richer students at all levels. Years after California’s landmark Serrano decision (1971) against unequal school funding, children of poor and working families still have much less invested in their educations, according to a New York State Court finding in 1981 and to Sizer’s assessment after touring high schools around the nation in 1984.16 This inequality is only the tip of the iceberg, because the daily lives, the ways of using language, and the job futures of poor or working students provide other
realities dysfunctional to success in traditional classrooms. This “inequality” (and “arms race”) explanation of the school crisis did not appear in the official reports because it blames the economic system rather than pointing a haughty finger at student-teacher “mediocrity,” at “spongy” courses in high school, at open admission to college, or at the alleged breakdown of discipline in the family. Economic and social policy gutted mass education, inviting students and teachers to go on a performance strike.

Performance Anxiety: Why Teaching Matters

While factors beyond the classroom grossly affect education, what goes on in school makes an important difference, not only in the quality of a student’s life and learning, but also in the possible transformation of students, teachers, and of the society setting the curriculum. The strongest potential of education lies in studying the politics and student cultures affecting the classroom. It is politically naive or simply “technocratic” to see the classroom as a world apart where inequality, ideology, and economic policy don’t affect learning. It is just as damaging to think pessimistically that nothing good can be achieved in the classroom until the economic system and society are changed. It is also mistaken to believe euphorically that education can change society one classroom at a time.

Lone classrooms cannot change a social system. Only political movements can transform inequality. Egalitarian pedagogy can interfere with the disabling socialization of students. School is one large agency among several that socializes students. One way to touch the real potential of teaching is to see that education can either confirm or challenge socialization into inequality. Classrooms can confirm student rejection of critical thinking, that is, confirm the curricular disempowerment of their intelligence; or teachers can employ an egalitarian pedagogy to counter their students’ disabling education. School is a dependent sector of society that plays a role in reproducing alienated consciousness; it is also an arena of contention where critical teachers can search for openings to challenge inequality, through a critical curriculum in a democratic learning process, to study the culture offering a mass disabling education.

When pedagogy and curricular policy reflect egalitarian goals, they do what education can do: oppose socialization with desocialization; choose critical consciousness over commercial consciousness, transformation of society over reproduction of inequality; promote democracy by practicing it and by studying authoritarianism; challenge student withdrawal through participatory courses; illuminate the myths supporting the elite hierarchy of society; interfere with the scholastic disabling of students through a critical literacy program; raise awareness about the thought and language expressed in daily life; distribute research skills and censored information useful for investigating power and policy in society; and invite students to reflect socially on their conditions, to consider overcoming the limits.

Such a critical pedagogy reinvents education in opposition to the traditional purpose of curriculum, which is the reproduction of inequality, a function studied handsomely by Jencks, Bowles and Gintis, Carnoy and Levin, Willis, Apple, Giroux, and others. In opposing the reproduction of subordinate consciousness, there are several roads to critical learning. I and others have experimented with Paulo Freire methods. Shirley Heath tested an ethnographic model. Herb Kohl offered a student-centered language program similar to Stephen Judy’s (1980) proposals. Robert Pattison (1982) suggested a “bi-idiomatic” approach to teaching colloquial and formal discourse simultaneously. Jonathan Kozol (1985) proposed a national literacy campaign aimed at adults.

