



## THE TRAINER – TRAINEE RELATIONSHIP AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM ACCORDING TO FREIRE

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### **Abstract:**

By presenting the life and work of Paolo Freire, this research aims to show the significant contribution and diachronical value that his pedagogical theory has made in enriching the thought on current educational reform. In the Brazilian educator's work, Adult Education acquired a liberating power, particularly, but not only, for the working and lower classes of society. Its main principles are based on: a social dimension of thought; a critical understanding of the dialectical relationship between consciousness and the world; the humanization objective; an approach to knowledge as a formation of thinking and action on reality; and lastly, social reform and democratisation.

**Keywords:** Freire, literacy, adult education, educators

### **1. Introduction**

The work of Paolo Freire (1921-1997) has been linked to Adult Education mainly through his literacy programmes in Latin America and Africa that provided a practical model focusing on human nature and attributing the utmost importance to human existence (Collins, 1997; Gadotti, 1994).

Freire's theoretical body of work incorporates elements from different ideological movements and contains a notable wealth of knowledge on a variety of academic fields. His philosophical and pedagogical principles stem from a combination of his formal studies and personal experience of the lower social classes of the underdeveloped nations he worked with. It could, in fact, be said that despite being

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associated to the specific social, economic and political conditions that prevailed in Latin America and generally in the Third World, the general principles of Freire's theory can also be applied to western countries, where even in our day and age the citizens of these developed societies are all too often the objects of exploitation (London, 1973).

Freire was specifically involved in the fight against illiteracy, initially in Brazil. His concern about this crucial social issue led him to formulate a comprehensive and deeply humanistic approach on educational theory and practice that regarded education as a process of socialization (Freire, 1996).

The Brazilian educator espoused a humanising education whose objective was not merely to provide specialized or expert knowledge to trainees but which aimed to bring about an overall restructuring of intellectual and social power in society. By cultivating ethical consciousness and collective responsibility, it contributes to the rounded formation of human character, setting an example for political and moral integrity. In addition, humanising education concerned with people and their destiny, comprises a most interesting intellectual, pedagogical, and last but not least, political proposal over time (Xohelis, 2007).

According to Freire, humanising education is above all a means of empowerment and liberation, which can be attained through critical consciousness when the oppressed groups in society reach a level of deeper awareness not only of the socio-political reality shaping their lives but also of their own potential to transform it.

His ideas and methods, widely disseminated over the twenty-year span of the 1960s-80s, had a profound impact on many radical educational movements in Nicaragua, Guinea-Bissau, Angola and others. They were also adopted by Trade Unions and educational training institutions in western societies, including the General Secretariat of Lifelong Learning in Greece, in the decade of the 1980s. Indisputably, therefore, Freire's pedagogical theories on popular education based on equality and dialogue can be said to have been influential in the development of Adult Education at a global level.

## **2. An interactive learning approach**

According to Freire, a quality teacher-student relationship centred on genuine dialogue between the two is an essential prerequisite for liberating education, which is in stark contrast to the traditional notion of education. Here, it should be noted that Freire defined traditional education through the concept of "banking education". This is the situation where students merely receive, classify, and store the knowledge that is conveyed to them by teachers, thereby restricting the recipients' freedom and

independence. Furthermore, in traditional adult literacy programmes, banking education was applied through the reading –and other- materials that had very little or no relation to either the experiences or the interests of the learner-students (Matthews, 1985; Freire, 1985). In other words, the aim of the banking education model was to transfer the teacher’s existing knowledge and deposit it, as it were, into the uncritical recipients, who were called on to commit it to memory and recall it each time it was asked of them (Shor & Freire, 1987). In this way, educational practice was restricted to a limited set of teaching methodologies, which, in a curiously naïve way, were considered to be neutral, reducing the educational process to an unproductive, standardised and bureaucratic operation. Schooling, by fostering rote learning, in effect thwarted knowledge of social relations, since the curriculum content was not only abstract but most times unrelated to the students’ lives and experiences.

This prevailing banking model of learning tends to perpetuate complete ignorance in students, through the one-sided modes of communication, such as lectures or trainers’ monologues. Thus, the banking concept of education, whose aim is to direct and control, fosters credulity or even gullibility in learners, with the underlying intention of suppressing them into obedience and submissiveness, while at the same time treating them as “an empty account” in which ready-made, pre-prepared knowledge, adapted to the ideology of oppression and exploitation is deposited.

