

Day 1 - PAULO FREIRE: INTRODUCTION

It is not possible to act in favor of equality, respecting others, the right to a voice, participation, and reinventing the world in a regime that denies the freedom to work, eat, speak, criticize, read, disagree, come and go, in short, the freedom to be. Freire, Letters to Cristina, p. 145

I chose Dr. Paulo Freire's writings for much of our reading in the course. Freire is a well-known, multi-cultural educator. His book Pedagogy of the Oppressed (written in 1967) remains one of the most quoted texts in Education, and particularly popular in Latin American, African and Asian countries. More than 750,000 copies exist in the world, translated into many languages.

Freire's ideas throughout his writings unveil his own lived experience, his teaching, and his countless dialogues and activities with citizens and educators interested in pedagogy that acts as "the practice of freedom." In such pedagogy, both teacher and student discover how to participate in transforming their world, "critically and creatively."

For this course, I have constructed 4 summaries (for Day 1-4) of key ideas and gathered quotes from 8 books he wrote over the course of 30 years.

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Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Northeastern Brazil into a middle class family. However, the World's Great Depression in the 1930s sent his family into poverty. From his experience of hunger as a child he developed "solidarity with the children from the poor outskirts of town." He recalls in a letter to his niece, "...our hunger was of the type that arrives unannounced and unauthorized, making itself at home without an end in sight" (Letters to Cristina, p. 15).

Adding to his family difficulties, his father died in 1934. He remembered, "Someone took me out of the room and to a corner of the house where I heard the moans, each time weaker, with which my father said good-bye to the world" (Letters to Cristina, p. 73).

Freire's family economics did turn around from such poverty, but his experience never left his memory. He became a grammar teacher while still in Secondary School. Later, he studied Law and Philosophy. He married Elsa in 1944, an elementary teacher who influenced his critical turn toward Education.

In 1946, Freire worked for a government employee institution helping workers and their families. He witnessed disconnections between education and the realities of the working people, many living in poverty. Freire was part of the Movement for Popular Culture in Brazil and supported active exercises of democracy. In 1959, he completed his PhD with a thesis entitled, "Present-day Education in Brazil."

In the early 1960s Freire became interested in adult literacy throughout Brazil and initiated a program for adults in rural settings who could not read. The beginnings of the program involved literacy workers mingling in the rural communities and studying people's lives, and their language. The literary curriculum promoted their self worth and respect for their own everyday language.

"Freire's invitation to adult literacy learners is, initially, that they look at themselves as persons living and producing in a given society. He invited learners to come out of the apathy and the conformism—akin to being dismissed from life—in which they often find themselves. Freire challenged them to understand that they are themselves the makers of culture, leading them to

learn the ... meaning of culture” Freire: Teachers as Cultural Workers, p. xi (Preface, Macedo & Anna Freire).

In 1962 Freire worked with 300 farmworkers with his method of teaching reading. The 300 farmworkers learned to read in 45 days! His pedagogy involved not only “reading the word,” but also “reading the world” by participating in dialogues, which Freire called, “culture circles.” With time and government support, thousands of culture circles (groups) participated in the process of reading the word and reading the world.

As participants developed literary skills in written language, they also increased their awareness of their world by questioning their existing historical and social situation, issues of exploitation, the meaning of culture. In this pedagogy, dialogue was critical. Both teacher and learner together posed questions, reflected and participated in meaning making that could improve community well being and resistance. According to Freire,

“Time spent on dialogue should not be considered wasted time. It presents problems and criticizes, and in criticizing, gives human beings their place within their own reality as the true transforming Subjects of reality.” Freire: Education for Critical Consciousness, p. 107

Freire’s efforts at adult literacy throughout Brazil came to a halt in 1964 when a military coup took over Brazil, which resulted in Freire’s imprisonment for 70 days and his exile for the next 15 years. During that time he lived in Chile as well as other places outside Brazil. His work and writing continued across the world. He writes:

“Suffering exile is more than knowing the reality of it. It requires embracing it with all the pain this embrace represents; this is the only way the exiled can prepare for the return. Suffering exile is accepting the tragedy of rupture, which characterizes the experience of existing in a borrowed context. One suffers exile as one deals better with the difficulties associated with being unable to return to one’s origin. One suffers exile as one reconciles the contradictions between the present where one lives, in a space where one has experienced no past, and the future, which has to be built in uncertain space... I exist in the present, where I prepare myself for the possible return.” Freire: Pedagogy of the Heart, p. 67

In 1979, he was allowed to return to Brazil. From 1980 to 1986 he continued work in adult literacy programs. He was awarded 3 Honorary Doctorates, and the UNESCO Price for Education for Peace, 1986. Paulo Freire died in 1997.

One of Freire’s books, Pedagogy of Hope, will inspire us now and in the future as leaders in Education. Our own Dialogue Circles will give us a place to “read the world” and imagine that future.

“My hope is necessary, but it is not enough. Alone, it does not win. But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly. We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water” p. 2.