We can pose the question of critical pedagogy (desocialization) when we discuss teacher education programs or curriculum at any level of schooling. Once we accept education’s role as challenging inequality and dominant myths rather than as socializing students into the status quo, we have a foundation needed to invent practical methods. Desocialization itself, as a curricular goal, builds on the dissenting terrain already staked out by the liberal departures. Pattison, for example, refused to enthrone correct usage as a universal standard of excellence, referring to it simply as the idiom of the triumphant middle classes, useful for supporting authoritarian societies as easily as democratic ones. Boyer (1983) asserted equality as an unfinished agenda for education. Darling-Hammond (1984b) repeated Boyer’s thought in her study of schooling for black students, whose egalitarian gains from the 1960s have eroded since 1975. Further, she saw the micro-management of the classroom by state-mandated testing and syllabi as depressing the performance of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1984a). Sizer (1984) acknowledged the great impact social class has on education while class as a theme was not included in the syllabus. Heath (1983) suggested teaching out into everyday life to build on the existing literacy of any school population. Her work was a refreshing break with routine assertions that students were “illiterate.” Goodlad (1983) offered the most systematic critique of traditional teaching, including the racial inequities of tracking. Lastly, the Association of American Colleges’s Integrity in the College Curriculum (1985) strongly criticized the remoteness of college professors from teaching.
for students, who would be trained to be local ethnographers, studying scientifically the language and habits they had previously only experienced. Through such a pedagogy, students teach themselves and the teacher while the teacher learns from the very students she or he is also teaching. This mutual education also offers students distance on reality, modeling the critical habit of mind. Heath’s program collapsed the wall between classroom and community, between research and teaching, and between research and living. It is an example of the experiential/conceptual approach to learning Dewey proposed.

However, the trend of curricular reform after 1983 was not towards participatory pedagogy, experimental training units, or liberal educational policy. The debate defined teaching and learning in conservative ways that evaded the real needs of the classroom. One evasion focused on managing the profession—teacher testing, certification requirements, differential pay, competitive career ladders—while skirting the three big-ticket items that most concerned teachers: higher wages across the board, smaller class size, and lighter course loads. A second evasion concerned the learning process. Teaching and learning were defined primarily in terms of traditional values and the Great Books, as fixed authority based in standard reading lists, with the teacher as a delivery system in a one-way transfer of information and skills to students. This mechanical notion of education sought traditional material as its core curriculum: the American Heritage and Western Civilization. Such rejections of the multicultural diversity emerging from the 1960s can be read ideally in E. D. Hirsch’s definition of “cultural literacy” as a 130-page reading list of Eurocentric works. Hirsch assured us that this list could be reduced for curriculum purposes to a more manageable size, but without such an excursion through a canon dominated by white, male, Western authors, a person could not be considered culturally literate. Another canonical thrust was Mortimer Adler’s bookish “paidia” program, which endorsed the knowledge of “classics” in a lecture-dominated pedagogy.

The notion of a core curriculum based in traditional values and classical texts appealed also to Chester Finn, when as Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administration he prepared What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning (1986). This angelic tome began by exhorting the family to do more at home for education and by insisting that hard work and self-reliance (not social policy or school funding) are at the heart of student failure or success. The traditional bent of Finn, a key “excellence” spokesperson, was demonstrated by the many quotes from ancient and pre-1800 sources sprinkling the text, as well as by recommendations to teach a “shared” heritage to students that would instill national pride. This myth of a neutral, shared, national history reduces the critical and
multicultural potentials of education. The models proposed by Finn, Adler, and Hirsch were the kind that informed legislative action. They denied the student-centered and experiential values of Goodlad and Heath, and of Charles Silberman during the upheavals of the 1960s, when Silberman (1971) defined a community “paidedía.” Goodlad (1983) also referred to “paidedía” as education in a whole community, not as a school-bound event alone. But, the house of authority heard only Adler.

One lesson here is that the reading list and the learning process are forms of politics and ideology, not neutral terrains. Another lesson is that the learning process you set for the school is the model socializing future teachers in how to teach. By reasserting an elite canon, in a mechanical menu of testing and teacher-talk, the official commissions and legislative bodies after 1983 were also reifying a model of teaching. In-service teachers feel great pressure to teach to the tests, while future teachers receive passive canonical instruction in high school, in collegiate liberal arts, and in their academic majors. A passive pedagogy married to dismal texts and traditional reading lists is the curriculum modeled to students, including that fraction who will one day be teachers. This is why all of school is actually “teacher education,” a paidedía socializing teachers in how to teach and what to learn. To segregate “pedagogy” courses as the place to study teaching is one way to hide the authoritarian, mechanical training embedded in the standard curriculum.

