



Education's state of hegemony: Considering the contemporaneity of 'conscientisation'

nelson ang^A

A *Educator*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2021.4.s1.8>

Introduction

I have always challenged the essentialism reflected in claims of a unitary experience of class and gender, inasmuch as it is assumed that suffering is a seamless web always cut from the same cloth. Oppression must always be understood in its multiple and contradictory instances, just as liberation must be grounded in the particularity of suffering and struggle in concrete, historical experiences, without resorting to transcendental guarantees.

- Freire, 1993, p. x.

With greater access to education today than ever in history (Unicef, 2021), could hegemony continue to persist? Is a critical pedagogy still relevant and necessary?

Giroux (1988) contended that Freire's continued relevance as a viable alternative to the stasis of existing practice is constituted in his adroit combination of the "language of critique" and the "language of possibility" (p. 108). Freire believed that traditional education is aimed at domesticating learners into accepting oppressive structures; a form of dehumanisation. Whilst more people now have access to education, students are denied an education that is rooted in "a deeply civic, political, and moral practice – that is, pedagogy as a practice for freedom" (Giroux, 2010, p. 715). Instead, formal schooling, especially in institutes of higher learning, is rapidly being subjugated to the service of economic purposes and standardised testing. Indeed, Freire's alternative educational approach is aimed at liberation that combined study circles (called 'culture circles'), lived experience, work and politics (Schugurensky, 2014, p. 21). In so situating students' struggles in the particularities of their individual circumstances, Freire avoided the pessimism of being fraught with the might of systemic oppression, thus restoring the possibility of agency (Giroux, 2010).

The thoughts articulated in this text are the result of my 'critical encounter' with Freire; a dialogue that demanded me to believe that human agency can bring about transformation (McLaren & Leonard, 1993). I "will be satisfied if among

the readers of this work there are those sufficiently critical to correct mistakes and misunderstandings, to deepen affirmations and to point out aspects I have not perceived" (Freire, 1970, p. 39).

Conscientisation

... Freire's project of democratic dialogue is attuned to the concrete operations of power (in and out of the classroom) and grounded in the painful yet empowering process of conscientisation. This process embraces a critical demystifying moment in which structures of domination are laid bare and political engagement is imperative.

- West, 1993, p. xiii.

The pain of conscientisation probably lies in an irrational fear of freedom. A fear that those who possess it are reluctant to admit to, or otherwise unconscious of, and mis-recognising the status quo as self-existent, to be preserved and protected. Conscientisation then stands accused of fueling a "destructive fanaticism" that threatens an illusionary freedom (Freire, 1970, p.35).

Liberation from oppression or to become oppressor?

The violence of dehumanisation afflicts both the oppressed and the oppressor; losing and stealing humanity equally denies the vocation of being. Emancipation is therefore necessarily a process of humanisation, a recovery of humanity, which can only be led by the oppressed for the liberation of both the oppressed and oppressor (Freire, 1970).

But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or "sub-oppressors."

- Freire, 1970, p. 45.

Unfortunately, prolonged immersion in the structures of domination confuses the oppressed into believing that to be human is to be the oppressor; a distorted model of humanity prescribed, which stems from internalising the image of the oppressor and perhaps an as-yet surfaced fear of freedom (Freire, 1970). This fear of freedom causes the oppressed to desire to become an oppressor or accept their lot as the oppressed. Conscientisation breaks this fear, painfully. However, Freire did not intend for this realisation to be instantaneous or a mere point in time. Conscientisation is a continuous process of searching beneath the surface and revealing the hidden (Roberts, 1996). This process is praxis.

Praxis

Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.

- Freire, 1970, p. 51.

Conscientisation is necessarily transformational. Reflective action must therefore not be reduced to a collection of techniques or strategies; rather, it ought to be imbued with a critical consciousness that is translated in a praxis (Estrela, 1999). The tendency is for oppressive realities to drown the consciousness of those living within such that change is not effected. Praxis calls on the subjectivity of the oppressed to critically intervene by objectifying the reality and acting upon it. This action is dialectical to a reflection of a concrete experience that is brought into greater clarity through dialogues (Freire, 1970).

Banking method and dialogic

Education is a human endeavour that has far-reaching consequences. Teaching and learning cannot be reduced to a mechanical transfer of quantifiable facts from the teacher to student; rather, they are profound social actions that could empower or domesticate (Shor, 1993). The classroom as a lifeless conveyor belt of neatly packaged knowledge domesticates not only the students but the teacher as well.

Banking method

... Education is suffering from narration sickness.

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalised, and predictable. Or else, he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration – contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity.

The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power...

- Freire, 1970, p. 71.

The banking method assumes that the students are empty vessels that require filling up with pre-determined narrations. Good teachers then fill students up completely and good students do not resist such a filling up. The banking driven classroom mirrors oppressive society inasmuch as the teacher is autonomous, authoritative, and hence the "Subject of the learning process" whilst the student are mere objects and required to remain meek (Freire, 1970, p. 73).

Dialogic

As we attempt to analyse dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: the word... There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world.

- Freire, 1970, p. 87, emphasis in original.