The effects of oppressive education are the subjugation of critical consciousness and alienation through the transmission of facts as knowledge. The teacher –in the role of knower- passes on ‘ready-made’ knowledge to the students –who are the non-knowers, resulting in stifling the development of their critical thinking skills and in so doing maintaining the repressive social order (Freire, 1985).

According to Freire, structural relations between the oppressors and the oppressed create a “culture of silence” which pervades all aspects of the life and thinking of the dominated individuals, a which was foreign to the real needs, problems, and conditions of their existence. The viewpoints, perceptions, and theories of the dominant class are forced on the oppressed, who ignorant of the true causes of events, are hindered from having a more accurate understanding of their reality and the world generally. This culture of silence gives rise to simplistic forms of existence, thought, and action that lack critical consciousness, which serves the interests of the holders of power. In addition, students from the oppressed classes do not develop those qualities - such as creativity, curiosity, imagination, and reasoning- needed to pursue knowledge, as they are in no position to either subject their reality to analytical examination, or to apply critical thinking in order to discover the causes that formed it. The fact is that in this type of educational model the teacher’s thinking is not authentic as s/he simply imposes it on the students -thinking for them rather than with them- this results in the

students' thinking also being unauthentic (Freire, 1998). Instead of being involved in a consciousness raising process that enables them to gain a deep awareness of the world and its problems, the students from the lower social classes are given a fragmented perception and understanding of reality in which social phenomena are presented as being static and unchangeable, resulting not only in their intellectual and psychological undermining but also in their political disempowerment.

In the banking concept of education the learner is transformed into an object, a fact which signifies that the fundamental problem rests not with society but with the individual. The banking education system accepts the premise that poverty exists not because the injustices and inequalities within the society create it but because the poor do not know how to function advantageously within that society. Thus under this system, adapting the mentality and behaviour of the illiterate poor the needs of the society becomes the goal of education. This is despite the fact that it was this very society that caused their poverty in the first place, blaming them solely for their failure to succeed. The banking concept of education, in serving its own social and political objectives, ended up becoming political propaganda, and as a result contributing uncritically to the alienation and exploitation of the oppressed.

Thus, according to Freire, this system of educational practice constituted a form of violence on the oppressed, because it forced on them ideas, principles, and methods that not only disempowered them but actually also distorted their critical awareness of reality. Students became alienated because they were not given the opportunity to participate in the learning process of their own reality but received instead a readymade and prefabricated outlook of the world. The consequence of this was that students/women and men were transformed into passive objects of the educational system, having no real understanding of their personal/individual needs, or any genuine involvement in the knowledge process.

In contrast to this traditional view of education, Freire, firmly maintained that there is no teaching that does not involve learning, by which he meant that these two vitally important processes are closely interlinked. While teaching, teachers are at the same time learning. Through dialogue the teacher is able to trace the step-by-step progress of their beginner-learners' curiosity, bringing to light their questions and speculations on issues, as well as new ideas that arise, while simultaneously, the teacher becomes aware of her/his own mistakes and shortcomings (Freire, 1998).

Through such a process, both teachers and students become learners, acquiring an equal status as cognitively active subjects, where the one discovers knowledge through the other as well as through the objects that are being learnt about. This is not a situation where one party is in the know while the other is not, but rather it involves a genuine attempt on all sides, to make a discovery during the learning process. In this

interactive dialectic relationship, the students are taught by and simultaneously teach the teacher from which they both grow and develop, joining forces against authoritarianism. While the teacher discusses with students, her/his interest should be focused on issues that may not be clearly evident and the problem-posing approach must be applied. By focusing on students' potential, the inspired teacher can promote the experimental design of simulated problems for each period of study, thus transforming the learning process from a series of standard lessons into an experiential situation where students' needs are taken into account. Evidently, such a process is time consuming and in order for it to be successful, requires a series of lessons needs to be completed.