Cannons Aimed at Canons: The Culture War over Learning Process

For over a century, mechanical, factory models of teaching and learning have been at war with critical, interactive education. The quality of the learning process was an issue to liberal dissenters after 1983, heirs as they are to the Deweyan side in the long culture war over curriculum. In one more liberal departure from the dominant trend, the Academy for Educational Development’s report Teacher Development in Schools (1985) suggested that the teacher’s learning process required far more than information skills or mechanical grasp of subject matter. The document pointed towards the pre-service teacher’s need to study the cultural influences surrounding an individual school, and how teachers and students actually learn in real classrooms.

On the managerial side of this debate, some samples of silence on the learning process can be found in reports from the Southern Regional Education Board, Improving Teacher Education (1985a) and Teacher Preparation: The Anatomy of a Degree (1985b); from Oregon’s Quality Assurance: Teacher Education in the Oregon State System of Higher Education (1984); from the California Commission on the Teaching Profession’s policy study Who Will Teach Our Children? (1985); from the State University of New York’s Report of the Chancellor’s Task Force on Teacher Education (1985) and the New York State Education Department’s Strengthening Teaching in New York State (1985); from the Washington-based National Center for Education Information’s The Making of a Teacher: A Report on Teacher Education and Certification (1984); and from the most prominent of all, the National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education’s A Call for Change in Teacher Education (1985).

Instead of a critical discussion of a future teacher’s learning process, the reports focus on managing the profession, on admissions and graduation standards to programs, on certification of teachers, on differential pay schemes, and on time spent by students in collegiate courses. The mechanical pedagogy modeled to students at all levels does not surface as a serious concern. Thus, while the reports differ in style and emphases, they show compatibility and consensus. A consensus policy agenda from this group could be synthesized as follows:

- The teaching profession needs higher standards for training and licensure. Teacher education programs are not selective enough, while in-service teachers need to meet more rigorous standards. Admissions and graduation standards in college programs should be raised.
- Teachers need more in-service development. Veteran classroom teachers can train new ones in school and future teachers in campus programs.
- Salaries need improvement, especially at entry-level, and career ladders should be instituted to give teachers incentives.
- Assign teachers fewer noninstructional duties, offer teachers more autonomy in their classroom, and include them more in administrative and policy decisions.
- More care and funds should be given to student teaching in college programs. Teacher preparation should include at least a one-year student-teaching internship.
- The training of teachers should remain primarily on college campuses at the undergraduate level with some alternate, off-campus routes into the profession (a choice made by a number of states, including New Jersey and its alternate certification plan).
- Education majors need more liberal arts courses in college.
- For certification, new teachers should have to pass exams in subject matter, basic skills, and knowledge of pedagogy, in addition to successfully completing a one-year internship in student teaching.
• Efforts should be made to attract the brightest students, especially high-achieving minority candidates, to teaching.
• Research on teaching needs to be more widely disseminated in education courses and in public schools.
• A five-year undergraduate teacher education program is needed, requiring liberal arts, concentration in an academic major, education courses, and an internship in student teaching, all of which cannot be completed within the current four-year degree.

A five-year undergraduate program was suggested by the National Commission and by the California Commission in their documents, but it also appeared in the NIE statement *Involvement in Learning* (1984). The New York State Chancellor’s Task Force was evenly split between the four- and five-year degree program. The heads of both teacher unions, Albert Shanker of the AFT and Mary Hatwood Futrell of the NEA, served on the National Commission and strongly endorsed the recommendation for a five-year baccalaureate program. Shanker later gave full support to the Carnegie report *A Nation Prepared* (1986), which joined the Holmes Group in urging the abolition of the undergraduate degree in education, in favor of graduate programs only. Holmes called for an end to all undergraduate education programs while favoring most of the above consensual agenda. I will come back to this undergraduate-graduate dispute shortly to discuss “time” fallacies in mechanical approaches to learning. The five-year baccalaureate and the undergraduate-graduate debate are two ways to paint yourself into a corner if you lose sight of the quality of a learning process. Pedagogy took a back seat in this dispute between two wings of the academy—the graduate research universities that want to offer and to “professionalize” the teaching degree versus the established undergraduate teacher programs. This dispute suggested a “trade war” in higher education over who will control the huge teacher-training market. Trade war aside, the above consensual agenda did suggest items beneficial to the teaching profession: higher pay, more classroom autonomy for teachers, carefully mentored internships, in-service development, veteran school teachers serving as adjunct faculty in college programs (suggested also by Holmes and by Shanker). The California Commission even recommended the teacher’s nightly wish: reduce class size. The agenda, however, was undemocratically developed and imposed with little or no input from teachers. Class size and course load have not come down, while salaries have made some selective gains. The high-profile reforms first pushed through have been more testing of teachers and of students in information and in basic skills, and more required courses in the syllabus, without debate on the learning process in teacher education or in the schools and colleges.

