

# Response: Critical Theory in Education: Remembering the Lessons of *El Abuelito*

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When asked to serve on the TAMARA Editorial Board, we were honored. To be able to work and theorize with colleagues in such diverse and important fields as organizational science, critical postmodernism, green theory and left economics was a rare treat. *We* come from the tradition of “critical pedagogy.” For us, critical pedagogy stands at the nexus of critical/postmodern/poststructuralist theories, multicultural theories, cultural studies and struggles for social justice and a progressive politics within education. And truly, we expect to learn more from our TAMARA colleagues and submitters than they will from us. And to then be asked to react to the important research presented in “Think Global, Act Local,” by de Cieri, Wolfram Cox & Fenwick, was even more of an honor; for these researchers truly “push the envelope” of organizational science—specifically, by examining “critical participation” within the context of “strategic international human resource management” (SIHRM).

In this essay, we choose to react to de Cieri, Wolfram Cox & Fenwick by going “old school.” For us, critical pedagogy began with *el abuleito*, *intelectual*, *Compañero* Paulo Freire. While he was Brazilian, and we are Chicano and European American, as left educationalists, we feel an enduring political, cultural and educational bond with Freire. Although he died in 1997, his connection to all educational progressives, and all who are interested in advancing struggles for social justice and dignity among all women and men, we must always remember the legacy and importance of his years of living his theory and theorizing his practice.

## **EL HOMBRE**

Freire was born into a middle class family in Recife, Brazil, on September 19, 1921 and spent the majority of his life theorizing about, designing and implementing empowering literacy projects throughout the Third World—from Africa to Asia to Latin America. He taught from the 1940s until 1964 in Brazil and at one time served as the director of the National Literacy Campaign. When the military leaders of the U.S. backed *coup d' état* came into power in 1964, he was accused of being a “subversive”—and imprisoned for two months before being sent into exile. Although the reason given by the Brazilian government for his incarceration was for “teaching peasants how to read,” Freire always claimed he was not imprisoned for teaching *campesinas/os* how to read, but rather, that he was teaching them how to “read between the lines.” After ex-

ile, he briefly stayed in Bolivia but then settled in Chile, where he made his home until 1970. While in Chile he taught at the University of Santiago, was a UNESCO consultant with the Agrarian Reform Training and Research Institute, did literacy work and later supported the work of socialist president Salvador Allende—who was later overthrown by another U.S. sponsored coup in 1973. In 1969 Freire was appointed to Harvard University’s Center for the Study of Development and Social Change and in 1970 he and his family moved to Switzerland so Freire could work as a consultant to the office of education of the World Council of Churches. He returned from exile to Brazil in 1981 to teach at the Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo. Freire also served as the Minister of Education in São Paulo under the Workers’ Party.

Peter McLaren notes that “the work of...Freire places him in the front ranks of educational revolutionaries who march behind the banner of liberation to fight for social justice and educational reform.” Freire saw literacy and education as ways to transform the current unjust hegemonic social, economic and cultural order into a more just and humane one. He believed that we could (and can) use education to *re-make* our world from a place where the majority of people are not able to read and write, and where 30,000 children die every day from starvation, to a place where people are able to re/co-create their realities and truly realize their human potential. Henry Giroux elaborates: “[L]iteracy for Freire is inherently a political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society.”

Freire had many theoretical influences; most notably, however, he drew from three major areas of thought: existentialism, Catholicism and Marxism. He found these world views complementary and was able to combine them into a compassionate, compelling and revolutionary philosophy for the ongoing liberation of humankind.

Existentialism was one of the driving forces behind Freire’s vision of what the world in transition, and humankind’s purposeful interaction with it, should look like. Freire believed that it is our species’ *vocation* to define and read its world, its environment and to shape it in interaction with other humans. He often quoted Sartre in criticizing oppression and traditional forms of education in their attempt to “mystify” reality and to separate us from a fuller understanding of our world, thus not allowing us to assert our “free will” in defining and shaping that world.

Freire’s brand of Catholicism flowed easily from his grounding in existentialism and humanism, for he identified with the Latin American religious movement known as “liberation theology.” Begining in the late 1960s, liberation theol-

ogy combines Christianity and socialism in a less dogmatic reading of the bible with the goal of improving the material existence of the average human in the here and now. As Blase Bonpane notes, “Liberation theology is learned by the ancient method: walk around, live, and thus learn as we dialog, think and suffer.” This “walking your talk” is core to Freirean thought and “praxis.”

Marxism is the tool that Paulo Freire used to analyze people’s objective materialistic existence, and the extent to which they control or don’t control-or fully comprehend-their conditions. In quoting Marx, Mao, Lenin, Guevara, Castro and Althusser, Freire showed how we can not only use Marxism to help place ourselves as “subjects” within our day-to-day realities, but also how we can educationally and politically organize and act for progressive social change. As Bandera notes, “Freire...is inspired by Marx and other ‘great ones’ of Marxism: that is to say that in Freire method and doctrine are Marxist.”

