

Paolo Freire

Early Biography

Born in the northeastern port of Recife, September 19, 1921 to a middle-class family. His family had lived a comfortable existence until the Great Depression reached Brazil. During this period of economic difficulty his family moved from Recife further inland to Jabatao when Paulo was ten years old. Not long after their arrival his father died, which further impacted the family's financial status. It was during this period of economic hardship that he experienced some of the suffering faced by those who were perpetually facing poverty.

His economic hardship resulted in his being two years behind in his schooling. The decline into poverty by the Freires so impacted on young Paulo some of his teachers even suggested that he might have serious long-term developmental problems. In the lexicon of the day they believed he might be retarded. As the family's decline abated and economic turmoil began to dissipate, Paulo's family's economic status improved. With the return to their middle-class status he was able to finish secondary school and gain admittance to college. He studied law and philosophy at the University of Pernambuco.

In 1944 he married an elementary school teacher named Elza Maia Costa Oliveira and together they had five children, three daughters and two sons. It was becoming a parent which may have been an important step in Freire's development.

“As a parent, Paulo's interests in theories of education began to grow, leading him to do more extensive reading in education, philosophy, and the sociology of education than in law. In fact after passing the bar he quickly abandoned law as a means of earning a living in order to go work as a welfare official...” (<http://nlu.nl.edu>, p. 2)

While attending the university Freire taught Portuguese in a secondary school. In 1959, Freire completed his doctoral thesis on adult illiteracy and accepted a professorship in history and

philosophy at the University of Recife. The university also made Dr. Freire director of its literacy outreach program.

Influences

Recife is located in the northeastern part of Brazil along the Atlantic coast on what might be said to be the part of South America closest to Africa. It is a seaport, but its role as a port and economic gateway had diminished greatly during the twentieth century. In a nation ravaged by great disparities in wealth, the region around Recife poverty was endemic. It was the classic feudal pattern, "In 1956 half the land was owned by three percent of the population." (Elias, p. 1) The region had once been profitable with an agricultural system based on slave labor. But with the evolution of technology and competition from other similar economies the descendants of the former slaves were left far behind.

It was this history and the residual effect of the slave economy, that is, an elite owning much of the land co-existing with the landless unskilled descendants of former slaves, which perpetuated the economic injustice evidenced by pandemic poverty. Unlike the United States Brazil ended the institution of slavery only in increments. Emancipation began with a law passed in 1871 but was not completed until 1888 when the last 700,000 slaves were freed.

Along with such profound and pervasive poverty was the accompanying plagues of illiteracy and ill health. "Around the year 1960 the seven state areas had an illiteracy rate of seventy-five percent and a life expectancy of twenty-eight years for men and thirty-two for women." (Elias, p. 1) It was in this social and cultural environment that Freire began his life as an educator and philosopher.

Whether it was because he married an educator or because his pedagogic skills were so

much a natural part of his personality he found himself, despite the potential to earn more money as a lawyer, drawn to teaching.

“Following his studies, Freire worked as a teacher and advocate among the people of the slums. It was while he did this work that Freire became involved in literacy training. He gradually began to focus all of his attention on education, especially adult literacy among the poor of Recife.” (Elias, p. 3)

It was in this setting of working with the illiterate poor in the slums of Recife that Freire became politicized.

“To make ends meet, Freire worked as a welfare official as well as a director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service in the state of Pernambuco. Between 1947 and 1959, his involvement with adult literacy intensified and caused him to become increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional methods for dealing with illiteracy that posited an authoritarian relationship between teacher and pupil.” (Elias, p. 3)

With memories of his own poverty still clearly etched in his mind he approached his work with an empathy uncommon among most middle-class bureaucrats.

Freire believed that the process making an individual literate was somehow contributing to the reproduction of poverty. “For Freire, literacy is a quality of consciousness, not simply mastery of a morally neutral technique.” (Grabowski, p. 37) He believed that there was embedded in the curriculum being taught to the poor a message which would ultimately reinforce and perpetuate their poverty. If the message submersed in the curriculum did not restrict the advancement of the adult learner it often resulted in that individual distancing themselves from where they had once been. It was Freire’s experience teaching the poor of Recife which led him to the conclusion that “...these primers contained a hidden curriculum consisting of knowledge, attitudes, and values which illiterates were to learn as well as the

rudiments of literacy.” (Elias, p. 3)

So successful was Freire’s teaching literacy to adults that in 1962 he was placed in charge of the adult literacy program of the city of Recife by its’ mayor. In 1963, with the aid of the American Agency for International Development, Freire began to expand his adult literacy program. “The results of this experiment were impressive. Three hundred workers learned to read and write in forty-five days.” (Elias, p. 4) His accomplishments would result in a near meteoric rise from an urban teacher to national expert in the quest for adult literacy. “When Paulo de Tarso, a friend of Freire, became Minister of Education, Freire’s literacy program was extended to the entire nation in June, 1963.” (Elias, p. 5) Freire was made head of the national literacy campaign.