The Proof of the Pudding Is in the Process: If More Liberal Arts Is the Answer, What Is the Question?

One repeated claim in the major reports is that education courses are soft on content while liberal arts courses are hard. Therefore, future teachers who need a better grasp of the canon should study more academic subjects. Future secondary teachers already spend the largest part of their credits in liberal arts and only about 20 percent of their baccalaureate hours in education courses. Still, the information mystique of the liberal arts (social science, natural science, literature, the arts) reappears at a time when mechanical pedagogy fits the needs of top-down reform. The mechanical model offers quantitative and pointless answers to the education crisis: require teachers to take more academic courses, require students to take more information courses, and test both students and teachers on how much they memorized. The grave error is to define memorization as education. The grave disservice to the liberal arts is to define them as information centers.

The humanities curriculum should be admired when it generates critical thought in students and inspires them to interactive learning. Academic studies should not be bodies-of-knowledge eaten in gulps by “information-poor” students. Liberal courses should develop conceptual habits of mind, critical methods of inquiry, in-depth scrutiny, by displaying the relationship between intellect, politics, values, and society. To send future teachers to liberal arts courses to be lectured at and made passive recipients of information is to socialize them further in the wrong model of learning and teaching. This is a point raised in the Holmes Report, and suggested in the earlier AAC and NIE documents, *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (1985) and *Involvement in Learning* (1984). The challenge to every liberal arts course is how much critical thinking does it generate and how much participation does it mobilize, how does it relate its body-of-knowledge to other disciplines, to the communities and literacies of the students, and to the larger conditions of society. These are the pedagogical responsibilities of any course, it should be said, not merely liberal arts. We’ve come to expect career, business, tech, and science courses to be trade-school arenas that don’t provoke spacious understanding or critical thinking around values. This is as bad as expecting liberal arts to be the sole repository of historical thinking, values analysis, and comprehensive knowledge.
thought on school and society, then teacher-education will be a serious enterprise at the graduate or undergraduate level. If curriculum at any degree level for any number of years is dominated by teacher-talk, didactic lectures, canonical reading lists, commercial textbooks, and standardized testing, then five or six years of undergraduate work or two years of graduate study will not develop the teachers needed to inspire learning. Further, even the best teacher education will have limited results as long as low pay, large classes, heavy work loads, administrative over supervision, standardized testing, and shabby conditions dominate the classroom.

It will be useful for teacher-education reform to confront the time fallacy. More time in liberal arts, a five-year baccalaureate, or a two-year M.A.T. pale in comparison to the question of the learning process. The socializing power of any experience is more in its quality than in its quantity, more in the quality of social relations than in the quantity of statements or rules. A desocializing, egalitarian, and critical pedagogy is a quality process that can invite teachers and students to take their educations seriously. It is one not being modeled now.

Modeling New Fashions: Freirean Themes for Teacher Education

To help define a desocializing model for teacher education, I want to offer a Freirean agenda for the learning process:

1. **Dialogue Teaching.** The dialogue-method discussed by Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1987) is one way to reduce student withdrawal and teacher-talk in the classroom. A dialogic class begins with problem-posing discussion and sends powerful signals to students that their participation is expected and needed. It will not be easy to learn the arts of dialogue because education now offers so little critical discussion and so few constructive peer exchanges. Dialogue calls for a teacher's art of intervention and art of restraint, so that the verbal density of a trained intellectual does not silence the verbal styles of unscholastic students.

