Key Pedagogic Thinkers
Paulo Freire: An influential educator
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Introduction

This paper emerged out of a Key Thinkers series that the Institute for Research in Education at the University of Bedfordshire introduced during the academic year 2011-12. Paulo Freire was one of the key thinkers discussed. This paper provides an opportunity to develop wider insight into Freire's key educational ideas, and seeks to examine his influence on educational theory and practice.

Freire was born in Brazil in 1921 into a middle class family. The educational perspectives he developed were influenced by his middle-class upbringing, experience of poverty (during the world depression), Marxist leanings, imprisonment following the 1964 *coup d'état* in Brazil and his later exile in Chile and time spent teaching at Harvard University. These experiences underpinned Freire's political commitment to addressing the needs of the poor, in particular their lack of education, which he saw as inhibiting the development of Brazil and the wider humanity. Freire illuminated the educational deficiencies of the poor when he drew attention to the absence of education among four million school-age children and 16 million 14 year olds who were deemed illiterate (Freire 2008:37). Ultimately, Freire saw education as part of a wider project of cultural and political liberation and transformation of society.

Banking versus Problem-posing

Freire's work is characterized by two major concepts: 'banking' and 'problem-posing'. For Freire, essential to a teacher's development is to understand the differences between the two.

Banking approach

Freire (1968) introduced the 'banking' concept of education whereby he equated teachers with bank clerks and saw them as 'depositing' information into students rather than drawing out knowledge from individual students or creating inquisitive beings with a thirst for knowledge:

> Education… becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the

deposits… in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world and each other.

Through 'banking', teachers impart knowledge and this is legitimated by teacher perceptions of students being 'ignorant' and devoid of knowledge, and students' own acceptance of their alienated status and 'ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence'. Ironically though, 'unlike the slave', Freire contends that students 'never discover that they [can] educate the teacher' (ibid: 54). Herein lies the contradiction in education: that teachers can be both educators and learners. This educational contradiction is, according to Freire, maintained through the following 'banking' attitudes which 'mirror oppressive society as a whole':

a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
d) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly;
e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
f) the teacher chooses and enforces the choice, and the students comply;
g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting, through the action of the teacher;
h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which he or she sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
j) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects (53-4).

Given the length of time that Freire spent articulating the 'banking' concept, one can be forgiven for thinking that he wholeheartedly endorsed its use. However, it was a position he unreservedly abhorred. Inspired by Marxism, he was critical of teachers who applied the 'banking' concept in their teaching because, as he

argued, 'the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world' (54). Thus he viewed the 'banking' approach as helping to undermine the development of a critical, questioning mind in pupils/students. Added to this, the 'banking' approach was considered to ignore students' prior knowledge (and background), understandings, skills and interests as it is underpinned by a false understanding of students as 'receiving objects' and because they just receive rather than process/challenge the information received, their thoughts and 'creative power[s]' (58) become inhibited. In this respect, the 'banking approach' prevalent in schools at the time was viewed by Freire as serving the interests of the ruling class (whom he termed the 'oppressors') who were considered to want to maintain the status quo as it 'avoids the threat of student conscientizacao'. Indeed, 'the more the oppressed (i.e. the Proletariat – to borrow from Marx) can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated', become 'automatons' and 'dehumanised' (55): a not dissimilar justification for the denial of education to slaves and those freed following the abolition of slavery. In other words, by filling working class pupils/students with knowledge dictated by the ruling/middle classes, they become educated not only to understand but to accept their place/role in society without question/challenge:

> The teacher's task is to… 'fill' the students by making deposits of information which he or she considers to constitute true knowledge. And since people 'receive' the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated individual is the adapted person, because he or she is a better 'fit' for the world. Translated into practice, the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquillity rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it.

Concurring with Freire, hooks (1994) similarly regards the 'banking' system as not addressing the social realities in which students live and in particular their classed, gendered and racialised positions/experiences.

Freire also observed that:

> The more completely the majority adapt to the purposes which the dominant minority prescribe for them … the more easily the minority can continue to prescribe. The theory and practice of banking education serve this end quite efficiently.

Interestingly, despite Freire's criticism of the 'banking' approach and his specific critique of professors, especially those who 'specify in their reading lists that a book should be read from pages 10-15' (ibid:57) as a way of helping their students, the 'banking' approach is nevertheless evident in higher education. The current political climate of consumerism and neo-liberalism in higher education not only encourages students to regard themselves as consumers of education with the (purchase) power to demand that they are told precisely which texts/journals they should read, but panders to the unwillingness of some students to become independent, critical thinkers/learners.

Problem-posing
Contrary to the 'banking' approach, Freire argued that teachers should be concerned to make students 'more fully human' by which he meant 'conscious beings', subjects and creators of knowledge. [A subject is someone who has the capacity to adapt oneself to reality *plus* the critical capacity to make choices and transform that reality'] (Freire 2008:4.). For this to be achieved, teachers should reject the 'banking' approach and replace it with one of **'**problem-posing' which enables students to recognise their relationship with the world and become conscious beings, i.e. as 'subjects' having a true understanding of the world. According to Freire, 'problem-posing' helps to create dialogue between teachers and students, and students with teachers. In this changed relationship:

> The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow… (61-2).

But true teacher-student dialogue cannot exist if the teacher continues to regard students as 'ignorant' (71) and their minds are closed to the knowledge that students bring to the classroom. It must encourage/develop 'critical thinking' (73).

Importantly, 'problem-posing' 'strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality' and the more students experience problem-posing, the more they will feel challenged 'and obliged to respond to that challenge' (62).