Despite the phenomenal success of his programs there were negative repercussions. Embedded in Freire’s literacy programs was the message of the need for economic justice, reform and opposition to repression. The stories were not just about husbands and wives buying bread at the local market, they were stories which railed against injustice and offered to raise the awareness of these marginalized Brazilians. “Freirean-based literacy programs involve an examination of society’s hidden economies of power and privilege and how these help to inform students’ subjectivities.”(sic) (McLaren & Leonard, p. 53)

It was not just the message of the underclass being encouraged to challenge political and economic oppression which made Freire controversial. It was a time when the Cold War and revolution threatened to spread throughout Latin America. The true manifestation of Cuban Revolution had just sent the repressive oligarchies of the Western Hemisphere reeling, furthermore Che Guevara was loose somewhere on the South American continent. Freire was

a leftist reformer, and though his techniques might have been unique to him, the notion of a national literacy program was not. It was no secret where Freire got many of his ideas for the nation-wide application of his literacy programs. “This national literacy campaign was modeled after the example of Cuba, which had almost eliminated illiteracy through a massive literacy campaign a few years earlier.” (Elias, p. 5)

On April 1, 1963 there was a military coup in Brazil removing President Goulart. Goulart, a leftist, who had exhibited too much of an affinity for Marxist ideals and had initiated too many social reforms in the opinion of the right-wing military leaders. Shortly after the coup, Freire was arrested and held without charge for seventy-five days. Though his abductors found only slide projectors in the boxes from Poland where they expected to find smuggled firearms, he still was taken into custody. “Freire was accused of using literacy training to spread subversive ideas.” (Elias, p. 6) Freire was not a subversive. He had the approval of the highest levels of the legitimately elected Brazilian government. In his mind he was merely patriotically serving a progressive administration in the task of raising the consciousness of the underclass. For Freire this change in the perspective of Brazil’s poor would be a means of improving the democratic processes. “Incitement to revolt was never the direct objective of Freire as an educator. Freire wanted only to aid the reformist government of Joao Goulart in its efforts to bring certain political and social reforms to northeast Brazil.” (Elias, p. 6)

As was the case with all Brazilian reformers, Freire knew the right-wing military presented a constant threat. Though he was fearless in his overt challenges to the status quo in a political environment where repressive and anti-democratic elements were capable of seizing power, he feared that under the right-wing military junta prison would be a constant threat

imposed upon him at the will of the government. He was not a revolutionary but rather a reformer, the advocate of a specific broad-based approach to conquering illiteracy and hopefully poverty. Revolutions can use martyrs, public programs can't. Public programs need the expertise of practitioners and administrators as well as the support of advocates.

Following his release, Freire was offered the option of exile, which he accepted.

Freire eventually made his way to Santiago, Chile where he went to work for UNESCO. The stay in prison was not totally unproductive, "(w)hile Freire was in prison, he had begun to write an account of his literacy methods. In 1967, he finished this book *Educacao como practical de liberdade* in Chile, where it was soon published in Spanish and extensively used." (Elias, p. 8)

While in Chile Freire was made head of that nation's literacy program under a Christian Democratic government. Freed from the responsibilities of being concurrently an administrator and a practitioner, Freire made ample use of his time. While in Chile, Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It was this publication which was to expand his horizons even more. No longer limited to the South American continent Freire's philosophies and techniques would receive world-wide recognition. It was this fame which produced an offer from North America. Freire was offered the position of visiting professor at Harvard University's Center for the Study of Education and Development.

During his stay in the United States Freire had an epiphany. Like many of those living outside America at that time, Freire had no notion that there are poor and oppressed people within this country. Freire was shocked to learn how pervasive poverty was in America. He was in Boston during the anti-war activities and saw the government repress the student

protests. “His reading of the American scene was an awakening to him because he found that repression and exclusion of the powerless from economic and political life was not limited to third world countries and cultures of dependence. (Collins, p. 18-19)

Anxious not to be swept into the vortex of an American-centered politics, in 1970 Freire accepted a position with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland where he rose to the position of Assistant Secretary of Education. Though Freire’s principles seemed to owe more to Marx than any other source, he never abandoned Christianity in general or specifically his Catholicism. From that position Freire sought to expand his ideals and programs to all Third World countries. He remained there until he was notified in 1979 that he was welcomed back in his native Brazil.