Yet Freire was not orthodox spouter of lock-step modernist predeterminism. He held that we each needed to re-invent our own critical pedagogy, our own education for social change, for ourselves, based on our own contexts. As noted in his classic work with Donaldo Macedo:

I refuse to write a how-to manual or provide a step-by-step recipe...When a North American educator reads my work, does not agree with all I say...but feels touched by my writings, rather than merely following me, he or she should begin [their] practice by trying to critically comprehend the contextual conditions of where I worked... Educators must also investigate all of these conditions in their own contexts.

### **SUS IDEAS**

Freirean pedagogy has as its goals the liberation of students (“students/teachers”) and their

teachers (“teachers/students”) from oppressive realities they face in their daily lives; the development within students and teachers of attitudes and capacities to view themselves as capable of taking action on their world in order to change it; and the enhancement of student “literacies” and “academic competencies.”

Freirean pedagogy seeks to make visible the political nature of schooling, and the effects of unequal, often oppressive, power relations that characterize schooling and the larger late capitalist, post-Fordist society within which we live. Freire’s theory of teaching and learning challenges widely held pedagogical truths, with particular emphasis placed on rebuking myths of educational “meritocracy” which attempt to present schooling, and the acquisition of literacy, as individual and neutral processes. Freirean theory seeks to uncover who benefits and who is disenfranchised within educational systems steeped in these so-called “meritocratic” practices.

From a Freirean perspective, people should be seen as “historical subjects” capable of transforming their *own* lived realities as they see them, as “subjects” who act on the world, as opposed to “objects” who are acted upon by others. At the heart of Freire’s approach is that learners reform their identities in opposition to perceived societal problems. That is, students are encouraged to take up subject positions as critical analysts and agents.

Critical teachers following this philosophy are encouraged to engage learners in discussions and investigations of their lived realities and problematic situations. The concerns, needs and personal experiences of the students are at the center of this process. Open-ended cultural and political themes are collectively investigated by the students and teacher in order to generate discussion and to propose actions to solve learners’ concerns and problems. Through the application of this theory, it is hoped that critical practitioners will facilitate students’ development and eventual manifestation of “critical consciousness,” what Freire has called “con-

scientization.” In developing this critical consciousness, Freire’s pedagogy calls for the use of dynamic discursive interactions to develop students’ critical understandings within the areas of education, economics, politics and culture. According to Freire, this critical analytical capacity on the part of the students—the development of critical agentive stances toward the world—is realized as students *engage* the problematic themes of their lives during pedagogic and other encounters. Further, students are encouraged to take collective and individual actions on problematic situations in their lives in order to change them and then to relate these experiences to classroom learning. In this way, students learn to read the “word” through their reading (and *rereading*) of their “world”. Through this process, as students become more critically aware of education and language, and their liberatory or repressive potentials, they further increase their ability to be critically conscious; to be critical agents.

In summarizing the aims of Freirean pedagogy, Antonia Darder notes that “students discover themselves as historical social subjects with the power to transform their world.”<sup>11</sup> According to Freirean theory, classrooms should be places where teachers and students attempt to encounter, and then transform, oppressive power relations based on distinctions such as class, gender, race, language and sexual orientation. At the core, the goal of Freirean pedagogy is not just to assist students in developing various literate and academic competencies, but also to assist students in using these and other skills to develop critical *consciousness* about the social and political conditions of their lives and to take transformative actions—be they small or large.

What Freirean pedagogical theory represents is a move toward critical student agency, an agency that is characterized by a critical way of viewing and acting on the world-as-mediated, *but not determined by*, discourse. We often tacitly accept the way people with power define us, the way they attempt to position us as powerless “objects.” To break with this limiting view of self, to take up transformative subject positions,

and to then take action based on these new views of self, is to be an agent, a critical agent. A student who assumes such a position is a "critical student agent." This project of assisting students in taking up counter-hegemonic subject positions, within and outside of classrooms, is at the heart of Freirean philosophy.

These are the lessons and ideas from *el abuelito* that continue to inspire us as we attempt to advance progressive social change in the Chihuahuan Borderlands of Las Cruces, New Mexico, USA; El Paso, Texas, USA; and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México. And we can also clearly see that these same lessons, learned from different *abuelitas* and *abuelitos*-but no less radical, no less critical and no less revolutionary-inspire de Cieri, Wolfram Cox & Fenwick in their work of unpackaging, critiquing and calling for the transformation of SIHRM from East Caulfield, Australia. We hope you enjoy, are challenged by and learn from their piece-and from TAMARA generally.

*Siempre adelante, nunca atras.*

## References

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## Endnote

- 1.. Darder, Antonia, book review of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *The Nation* Vol. 255, No. 301 (1992, p. 302).

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