

AN EXPLORATION OF FREIRE'S DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The ideas of Paulo Freire resonate strongly with international educators, especially in those who are familiar with the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme. Although Freire's work was targeted at the adult population in a rural context, the notion of downsizing or eliminating the existing hierarchy between teachers and students through what he calls a true dialogue, can be applied to the school context. The main challenge in the milieu of schools is to move away from the concept of *tabula rasa*, which is generally held by teachers, students, and parents. Freire strongly criticises 'traditional' or 'banking education' precisely because it assumes that pupils are similar to empty bank accounts in which money (i.e., knowledge) has to be accumulated. The key term under exploration in this paper is dialogue, which according to Freire, cannot exist unless there are contradictions. Such contradictions, which originate from previously held knowledge and from different personal perspectives, are the elements that should fuel interactions between students and teachers. Without dialogue, there is no true education but only an imposition of pre-approved educational models drawn by governments to suit their own purposes. It is through dialogue that teachers and students achieve genuine social equality since teaching and learning become reciprocal: "Authentic education is not carried on by "A" for "B" or by "A" about "B," but rather by "A" with "B," mediated by the world." (Freire, [1970]1993)

Keywords: education, learning, learning processes

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UNA EXPLORACIÓN A LOS DIÁLOGOS DE FREIRE

Resumen

Las ideas de Paulo Freire resuenan fuerte entre educadores internacionales, especialmente en quienes están familiarizados con el Programa del Diploma del Bachillerato Internacional. A pesar de que el trabajo de Freire estuvo enfocado en la población adulta en un contexto rural, la noción de reducción y eliminación de la jerarquía existente entre maestros y alumnos, por medio de lo que él llama un verdadero diálogo, puede ser aplicado en el contexto escolar. El principal reto en el entorno de los colegios es dejar de lado el concepto de la tabula rasa, el cual es generalmente utilizado por profesores, estudiantes y padres de familia. Freire critica duramente la educación “tradicional” o “bancaria”, precisamente porque esta asume que los alumnos son similares a cuentas de banco vacías en las cuales el dinero (esto es, el conocimiento) debe ser acumulado. El término esencial que se explora en este escrito es diálogo, el cual, conforme a Freire, no puede existir a menos de que haya contradicciones. Dichas contradicciones, las cuales se originan desde el conocimiento previo y desde diferentes perspectivas personales, son los elementos que deben estimular las interacciones entre educandos y educadores. Sin diálogo no hay verdadera educación, sino solo una imposición de modelos educativos preaprobados por gobiernos para satisfacer sus propios intereses. Es a través del diálogo que los profesores y los alumnos pueden alcanzar una igualdad social genuina, ya que la enseñanza y el aprendizaje se vuelven recíprocos: “La auténtica educación no es llevada a cabo por ‘A’ para ‘B’ o por ‘A’ acerca de ‘B’, sino por ‘A’ con ‘B’, y mediada por el mundo” (Freire, [1970]1993).

Palabras clave: educación, aprendizaje, procesos de aprendizaje.

Introduction

After reading chapter 3 of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I initially felt dismayed by the rather complex and somewhat obscure use of terms and key words. I needed to go over the text more than once to try to make full sense of his words. Having read a few excerpts from his book in previous courses, I remembered that his ideas were influenced by his work with peasants in rural Brazil in the early 1960s. Using this information as background context, his views on education started to show some clarity. It then became evident to me that Freire was not directly addressing the school context but that of educators (i.e. student-teachers) who are involved in field research. Nevertheless, I found several of his terms intriguing, particularly the word dialogue.

I believe Freire uses dialogue and its variants as "...in the dialogical nature of education begins with thematic investigation." (Freire, [1970]1993) to refer to different types of interactions in an educational context. As I understand them, these dialogues are interactions between teachers and students, between students and their environment, between people (i.e. teachers and students) and their reality, which involves their world and its problems. Such interactions are precisely what the proponents of the Learner-Centered ideology, also known as the progressive school of thought in curriculum development, consider as essential since "learning is thus considered a function of the interaction between a person and his or her environment." (Schiro, 2013)

However, Freire goes beyond progressivism by advocating a dialogue which is genuine and profound enough to result in an individual's 'liberation' from the oppression that their own ignorance, fear, or acceptance of what 'banking' educators believe people need or what is best for people. Freire's use of the term 'banking

education' is an obvious allusion to the Scholar Academic ideology, also known as Traditionalism. According to Pinar (1978), curriculum development in this school of thought tends to have teachers in mind as opposed to learners. In Freire's view, the dialogue between educator and students involves a mutual awareness of cognition where their roles are constantly interchangeable: "Authentic education is not carried on by "A" for "B" or by "A" about "B," but rather by "A" with "B," mediated by the world. (Freire, [1970] 1993). This means that in terms of curriculum development, his advocacy for interaction rests on the idea that a teacher becomes a student, and a student becomes a teacher, once both accept that they are in a horizontal relationship of trust and hope. Said in other words, none of them are the owners of the absolute truth, so their dialogues put them into a close learning partnership.

One of the features of the term dialogue which I find most interesting and pedagogically enlightening is that "true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking" (Freire, [1970]1993). Critical thinking thus becomes the element that binds people among themselves and their world. According to Giroux, Freire viewed critical thinking as "a tool for self-determination and civic engagement" (Besley, 2012). To Freire, critical thinking is a way to think beyond the present, to enter into a critical dialogue with history and to imagine a future. Since critical thinking is one of the cornerstones of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, it resonates quite strongly within my milieu. In my opinion, the dialogical nature of education as Freire argues and illustrates, holds significant value in curriculum reform, since it proposes a shift from a learner-centered approach to a teacher-student centered approach.

I completely agree with Freire's choice of term and what it represents. However, from the pragmatic perspective of a teacher, I feel that the kind of dialogue that he fully envisions is more of a utopia than a potential reality in the current context of schools. Actually, I do not think that Freire had school students in mind when he claimed that the dialogues are to be constant and horizontal between teachers and students if they are to lead to authentic education. I believe he was referring to adults who have enough life experiences to generate what he called contradictions. According to Freire, only contradictions can generate dialogues or interactions. When there are no contradictions between educators and students, there is no dialogue but 'banking' style education where educators simply give knowledge or impose

models contained in pre-approved programs, ignoring the knowledge and experiences that students already hold by regarding them as empty receptacles that need to be filled.

I do not think that curriculum reform has reached the levels of sophistication that Freire argues for. Government regulations as well as societal values and beliefs act as powerful filters which make his dialogical approach difficult to apply. However, I do recognize that without critical thinking, education cannot be genuine. In my milieu, the dialogues that I attempt to establish between my students and their worlds (meaning the circumstances which surround them whether temporal, historical, social, cultural and so on) are the drive for their potential emancipation from naïve thinking.

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