Practice in leading dialogic inquiries in class will require making the teacher-education curriculum itself dialogic. It also suggests study in group dynamics, the social relations of discourse, and the linguistic habits of students in their communities, in relation to their sex, class, race, region, age, and ethnic origin.

2. **Critical Literacy.** Literacy that provokes critical awareness and desocialization will mean more than basic competency. It will be critical literacy across the curriculum, asking all courses to develop reading, writing, thinking, speaking, and listening habits,
to provoke conceptual inquiry into self and society and into the
every discipline under study. This means that future teachers in
every subject, from biology to architecture, can study how their
special competence can generally develop thinking and language
skills.

Critical literacy invites teachers and students to _problematize_
all subjects of study, that is, to understand existing knowledge as
a historical product deeply invested with the values of those who
developed such knowledge. A critically literate person does not
stay at the empirical level of memorizing data, or at the impres-
sionistic level of opinion, or at the level of dominant myths in
society, but goes beneath the surface to understand the origin,
structure, and consequences of any body of knowledge, technical
process, or object under study. This model of literacy establishes
teaching and learning as forms of research and experimenta-
tion, testing hypotheses, examining items, questioning what we know.
In addition, teaching/learning as research suggests that teachers
constantly observe students’ learning, to make pedagogical deci-
sions, while students are also researching their language, their
society, and their own learning.

3. **Situated Pedagogy.** This goal asks teachers to situate learning in
the students’ cultures—their literacy, their themes, their present
cognitive and affective levels, their aspirations, their daily lives.
The goal is to integrate experiential materials with conceptual
methods and academic subjects. Grounding economics or nursing
or engineering or mathematics or biology in student life and liter-
acy will insert these courses in the _subjectivity_ of the learners.

Subjectivity is a synonym for motivation. Material that is of
subjective concern is by definition important to those studying
it. By turning to subjectivity, the situated course will not only
connect experience with critical thought, but will also demon-
strate that intellectual work has a tangible purpose in our lives,
in discourse connected to student habits of communication.
Further, only a situated pedagogy can bring critical study to bear
on the concrete circumstances of living, the immediate conditions
of life that critical learning may help recreate.

4. **Ethnography and Cross-Cultural Communications.** A teacher’s
academic program needs components in ethnography and cultural
anthropology. To situate critical literacy and dialogue inside the
language, themes, and cognitive levels of the students, a teacher
needs to study the population he or she is teaching for. This study
can be carried out using the ethnographic methods described by
Heath, the sociolinguistics demonstrated by Richard Hoggart and
by Noelle Bissset, and the grounded theory approach to research
discussed by Glaser and Strauss.\(^\text{34}\)

Further, experience in cross-cultural communications will be
valuable for teachers who are likely to lead classrooms with di-
verse student populations. In this regard, the functions of bila-
dialectalism and bilingualism in schools are other academic themes
that can address the communications problems of teaching in a
multicultural society. A final anthropological feature of teacher
education is the need to study nontraditional literatures out-
side the official canon, from labor culture, ethnic groups, and
women’s writings.

5. **Change-Agency.** To be egalitarian change-agents, teachers need
to study community analysis and models of community change.\(^\text{35}\)
How do communities structure themselves? How do they change?
How do outsiders identify and work with local leaders? How can
classroom instruction model itself on key issues of community
life?

The teacher will also need to study school organization, school-
based curriculum design, the legislative environment for education,
and professional politics. Inside the institution of a school or col-
lege, political methods for change can include staff development
seminars, community-school linkages, faculty committees and
assemblies, internal publications, political lobbying, and union
organization. Future teachers can benefit from studying histories
of organizing change in the classroom, in schools or colleges, and
in communities.