Freire was permitted to return to Brazil and did so in June 1980. Now approaching 60 Freire found a need to be closer to his now grown children and to his roots. Freire found his return to Brazil was a welcomed respite his from exile, however, globetrotting had exacted a price. “After living in exile for sixteen years and following his return to the country in 1980, Freire attempted to ‘relearn Brazil,’ thus traveling incessantly throughout the country, lecturing, engaging in dialogues with students and teachers, and publishing.” (McLaren & Leonard, p. 135)

Not long after his return to Brazil he was offered a faculty position at the University of Sao Paulo. In this new faculty position Freire found that he could not long remain in the isolation of academia. There in Sao Paulo Freire was made Minister of Education in 1989 “which made him responsible for guiding school reform with two-thirds of the nation’s schools.” (<http://nlu.nl.edu>, p.2) He was serving in that position when he died of a heart

attack on May 2, 1997, he was 75.

Freire's Technique

Freire's pedagogic system exists on two levels. It might be easier to view these two levels as two distinct perspectives, macroeducation and microeducation. Macroeducation being defined as the curriculum, the national grass roots educational programs and the associated philosophies. Whereas, microeducation is the specific interaction between teacher and student with the philosophic underpinnings of those practices. An example of microeducation would be how Freire brought humility to the pedagogic interaction. This subtle change was not superficial. This change in interactive modes was meant to convey a message. Freire knew from experience that "... adult educators have typically found their offerings of educational assistance more suited to and more frequently utilized by the upwardly mobile than the hardcore disadvantaged." (Grabowski, p. 3) Freire believed that one way of dealing with the learner was an equal which would be to acknowledging a subjective reality faced by the underclass. Freire taught that every action reflects consciousness and has meaning. This approach employed is what Freire called praxis. Freire defined praxis as being thoughtful and meaningful actions, that is, actions which are deliberate, functional and sacramental at the same time.

What seems to be partly responsible for Freire's success was how he sought to revolutionize not only the curriculum but the whole teacher-student relationship. It was Freire's opinion that part of the problem was based in the manner in which teachers addressed their students. He believed that teachers approached their students from a position of power

which was ultimately demeaning. It was Freire's opinion that this position of authority was used as a medium to condition the student to the existence of power relationships. In Freire's model the teacher was not just a aloof expert, but more of a colleague embarking with the learner on a journey. The teacher was one who might know the way better, but there was no one in charge, the teacher would not be dominating the relationship. "In seeking to provide adult education for the oppressed, Freire vehemently rejects teacher-dominated and subject-matter-oriented education." (Grabowski, p. 5) Freire seems to be restating what Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan had proposed. Freire's pedagogic technique was an educational variation of the notion of the medium being the message.

In his Collin's biography of Freire, *Paulo Freire: His life, works, and thought* (1977), he wonders why Freire is so successful where so many others seem to have failed. Collins attributes it to the process. As Collins describes it the process might be that component which spans both the interpersonal components with those which have broad-based implications and motivations.

Why did Freire's methods enjoy such rapid success? What made it appealing for campesinos who worked from dawn to dusk in the fields to attend sessions every night for six to eight weeks? The answer lies in understanding the process of *conscientização* ("conscientization"), the word Freire uses to describe authentic education. (Collins, p. 7-8)

Whether it was the compassion and empathy evident in the teacher-student relationship or the consciousness raising goals to the curriculum, Freire's programs succeeded. And because they were successful he was in demand throughout Latin America and eventually throughout the world.

What leaders from Santiago, Chile to Geneva, Switzerland saw in Freire's programs

was realization of what Thomas Jefferson had said more than two hundred and twenty years earlier. It was Jefferson who advocated the belief that democracy needed literacy to succeed. For the populace to exercise its democratic responsibilities properly it must be informed, and to be informed they must be literate. It was just this form of Jeffersonian equation to which Freire subscribed. Freire saw Brazil's failure to transition from oligarchy to democracy was largely due to the illiteracy of the masses.