Freire believed that once students realise the contradiction of their earlier education (e.g. during schooling) they will develop critical thinking and awareness of the world/society in which they live, and struggle for their liberation. Ultimately, for Freire education is 'the practice of freedom' (62) and the route

to individuals/the oppressed (the working class) becoming literate and educated, which ultimately leads to individuals becoming human.

> Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming...* it affirms men and women as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead… [and] more wisely build the future (65).

In that respect, 'problem-posing' education is considered 'revolutionary' (65) and 'revolutionary praxis' must stand opposed to the praxis of the dominant elites, for they are by nature antithetical' (107). Here we see Freire's Marxist beliefs coming to the fore. 'Problem-posing' education seeks to make a change, a difference to the education of the masses (i.e. the working class). However, in order for subjugated individuals, i.e. the oppressed masses to apply 'revolutionary' practice in their studies, they need to understand their current situation (e.g. that they are undereducated), the world as it is (that they live in world where the minority dominate the majority), and that it is possible for things to change through their own actions.

> Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables people to overcome their false perception of reality. The world – no longer something to be described with deceptive words – becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization (67).

> The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and the views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their suggestions and those of their comrades. Because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for this program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate (105).

Fundamentally, problem-posing education is 'education for critical consciousness' and in the words of Bob Marley is the means through which students/the working classes can 'emancipate [themselves] from mental slavery' and address their miseducation.

Possibilities arising from problem-posing
At a school level, although the National Curriculum is largely prescriptive, teachers are not precluded from adopting a 'problem-posing' approach in their teaching, but teachers do not always recognize the flexibility they have in delivering the curriculum (discussed in Maylor et al, 2007). Arguably, by applying a 'problem-posing' approach in schools and higher education we can move to a situation where education is not just based on what teachers/lecturers think students should learn/need to know, but provides opportunities for student/pupil negotiation/involvement in the curriculum offered, with their backgrounds/identities being incorporated into the curriculum. It particularly assists the working classes and lower-achieving ethnic groups (DfE 2011) into thinking the impossible, that they can maximize their potential and have careers outside of their designated class and presumed ability.

Finally, Freire (1973: 92) contends that:

> True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking – thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity – thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. … For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality.

It can be seen that Freire's philosophy encourages teachers/educators to be self-reflective and at the same time seek to transform their practice. But in order to become transformative, teachers need to be provided with opportunities through teacher training and classroom teaching which will enable them to consider alternative conceptions of themselves and society. I would posit also that Freire's critical pedagogy offers the potential to challenge student teachers to become critical thinkers so as to question and to make changes to the way they view and educate minority ethnic children.

Why does Freire's work remain influential?
The global strength of Freire's influence is evidenced by his work being translated from Portuguese into more than 20 languages. As an African American, hooks (1994:53) suggests that Freire influenced her work because he demonstrated through his writings how 'a privileged critical thinker approaches sharing knowledge and resources with those who are in need' and took an ethical approach to sharing education:

> Authentic help means that all who are involved help each other mutually, growing together in the

common effort to understand the reality which they seek to transform. Only through such praxis – in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously – can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped' (Freire cited by hooks 1994: 54).

Clearly, drawing on the work of Freire, hooks entitled her own transformative text *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) (which is incidentally sub-titled 'Education as the Practice of Freedom and is visible on the front cover). In this she observes that:

> to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn [and that] 'education as the practice of freedom' should enable students 'to move beyond boundaries, to transgress' (hooks 1994:207) and make a difference to those they educate.

Freire's work remains influential because despite his writings being informed by Brazilian educational contexts and economic circumstances in the early 20th century, his ideologies have proved to be globally transferable (in part informed by his time spent educating diverse ethnic groups outside of Brazil), and have the ability to be translated into diverse contexts such that his insights are viewed as essential to addressing, for example 'the abysmal state of Black education in the United States' (King 2009:3) and offers a vision for 'develop[ing] a critical consciousness … and a skill set to help pursue actions that foster [educational] social justice' (Zamudio et al, 2011:94); a goal more widely shared across the world**.**

References

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Book Reviews

Trust and Virtual Worlds: Contemporary Perspectives
Charles Ess and May Thorseth (Eds.)
Peter Lang Publishing (2011)
Review by Mitul Shukla

This is a slight book, being just over A5 in size with around 200 pages; for some reason it reminded me of my copy of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran. However, it is not a book written by a poet philosopher, although it is book containing strong philosophical debate, and in certain areas I would argue it is profound. *Trust and Virtual Worlds: Contemporary Perspectives* is made up of a series of works which were originally presented at the 'Philosophy of Virtuality: Deliberations, Trust, Offences and Virtues' event which took place in 2009 at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Reading through *Trust and Virtual Worlds*, I had the distinct feeling that that book was unafraid to tackle difficult concepts and subjects including, but not limited to, sexual objectification in child pornography, financial disparity and even mortality. This is not always an easy book to read. However it is one, in my humble opinion, worth reading.

Trust and Virtual Worlds is organised into three sections:

- Historical and cultural perspectives
- Philosophical perspectives on trust in online environments
- Applications/implications

I found it interesting that the first section of the book gives a fairly clear contextualisation, and then a further exploration, of the philosophical stances taken in the critique of the virtual space in the extant literature. Indeed the contributing authors contextualise and then underline the perceived mismatch of the dualistic view of the virtual and the real. Essentially, the point here is that rather than understanding the online and offline, or the virtual and the real, as being distinct spaces, we can, through the lens of embodiment, perceive not only the virtual as an extension of the real but more accurately as the two being interwoven.

This section of the book also has some interesting debate concerning the nature of how learning is affected by our presence in virtual domains. In fact, the point is made as to the effectiveness of online learning,