6. **Inequality in School and Society.** This academic interest can be
studied through sociology, economics, history, and psychology
courses. How do inequalities of race, sex, and class influence
school outcomes and expenditures? How did the current school
system emerge in relation to the politics of each preceding age?
What impact have egalitarian movements had on school and
social policy? How have nontraditional, egalitarian programs
affected student performance?\(^\text{36}\)

7. **Performing Skills.** Teachers can benefit from voice and drama
training to enhance their skills of presentation and discussion-
leading. To be a creative problem-poser in the classroom, drama
and voice skills are helpful. The teacher needs to think of himself
or herself as a creative artist whose craft is instruction. An excit-
ing instructor is a communications artist who can engage students
in provocative dialogue. Also, performing skills can habituate new
teachers to the intimidating challenge of standing up each hour in
front of a large group and taking charge of the session. Lastly, a
dramatic teacher models the aesthetic joy of dialogue, the pleas-
ure of thinking out loud with others.
This agenda of themes is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. Each study item does not require a separate course. Several themes can be integrated into the same course; for example, an ethnography class can also demonstrate dialogue methods of teaching as well as provide background on literacy situated in student culture, which can be studied for the impact of social inequality on daily life and learning. The above program can be coordinated with student teaching. Further, there are other subjects worthy of study: child psychology and adolescent development, the history of pedagogical thought, international education, immigrant patterns of assimilation, a second language (preferably Spanish for U.S. teachers), and how to survive the first year in the classroom. The most important value is participatory learning that mobilizes critical thought and democratic debate.

Class Dismissed

In conclusion, I would emphasize that learning is not the transfer of skills or information from a talking teacher to a passive student. Education is different from narrow training in business careers. These are the negative recipes for even more student alienation and teacher burnout.

A teacher must grow from the spacious hope of being much more than a talking textbook, more than a mere functionary who implements tests and mandated syllabi. Teaching should offer an illumination of reality that helps us and the students examine the social limits constraining us. Spacious learning does not define students as empty vessels to be filled with packaged information on a thin path of facts and figures. This means opposing the mechanical pedagogy and the unequal tracking that take some to success and most others to cheap labor and underemployment, to despair and anti-intellectualism.

Learning which is more than job training and more than socialization into subordinate lives seeks the critical study of society. Such education is a charmingly utopian challenge to inequality and to authoritarian methods, through a humorous, rigorous, and humanizing dialogue, with the April hope of lowering student resistance and teacher burnout, with the August desire of reknowing ourselves and history, in that vast arena of culture war called education.

Notes


4. One exception to the routine assertions of the 1983 reform wave is High Schools and the Changing Workplace, op. cit., which did not wax grandiloquent on high-tech and computers, as did the other reports. Stanford economist Henry Levin was on the panel producing this report, and its cool assessment of high-tech may reflect his research into the marginal impact computers would have on wages, opportunities, and employment in the future job market. Another exceptional moment is the "Background Paper" by Paul E. Peterson attached to the Twentieth Century Fund report, Making the Grade (1983). Peterson's research found no educational crisis or collapse to justify the official claims of 1983. His lengthy study showed the positive outcomes from federal equity programs in the 1960s, thus reversing the report's major claim in favor of more emphasis on "excellence" and less on equality. A third exception is the California Commission on the Teaching Profession's report, Who Will Teach Our Children? (1985), which recommended ending state regulation of teacher education programs, thus allowing each campus to experiment. John Goodlad was on this Commission and this unusual recommendation reflected at least one concern in his study, A Place Called School (1983).

age were studied in Piven and Cloward, The New Class War: Reagan’s Attack on the Welfare State (New York: Pantheon, 1982).

6. For some analysis of the domestic brain drain, see Henry Levin, “Solving the Shortage of Mathematicians and Science Teachers,” Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Vol. 7, No. 4, Winter, 1985, 371-382. Levin’s research points out that from 15 to 50 percent of all science personnel are employed directly or indirectly by the Defense Department.


13. The NIE report, Involvement in Learning (1984), deals more with learning process than does the AAC report, Integrity in the College Curriculum (1985). AAC focused on curricular policy for higher education, promoting interdisciplinary and critical themes, in a desire to reorient a research professoriat back toward teaching.