However, it cannot be denied that the teacher ends up contributing more to the dialogic process, as not only do they know more than students on the given topics but also have greater awareness on the objectives to be achieved. In addition, in the pedagogic process there are always the instances of introducing the issue that teachers cannot expect learners to start or progress a process of learning so it becomes imperative for the teacher her/himself to take action. (Shor & Freire, 1987). When the students spontaneously start to apply critical thinking, the teacher should of course encourage this action, however, at the crucial moment, s/he must intervene in order to develop the issue at hand to its full potential, transforming them into fields where creative cooperation takes place.

According to Freire, Problem-Posing Education should in effect raise more issues than it solves. The characteristic feature of the implementation of problem-posing as a method of teaching in the classroom is one of constant fluidity, as the teacher assumes varying roles, continually changing her/his distance to the dialogic action. It is the teacher's intellectual efforts and abilities to critically present and deal with a particular topic or subject that results in the achievement of collective literacy. The teacher, having perhaps instigated and/or been the catalyst for starting the discussion steps back and fades into or merges with the group becoming an observer at the most lively points when there is the greatest participation from students. Only when and if the discussion becomes disoriented or disordered does the teacher again step up front to take control to restore the dialogic process. The teacher's function is, therefore, both multidimensional and multifaceted. Besides serious academic preparation and planning it also requires emotional and psychological balance in order to cultivate a sense of love and understanding of others, as well as develop an appreciation of the inherent process of teaching (Freire, 1998).

Through a process of critical analysis, the progressive educator explores with her/his students the relations between them and the historic-cultural world they live in, in order for them both to obtain an overall picture of society and the phenomena that

exit, as well as an understanding of their causes. Societal problems are complex and often inextricably linked. This fact calls for an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge and curriculum design, which is in sharp contrast to the technocratic tendency to promote the specialization and fragmentation of knowledge into various partial subjects. Once students increase their critical awareness and become active participants, based on their interrelationships, causal and casual links, as well as historical dimensions, they take a constructivist approach to social phenomena (Ellias, 1994).

However, even in liberating education, dialogue is conducted on the issues that are put forward by the teacher, although they deal with the relationship between people and the world, entailing the participants' perception of the world and their experiences. Freire insisted that educators must not present material from a core curriculum but rather, they need to search for teaching matter through the process of dialogue with their students. Teaching methods should be applied that are based on mutual respect and reciprocity. By promoting an exchange of views and a sharing of opinions in the classroom setting, emphasis is placed on equality and the elimination of discrimination.

The interactive and problem-posing method of education that Freire proposed begins with an investigation of the students' world with reference to their history and culture. By identifying their ideas, beliefs, and myths, the arts and sciences, their habits and preferences, thematic units are formed to be discussed in the educational process. In fact, in order for dialogue to become an effective method of knowing, students need to approach reality in a systematic way and to search for the dialectic relationships that define the structure of that reality. The outcome of the dialogic process is for the teacher and students to mutually decide on the activities they will be involved with that will determine the topics to be discussed.

Freire believed that knowledge of the objective world meant to firstly attain self-knowledge through one's experience of life. And that is why the first area covered in his method of teaching literacy skills was the study of people's daily life. Thus, by the teacher taking heed of everything that the students say in reference to their understanding of their world, Freire maintained that it becomes epistemologically possible for the teacher to direct those students into taking a critical approach to that understanding. A fact that offered the possibility to the indigenous peoples to think about the notion they had of themselves as well as the way they understood themselves within their own socio-political environment. Over time, the work of teachers of adult learners, who favoured free expression and creativity, developed within the framework of the cultural circles, into a comprehensive teaching methodology for reading and writing.

Freire asserted that knowledge is not produced through predetermined questions about the preset teaching content. The act of knowing is achieved when the teacher instigates student intervention to ask questions about the issues raised for discussion, which s/he responds to, providing in this way an explanation rather than merely a description of events.

Students, through language, are encouraged to participate in this type of dialogue. Through the analysis and use of language as a vehicle for the meanings with which they perceive the world around them, they become properly socialized. Freire, presents a humanizing teaching methodology where the teacher uses the same language as the students, and in so doing, together begin the exploration of their experiences. Through a combination of reflection and action, attention is centred on the real problems, which is the path to critical consciousness (Freire, 1985; Jarvis, 2001; Freire, 1998). By placing particular emphasis on the two-way process of dialogue, Freire, acknowledged that the teacher, in the role of motivator, can greatly facilitate the means to bring the students' experiences to the surface, on which reflection takes place, and which subsequently develops into a learning process.