During the past two centuries Brazil tried to import the structure of a national democratic state. In Freire's judgement this was an uncritical solution, typical of an alienate culture naive and 'messianic' because Brazilian society was without the conditions necessary for the critical construction of a democracy. (Collins, p. 11)

Freire saw literacy as being essential to the evolution of democracy in Brazil in addition to improving the lot of the underclass. "For such a society in transition, a mode of education providing profound political reforms, not just new techniques and economic structures, was necessary to assure the basis and establishment of democracy." (Collins, p. 11)

Freire's Philosophy

It was in this process of interaction between technique, curriculum, and human development that Freire based his philosophy which intertwined a mix of pedagogic, economic, and social issues.

This pedagogy challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their literacy and knowledge. His critical methods ask teachers and students to question existing literacy and knowledge as part of questioning habits appropriate for citizens in a democracy. (McLaren & Leonard, p. 25)

He linked the task of ending oppression and perpetuating poverty as part of process where the

learner is liberated through education. A liberation which frees the learner to reach their full potential. “Education as the Practice of Freedom presents a philosophical view of what men and women are capable of becoming when enabled to transform history and become subjects through the process of critical reflection.” (Collins, p. 10)

Part of what Freire saw in Recife was the acceptance by the poor of their status through their identification with their class and its plight. He invented words in Portuguese which do not easily translate into English such as “massified.” What Freire sought to identify was what he believed to be the poor’s loss of a sense of individuality, and with it a sense of agency. “Education is presented as a way of dealing with a massified (sic) society in which people are not considered individuals.” (Elias, p. 9) This is why Freire never totally submersed his beliefs in Marxism, though he relied on it for much of his analytical tools and perspectives. It was this reliance on Marxism and the success of the program which brought attention, both positive and negative, to Freire, his techniques, his programs and ultimately his philosophies.

“To read Freire and come away with the notion that he is ‘merely another neo-Marxist’ is to sell him short. While it is true that his analysis of history and culture leans heavily on the thought of Marx and Mao, of Fanon, Lukacs, Althusser, and Marcuse, his educational philosophy does not lend itself to quick analysis or identification with a specific school.” (Collins, p. 25)

But it will be his reliance on Marxist definitions and the accompanying tools of historical, economic, and social analysis which branded him as a dangerous radical. To declare Freire a Marxist and in doing so to identify him as a threat would be made easy by Freire’s use of such methodologies in his philosophy. However, those who knew him, knew his religious beliefs and understood the religious motivations for his actions, were not duped by the Marxist label.

They recognized that Freire's threat was actually more powerful, and ultimately more successful than international Marxism. "Peasant passivity and fatalism waned as literacy became attainable and valued. Freire's methods were incontestably politicizing and, in the eyes of the Brazilian military and land-owners anxious to stave off societal change, outrageously radical." (Collins, p. 8)

Freire on Courage

Not all those who exhibit courage reflect upon it. But this was not the case with Dr. Freire. What might be a product of his dual roles as both educator and philosopher he analyzed what motivated him to do what he did. He reflected on what he did more than many successful teachers might be inclined to do. First and foremost, he defined courage as a most subjective trait. "Courage, as a virtue is not something I can find outside myself. Because it comprises the conquering of my fears, it implies fear." (Freire, p. 41)

He spoke of courage as a characteristic which is exhibited in distinctly different ways. He believed that courage was a quality that teachers must have to survive the challenges of their profession. "It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, with the courage to try a thousand times before giving up." (Freire, 1998, p. 3) The teacher has to have courage to give of themselves to the learner. It requires courage because in the process the teacher is so vulnerable, so exposed. To attempt this time and again, even when confronted with failure, requires courage according to Freire.

For Freire the recognition of the existence of fear and controlling it through an educative process is an integral part of removing the barriers between teacher and learner. In

acknowledging their fear the teacher is relinquishing one of the trappings of the unequal relationship when educators seek to have power over learners.

By speaking about their fears or insecurities, educators move gradually toward overcoming them, and at the same time they gradually win the confidence of learners. This way, instead of trying to hide fear with the authoritarian disguises easily recognized by learners, teachers humbly admit it. By speaking their feelings, they accept themselves persons, they testify to their desire to learn with the learners. (Freire, 1998, p. 48)

Conversely, Freire suggests that teachers who do exercise this traditional power relationship as part of the pedagogic process do so in ignorance of the reality that fear represents. “Elitist and authoritarian educators, like those for whom democracy seems to be deteriorating when the popular classes begin to flood the streets with protest, never understand the humility of facing a fear is the first step in turning it into courage.” (Freire, p. 48)

A second manifestation of courage is that more conventional notion which would be a product of challenging an entrenched and ruthless opponent. Freire knew what the unstable Brazilian social and political environment was like. He knew that the military rose up numerous times in the twentieth century to put an end to reforms and imprison reformers. Though protected by the umbrella of the legitimate government, Freire was aware that anyone advocating change, particularly change which promoted justice at the expense of the elite, was at risk. It was existence of these real fears that Freire also reflected upon.