14. Some networks supporting community-based, participatory, or change-agency education include the Institute for Responsive Education (Boston), the Public Education Information Network (St. Louis), the Association for Community-Based Education (Washington, DC), Basic Choices (Madison, WI), the Participatory Research Group (Toronto), the Center for Popular Economics (Amherst), the Lindeman Center (Chicago), the Highlander Center (Newmarket, TN) and the Labor Institute (New York). See, for example, Frank Adams and Myles Horton’s Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander (Blair, NC, 1975); the Labor Institute’s What’s Wrong with the U.S. Economy: A Popular Guide for the Rest of Us (Southend, Boston, 1985); and the Institute for Responsive Education’s study, Action for Educational Equity: A Guide for Parents and Members of Community Groups (Boston, 1984, Order No. 100). For one experience in community-based, change-oriented education, see Meredith Minkler and Kathleen Cox, “Creating Critical Consciousness in Health,” International Journal of Health Services, Vol. 10, No. 2, 1980, 311-322.

15. In The 1984 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher (New York: Louis Harris and Associates), teachers ranked lack of student interest as the most serious problem in the classroom, with budget cuts running a close second.


32. Albert Shanker proposed hiring veteran teachers as mentors and adjunct faculty in teacher education programs in *The Making of a Profession* (Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers, 1988). He also confirmed his support of a national teacher testing program and career ladder, including a category of "transient" teacher at the entry-level position. The "transient" teacher idea reappeared in the Holmes Group report (1986) as the job of "instructor," basically the same nontenure track, subordinate position outlined by Shanker.

33. In the National Commission on Excellence in Teacher Education report, *A Call for Change in Teacher Education* (Washington, DC: 1985), how an education major spends her or his credits at the undergraduate level is discussed on p. 13. The Holmes Group report made the same emphatic point about teacher-preparation already being a liberal arts enterprise.


35. For one well-defined program in community education, see Ian M. Harris, "An Undergraduate Community Education Curriculum for Community Development*" Journal of the Community Development Society, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1982, 69-82.


References


Problem-Posing Education: Freire's Method for Transformation

NINA WALLERSTEIN

The problem-posing approach described here originated with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In the late 1950s, Freire initiated a highly successful literacy program for slum dwellers and peasants in Brazil. Concerned with his students' fatalistic outlook, he started “culture circles” that used pictures to challenge students to think critically about their lives and begin to control their own destinies. Culture circles evolved into literacy classes with carefully chosen words that represented the emotionally and socially problematic issues in participants’ lives. The dialogue about each “generative” word stimulated their understanding of the social root causes of problems and how they could effect change. Freire’s programs empowered students with the reading and writing skills necessary to gain the vote and participate in the political process. His work was so successful that he was forced into exile by the Brazilian military in 1964.

Over the last two decades, Freire’s ideas and vision of “education for transformation” have been a catalyst for literacy, English as a Second Language, labor, peace and health education, and community development worldwide. Freire has worked for the World Council of Churches, consulted for Third World countries in adult education, and given conferences in many U.S. universities, returning to Brazil in 1980. An increasing number of educators are adapting his ideas in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Freire’s central premise is that education is not neutral; whether it occurs in a classroom or in a community setting, the interaction of teacher and student does not take place in a vacuum. People bring with them their cultural expectations, their experiences of social discrimination and life pressures, and their strengths in surviving. Education starts from the experiences of people, and either reinforces or challenges the existing social forces that keep them passive.
1. Group evaluation of homework.
(a) Working in groups of three or four, determine which homework problem was easiest (5 min.).
(b) Determine which homework problem was hardest (5 min.).
(Evaluating homework questions is a good lead into having students create their own math problems. Also, this task shows students that because people learn in different ways, they find different problems easy or hard.)

2. Group creation of quizzes:
Working in groups of three or four, create two quiz questions based on the previous lesson (15 min.). I will then choose from your questions to create today’s quiz.
(Once students learn to create fair, comprehensive test questions, they will be able to anticipate the test questions teachers will ask and therefore be able to study effectively for tests. Hopefully, the more practice students have in creating questions, the more they will become used to asking questions, in school and in their daily lives.)