For Freire, thought and language were interrelated since the one could not exist without the other. Therefore, the teacher's daily meaningful contact with her/his students, observing and getting to know about their lives takes on exceptional significance. By acquiring in depth knowledge of her/his students and their lives -such as learning about their fears, needs and desires, and their living conditions, culture and ideology- is the liberator-educator able to understand their language, the way they learnt and thought, as well as their level of awareness of reality. Only then is s/he able to explain their mistakes, and to understand their difficulties, weaknesses and behaviour, and only through the construction and reconstruction of knowledge can s/he assist them to gradually overcome the naïve perception of their everyday life. Freire's humanizing nature of education is manifest in his interactive and problem-posing model of teaching methodology, where authentic dialogue is considered to be fundamental for both the teaching and learning processes, requiring a deep love and faith in people.

Furthermore, the fact that Freire used the term educator as opposed to teacher, illustrates that in principle, the relationship between the educator and the learners in Adult Education is a dynamic two-way process, since both parties are equally and mutually involved in exploring the solutions to problems. The role of the educator, therefore, is to bring up for discussion problems that relate to existing coded situations and help learners decode them. This is done in order for students to start dealing critically with the reality of the world they live in. As Freire pointed out, the job of the educator-as motivator and as animator was not only to teach students to think but to

also suggest how to transform their way of thinking, as well as jointly look for the best possible methods of decoding the subject under discussion (Grabowski, 1974; Freire, 1998). The educator who together with her/his students discovers knowledge by securing the praxis of learning through dialogue is in a position to fully comprehend that each party on its own is not sufficient to attain real knowledge (Watkins, 1999). In this dialogic relationship knowledge is never finalized but analysed; it is examined and re-examined as to its truth within the context of the particular juncture; it is constantly deepened and enhanced. In this way, with the educator as their point of reference, students are able to develop their curiosity, as well as their thinking. The educator does not achieve this by simply attempting to teach them how to be curious or how to think but by genuinely exposing them to her/his own thinking, at the same time respecting each individual's process of reflection. Thus, educator and students exchange ways of thinking in order to find the most appropriate manner in the decoding of their reality.

Therefore, problem-posing liberating education is not a practice for the mere transmission of knowledge but is in itself the knowledge praxis for both educators and learners. In accordance with Freire's pedagogic model, dialogue, as the key medium for the promotion of political consciousness and social action, is considered to be an essential factor in the liberating learning process. Hence, within this framework, learners and educators are involved in a dialogic process where the relationships between consciousness and the world, language and the world, theoretical context and reality, theory and practice, and so on are examined. This particular process of the sharing and exchanging of ideas and experiences is carried out in a spirit of adventure and discovery where knowledge is constructed and reconstructed. In this way, students gain the experience of making mistakes and taking risks; they discover the element of surprise; and the more their interest is stimulated, the more the threat of the bureaucratization of their thinking is diminished. This happens as a consequence of their being guided in the continual raising of their critical consciousness so that they become aware as to why things are the way they are in the world in general and their society in particular. In itself the gaining of knowledge and the acquisition of critical consciousness about the world, coupled with the recognition of themselves as active, thinking subjects has a humanizing impact on students, while simultaneously it helps them to mentally construct the components of their social action (Freire, 1998; Freire, 1972).

Freire's Liberating Education or Critical Pedagogy, founded on dialogue, is a communicative approach to learning that is aimed mainly at adults, and supports that the relationship between the educator and the learner requires mutual respect. On her/his part, in order to obtain access to the way students think, the educator needs to recognize the particular characteristics of the reality the students live in, as well as have



awareness of the specific conditions that transform this reality. It is not the teacher who enlightens the students but rather the students together with the teacher, who shed light on reality (Sipitanou, 2011). In sum, Freire regarded dialogue as an encounter between people, with reality as the means for the discovery and naming of this.