Freire (1970) sees the word as constituting reflection and action, hence it is effectually praxis. Unfortunately, unauthentic word degenerates into alienated and alienating verbalism because it renders reflections impossible and deprives actions. Untruths dichotomise reflection and action because the word, being false, is powerless to denounce the world, vacating any commitment to transform the world, thereby negating actions. Conversely, preoccupation with actions begets activism and renders dialogue impossible because reflection is impeded.

Human existence is predicated on the naming (with word) and problematising (hence requiring renaming) of the world; a dialectical creation and re-creation. The foundation of the word is love thus positing the necessity of the subjectivity of the individual, which cannot otherwise exist under domination (Freire, 1970). However, some are precisely denied the word, their voice. Freire proffers a problem-posing education, which is "key to critical dialogue" (Shor, 1993, p. 26)

In such a problem-posing education, both teacher and students ask questions; particularly, students question answers vis-à-vis the more familiar answering of questions. In this way, students are active in their learning as they "experience education as something they do, not something done to them" (Shor, 1993, p. 26). Students then cease being the empty vessels that require filling up.

Situating Conscientisation in the 21st Century classroom

In considering the contemporaneity of Freirean conscientisation, we must avoid domesticating Freire and reducing his pedagogy to mere methods, a "fetish of methods" (Aronowitz, 1993, p. 8). Rather, Pedagogy of the

Oppressed is a social theory, a philosophy, and a praxis of politics that transforms through “helping students achieve a grasp of the concrete conditions of their daily lives, of the limits imposed by their situation on their ability to acquire what is sometimes called ‘literacy’...” (Aronowitz, 1993, p.9). There is genuine convenience, hence temptation, to equate this literacy with improved mobility. Freire’s problem-posing education is predicated on the development of a criticality so as to be able to view “the world not as a static reality but as a reality in the process, in transformation” (Freire, 1970, p. 83). This is from whence the American experience takes an unfortunate “phenomenological progressive” turn, imbuing the pessimism of the impossibility of social transformation, thus believing erroneously that salvation is possible only for the individual (Aronowitz, 1993, p. 11).

Across the pond, in a study on European students’ perspectives on the purpose of university, 295 students across six European countries – Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain – were surveyed (Gupta, 2021). It was found that gaining decent employment, personal growth, and improving society were the most common purposes of university proffered by the students surveyed. It was also observed that these perspectives varied according to the amount students had to pay for their studies; the more they had to pay (England, Ireland, and Spain), the likelier they were to perceive employability as the main outcome of university education. Further, the researchers saw “a shift from a conception of higher education as an investment to help move up a social class to viewing it as insurance against downward social mobility”; with a university degree seen as necessary to avoid low-skilled jobs though the students believe it is insufficient for the higher-skilled ones (Gupta, 2021). Whilst gainful employment glosses an illusion of improved mobility over the perpetual domination of the students, they remain meek in acceptance of the jobs granted to them, the ontology upon which the banking driven classroom mirrors itself. People’s fulfilment is tied to the possibility of creating their own worlds with labour that they are able to direct; otherwise, dehumanisation persists because “work that is not free ceases to be a fulfilling pursuit...” (Freire, 1970, p. 145).

Meanwhile, students from Denmark, Germany, and Poland, who pay less for their studies, were more likely to associate personal growth and societal improvements with university education. In particular, the students believed that university enables them to contribute towards “a more enlightened society, by creating a more critical and reflective society, and by helping their country to be viewed more competitively worldwide” (Gupta, 2021). Is praxis only possible if someone else is footing part, if not all, of the bill?

Are these sufficient purposes for the university today? Given the marketisation of higher education thus competition for student-consumer dollar, would a seat be afforded at the table for Freirean praxis? The answer is no and the structure will not pay for its own destruction. However, praxis does

not constrict itself within a phenomenological pessimism that acquiesces to individual salvation (Aronowitz, 1993). To be Freirean is to reorder society; consciousness must never stop.

Any attempt to “soften” the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity; indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their “generosity”, the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this “generosity”, which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. This is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source.

- Freire, 1970, p. 44.

References

- Aronowitz, S. (1993). Paulo Freire’s radical democratic humanism. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. (pp. 8 – 24). Routledge.
- Estrela, M. T. (1999). Reflective practice and conscientisation. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 7(2), 235 – 244.
- Freire, P. (1993). Foreword. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. (pp. ix – xii). Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). The Continuum International Publishing.
- Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*. Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (2010). Rethinking education as the practice of freedom: Paulo Freire and the promise of critical pedagogy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 8(6), 715 – 721.
- Gupta, A. (January 9, 2021). What’s the purpose of university? Your answer may depend on how much it costs you. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/whats-the-purpose-of-university-your-answer-may-depend-on-how-much-it-costs-you-151526>.
- McLaren, P. & Leonard, P. (1993). Editors’ Introduction. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. (pp. ix – xii). Routledge.
- Roberts, P. (1996). Rethinking conscientisation. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 30(2), 179 – 196.
- Schugurensky, D. (2014). *Paulo Freire*. Bloomsbury.
- Shor, I. (1993). Education is politics: Paulo Freire’s critical

pedagogy. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. (pp. 25 – 35). Routledge.

West, C. (1993). Preface. In P. McLaren & P. Leonard (Eds). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. (pp. xiii – xiv). Routledge.

Unicef. (2021, January 7). *Education: Every child has the right to learn*. <https://www.unicef.org/education>.

Copyright: © 2021 Nelson Ang. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.