References

Letter to North-American Teachers

PAULO FREIRE (translated by Carman Hunter)

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

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

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

The idea of an identical and neutral role for all teachers could only be accepted by someone who was either naive or very clever. Such a person might affirm the neutrality of education, thinking of school as merely a kind of parenthesis whose essential structure was immune to the influences of social class, of gender, or of race. It is impossible for me to believe that a history teacher who is racist and reactionary will carry out his or her task in the same way as another who is progressive and democratic. It is my basic conviction that a teacher must be fully cognizant of the political nature of his/her practice and assume responsibility for this rather than denying it.
When the teacher is seen as a political person, then the political nature of education requires that the teacher either serve whoever is in power or present options to those in power. The teacher who is critical of the current power in society needs to lessen the distance between the speeches he or she makes to describe political options and what she/he does in the classroom. In other words, to realize alternatives or choices, in the day-to-day classroom, the progressive teacher attempts to build coherence and consistency as a virtue. It is contradictory to proclaim progressive politics and then to practice authoritarianism or opportunism in the classroom. A progressive position requires democratic practice where authority never becomes authoritarianism, and where authority is never so reduced that it disappears in a climate of irresponsibility and license.

There is, however, one dimension of every teacher’s role that is independent of political choice, whether progressive or reactionary. This is the act of teaching subject matter or content. It is unthinkable for a teacher to be in charge of a class without providing students with material relevant to the discipline. But if both a progressive and a reactionary are equal in their obligation to teach, if both agree that it is unthinkable to be a teacher without teaching, nevertheless they will differ with regard to their understanding of what teaching really is. They will differ in their practice, in the way they teach. Professional competence, command of a subject or discipline, is never understood by the progressive teacher as something neutral. There is no such thing as a category called “professional competence” all by itself. We must always ask ourselves: In favor of whom and of what do we use our technical competence?

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

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

As I said above, progressive and reactionary teachers do have one thing in common—the act of teaching some course content. But if they share this obligation to teach, their comprehension of teaching differs, and if they are consistent with their own views, their methods of teaching also differ.

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

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

And the progressive teacher only truly teaches to the degree that he or she has also appropriated the content of what is being taught, learning it critically for herself or himself. In this way, the act of teaching is an act of reknowing an already known object. In other words, the teacher reexperiences his or her own capacity to know through the similar capacity to know that exists in the learners. To teach, then, is the form that knowing takes as the teacher searches for the particular way of teaching that will challenge and call forth in students their own act of knowing. Thus, teaching is both creative and critical. It requires inventiveness and curiosity by both teacher and learner in the process.

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

Literacy in 30 Hours:
Paulo Freire’s Process
in Northeast Brazil

CYNTIAH BROWN

Learning to read is a political act. In a literate society, being able to read is a necessary step toward making decisions and sharing power. A nonliterate person may be very powerful within a nonliterate subculture, but within the dominant culture, a nonreader is marginal. She/he cannot fill out tests and applications, cannot determine what is in contracts without a trusted adviser who can read, has no access to information controlled by professionals, and often is denied the right to vote. Learning to read gives access to information, protection against fraud, and participation as a citizen.

Learning to read is a step toward political participation. But how people exercise their ability to read reflects in part the political attitudes of their teachers. If nonreaders learn to read by writing and reading their own words and opinions, then they learn that their perceptions of reality are valid to others and can influence those in authority. If, on the other hand, their teachers require them to learn the words and ideas in a primer that is donated by those in power, then the learners must accept that experience as more valid than their own. They must accept the concepts of social and economic structure transmitted by the teacher—or decide not to learn to read.

By understanding the political dimensions of reading, Paulo Freire developed methods that enabled adults to learn to read in thirty to forty hours. Freire was born and lived until 1964 in Recife, on the northeast coast of Brazil. In 1960, Recife had 80,000 children from seven to fourteen years old who did not attend school. Adult illiteracy was estimated at sixty to seventy percent. Crusades against illiteracy had been waged repeatedly without much effect. But Freire believed that adults could learn to read rapidly if reading were not part of a cultural imposition on them. After all, adults speak an