### 3. Conclusion

As a replacement to the traditional banking concept of education, where the learner is merely a passive receiver of all that is taught by the teacher-expert, and who as the professional is exclusively responsible for the design, implementation and evaluation of the teaching and learning process (Shor & Freire, 1987), Freire proposes Critical Pedagogy -a communicative, dialogic, interactive, liberating learning approach. Through dialogue, students acquire a social consciousness making them aware of their particular circumstances, the causes that have shaped these, as well as the potential alternatives open to them. In a more progressive system of education, the educator as expert and professional must pave the way for freedom. On the long, arduous but exiting journey to the attainment of knowledge, they should facilitate (rather than hinder) the liberating process; and they need to assist individuals in becoming critical thinkers not only in order to enhance creativity but also for them to reach a level where they are able to recognize and respond to their oppressed circumstances so as to improve their existence (Entwistle, 1994).

According to the Brazilian pedagogue, it is crucial that the relationship between educators and learners is based on mutual trust and respect, free from any competitive characteristics. This greatly contributes to the meaning of the democratization of education. The educator maintains a stable balance between the two poles of the relationship, simultaneously allowing the students freedom to exercise self-discipline. Within such a context, the educator does not misuse her/his power through the form of giving authoritarian commands, nor, however does s/he go to the other extreme and eliminate the boundaries of the relationship thus turning it into one of lax permissiveness. The educator, drawing on radical democracy, acknowledges the need for a democratic sharing of power and does not restrict the students' freedom, who on their part, gain awareness of its limits (Freire, 1998).

It thus becomes apparent that education as a practice of freedom is a positive learning situation. It redeems both the teacher and student from their respective enslavements –that of monologue for the former and silence for the latter. As each is liberated, they both start to learn: the student discovers her/his self-worth, shaking off the stigma of illiteracy and gaining critical social consciousness, while the teacher

attains acceptance and tolerance, and no longer in the role of the detached, wise, know-it-all, is able to start a constructive dialogue with the students.

Finally, Freire put forward the view that the radical model of education simultaneously constitutes an educational and cultural certainty, since it involves a constant reconstruction and regeneration process through which students learn and develop. Also it consists of gnosiologic activity, meaning that the subject of knowledge is constructed and re-constructed as the causes of its existence are revealed. And lastly, it comprises a political action, enhancing learners' curiosity, increasing their interest in study, and deepening their critical awareness of the inequalities in society.

As Freire stated, when he proposed the democratic relationship between educator and learner as objects of the same practice, he did not intend it to have a strictly pedagogic nature but a political character (Freire, 2007).

Although Freire's pedagogical model was developed within a particular economic, social, and political context -namely relating to his country of origin, Brazil, and later adopted in Chile and other Third world countries which differs considerably from contemporary western societies- it is still globally relevant. To the current technocratic perception of education, it proposes a humanising approach, expressed through the relation of people with their social environment. In spite of the fact that Freire's views are closely linked to pedagogic and curriculum design in the countries of the Third World, the general principles of his critical pedagogy can also be applied to western societies. A substantial number of Freire's pedagogic theories and views continue to be implemented in many countries around the globe up to the present day, whether as an alternative to formal education systems, in non-formal and a-formal learning settings, or as educational reforms. In addition, educators and teachers alike, either through collective or individual pedagogical intervention in all of the aforementioned educational environments, have, to a greater or lesser degree, utilized Freire's proposals, even if these have not been incorporated into the national education curriculum.

The profound impact of Freire's work over time lies in the emphasis that he places on the political character of education and the relationship between political design and liberating education, a fact which has serious consequences as much for the underdeveloped as for the developed worlds. Characteristically, he maintained that separating politics from education, whether from naivety and/or ignorance, or from slyness and deceit, is not merely misleading but outright dangerous (Freire, 1985). His thinking clearly stresses the power of education to be a liberating rather than a subjugating force. According to Freire, political action for freedom is the practice of those who strive to become the creative participants of their own history, conquering the alienation and oppression they have been subjected to. However, in order for this to

be achieved, the oppressed need their own Pedagogy based on teaching and learning models different to those of the existing traditional educational systems of the dominant class, and it is within this context that Freire formulated his radical learning approaches of Critical Pedagogy and liberating education (Turner & Williams, 1971).

It is, therefore, in view of the often controversial nature of contemporary educational reforms that many progressive educators have discovered anew Freire's theories and practices. They view his ideas as an alternative solution to the current conservative conception of education, and in so doing refute the long-held claim that liberating pedagogy, in essence the Pedagogy of Freedom, is applicable only to Third World countries.

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