Freire saw courage as the product of an educative process. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the conquering it by educating it.

Indeed, fear is a right, but one to which corresponds the duty of educating it, of facing it and overcoming it. Facing a fear, not running away from it, implies analyzing its reasons for being and gauging the relationship between what causes it

and our ability to respond. Facing fear is not hiding it; this is the only way to conquer it.” (Freire, 1998, p. 48)

He believes that the recognition of the existence of fear is essential to our humanity. It is almost as if Freire was saying “I fear, therefore I am.”

Before anything else, we begin to recognize that fear is a manifestation of our being alive. I do not need to hide my fears. But I must not allow my fears to immobilize me. If I am secure in my political dream, having tactics that may lessen my risk, I must go on with the fight. Hence the need to be in control of my fear, to educate my fear, from which is finally born my courage. Thus I must neither, on the one hand, deny my fears nor, on the other, surrender myself to them. Instead, I must control them, for it is in the very exercise of this control that my necessary courage is shared. (Freire, p. 41)

Freire taught that fear is omnipresent. He believed that the process of controlling one’s fears is what courage is. Without fear courage is conquering nothing. We would be merely acting in ignorance of the potential consequences, a condition which requires no courage, if it were not for the existence of our fears. “That is why though there may be fear without courage, the fear that devastates and paralyzes us, there may never be courage without fear, that which ‘speaks’ of our humanness as manage to limit, subject, and control it.” (Freire, p. 41)

Conclusion

Freire saw the educator as someone whose task it was to teach the learner about more than mere content. He saw the educator in the role which teachers played throughout history, that is, not just conveying expertise or facilitating the development of skills, but in the life-altering, pro-active, model which was the essence of Socrates and nearly every teacher before education became purview of the state. Confronted with the injustices and institutions which

relegate so many people to a life of profound poverty, Freire could not limit his content to teaching those skills which would make the poor useful to the society which has exploited them for so long. Freire sought to offer the poor not only the tools of human agency but the awareness essential to apply those tools in a manner that would allow individuals the freedom to reach their full potential.

For Freire, this proactive teacher, this educator who delves into everything that impacts upon the learners' life, instructing about all aspects of human existence, is by definition political. The modern Anglo-Saxon model of education, that is, a teacher who teaches morality, even religious values, but who is supposedly apolitical is a myth. It cannot exist, it never existed in reality. Teachers do not teach in a vacuum. In Freire's model this teacher reinforces the oppression by not calling attention to it. For Freire teaching is an inherently political act. "Freire... asserted that education must be social and political, a constant attempt to change one's attitudes and create democratic dispositions." (Collins, p. 12)

Freire believed that the purpose of any form of education is same as it is for all education, the fulfilment of human potential and subsequently the betterment of the human condition.

Freire's educational efforts are decidedly political. He is not an educator who sees intrinsic value in education for its own sake. What motivates him is a realization that people's lives in many parts of the world are impoverished. As an educator Freire attempted to respond to this in the way he knew best, by involving the people in a process of critical reflection on their situation. (Elias, p. 29)

For courage does not exist in and of itself. It exists as a condition which impacts broader more important aspects of the human condition. Freire's courage enabled him to cope with the daunting nature of the daily challenge of educating Brazil's poor. His courage enabled him to

work under constant threat of reprisal by the military and other who protected the status quo by any and all means at their disposal. And courage enabled Freire to take the one step too few teachers attempt, that is, to acknowledge the broader impact and the realities of their profession. The act of teaching is political, and to do it properly one must have the courage of their convictions.

Bibliography

Elias, John L. *Paulo Freire: Pedagogue of Liberation*. Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1994.

Collins, Denis, S.J. *Paulo Freire: His life, works & thought* New York: Paulist Press, 1977.

Faundez, Antonio. *Paulo Freire: Learning to Question— A Pedagogy of Liberation*. New York: Continuum, 1989.

Freire, Paulo. *A Revolutionary Dilemma for the Adult Educator*. Edited by Stanley M. Grabowski, Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse. Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1972.

----- . *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. New York: Continuum, 1994.

----- . *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Translated by Donaldo Macedo, Dale Koike and Alexandre Oliveira. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998.

Peter McLaren & Peter Leonard (editors). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter*. London: Routledge, 1993.