

## **The applicability of Paulo Freire's method to tertiary education in the Caribbean.**

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This paper proposes a discussion about the current authoritarian nature of teaching at the tertiary level, both in terms of the classroom environment and the didactic methods, which are often employed in imparting knowledge. The epistemological basis of the word university defines tertiary education as preparing students to understand the universe. With this in mind this paper suggests the use of Paulo Freire's methodology in the university, as a means both to comprehend and combine the universal and the immediate, exercising democracy within the classroom by eliciting active participation of the student, thus contributing to the promotion of learning, more in tune with the realities of the twenty-first century.

### **Introduction**

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) is one of the most important intellectuals of the twentieth-century. Primarily an educator, Freire is also considered a politician and philosopher, his influence on par with that of Piaget, and Vygotsky.

His legacy of commitment, love and hope to educators worldwide can be found in his critical pedagogy which infuses hundreds of "grass roots" organizations, literacy programs, college classrooms, and school reform efforts in different countries. Author of 35 books and articles translated into different languages all around the world, Freire has influenced the educational systems as he proposed a methodology opposed to the traditional authoritarian approach between teacher and student, and notions of teaching and learning.

His thoughts are influenced by different thinkers from Rousseau to Karl Marx, and can be understood in parallel with Foucault's analysis of power and freedom; one of the reasons why his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been so extensively used as a tool against colonialism and imperialism in Latin America, Asia and African countries.

Freire is best known for his opposition to what he called the "banking" concept of education, in which the student is viewed as an empty account to be filled by the teacher in daily "deposits of knowledge". As a substitute, he proposed a horizontal and democratic relationship between teacher and student, where the teacher learns while teaching and the student teaches while learning. During the learning process the teacher considers the knowledge of students and guides them to produce their own interpretations of problems and situations, always related to their immediate reality.

Keeping in mind that Freire's method was originally developed for adult literacy courses, during the 1950s and 60s, the paper aims to discuss the applicability of this method to university teaching, in the age of digitized information and globalization.

### **A call for revolution**

The central point in Freire's proposal for a new approach to education is based on the process of language development, applying Piaget's interpretation of children's development to adults' literacy.

His method consists of promoting literacy while developing a gradual understanding of the immediate environment and the social, economic and political context of the student, emphasizing the learner's previous knowledge and experiences. The other important characteristic of the Freire method is the denounce of the authoritarian aspects of education and the promotion of a more democratic relationship, not only between teacher and students, but also between head-masters, teachers, administrative and supportive staff, and all those involved somehow in the system, including government agencies.

Freire's political agenda was clear from the beginning to the end of his work. As he denounced the oppression and exploitation of the lower classes, the scholar attacked government and economic systems, responsible for exploitation and oppression. His call for change and revolution was heard in different societies. What became known as the *popular education* method was used to promote adult literacy and for revolutionary propaganda against colonial and authoritarian regimes at the same time. Besides Brazil, some of the countries that used his methods were: Angola, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Mozambique.

In a time of dictatorships in Latin America, and especially in Brazil, his popularity grew in parallel with political problems that caused him to go in jail and being forced into exile for about fourteen years, between 1965-1979. During this time, his ideas were spread and practiced in Latin America and Africa, making a profound impact in the field of education and the struggles for national development.<sup>1</sup>

Fifty years after the beginning of a series of successful projects for adults' literacy in the northeast of Brazil, one of the poorest regions of South America, it is valid to ask if his ideas can be practiced today, outside the Third World. Studies and experiences have shown that Freire's model has been successfully used in the so called "developed world", and its influence in changing educational approaches also in upper and middle-class schools, usually associated with constructivist methods. First known as a "popular" methodology, to benefit the "oppressed", the method is actually being used by government projects and private schools, which want to democratize their practices and increase political conscious among students.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaull, Richard. "Foreword" to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30<sup>th</sup> edition, New York, Continuum, 2006, pp. 29-34.

## Freire's methodology and the university

Freire's criticism of the traditional school is focused on the authoritarian and hierarchical structure, which characterizes educational system from primary to higher levels. Given the characteristics of education at the university level, mainly emphasizing the preparation of professionals and the production of deeper knowledge through research and development of products and projects, one could presume that the transmission of information is fundamental, mostly happening through lectures, book/articles readings and laboratory experiences. Many believe that only after accumulating a considered satisfactory level of knowledge, that the university student will in turn be able to produce some satisfactory knowledge. In this case, to accumulate information is essential to producing a good professional. Paulo Freire was against this "banking" concept of education in which the knowledge is deposited in the mind of passive students.

Another characteristic of the university is its hierarchy and the importance given to levels of knowledge, often translated into titles such as: doctors, masters, professors, lecturers, and so on. Even among students, the hierarchy produces differential categories such as freshmen, seniors, and honors students; it can also create differences among fields so that law students can feel more important than philosophy students, for example.

Considering the origins of the university, during the European Middle Age, hierarchy is so important that one could call it the *ethos* of the university.<sup>2</sup> As part of the educational system, the university fits the model proposed by Michel Foucault to analyze prison systems, lately extended to schools, as places for discipline and control.<sup>3</sup>

Universities in general are characterized by a complex fabric and network of power, supported by the hyper valorization of discipline and patterns of punishment/rewards under the guise of fixed rules and procedures, pre-conceived standards of achievement, the overvaluation of erudition over practice and celebration of authority. The strongest obstacle to overcoming these old fashioned features and move on to a more democratic and open institution is explained by Freire as the tendency of the "oppressed" (in this case, the student and/or staff) to copy the behavior of the "oppressor" (teacher, administrator or head-master) once he ascends hierarchically and sees him or herself in a more powerful position. The exercise of power becomes an act of retribution.

In this vicious circle, the student who suffered under an intolerant and inflexible teacher becomes an intolerant and inflexible teacher, perpetuating the oppressive relationship that generates tension in the classroom and panic during exams. Because he was never allowed to freely produce knowledge, he reproduces what was previously "certified as

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<sup>2</sup> Escobar, M., Fernandez, A., Guevara-Niebla, G. and Freire, P.. *Paulo Freire on higher education: a dialogue at the National University of Mexico*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and punish. The birth of prison*. London, Penguin Books, 1977.

true knowledge” as well as the patterns of oppression which victimized him or her in the past.<sup>4</sup>

Many would defend this hierarchical system as a way to push for a positive competition among staff and students, with the benefit of improving the quality of the education and knowledge produced in the university. If that is the case, why should any university support the application of Freire’s method as an educational approach and institutional policy?

According to Moacir Gadotti, the pedagogical model suggested by Freire is still responding to challenges faced by schools and educational systems – among these is included the university – which are dealing with a generalization of information, presented in various format and vehicles, mainly through the internet and mass media systems. The volume, format, availability and velocity of information in these vehicles are forcing the school to re-think its role and become more formative and less informative.<sup>5</sup>

The university, which must be a pluralist institution par excellence, incorporating different ideas, perspectives and technologies, is also being forced to review its role in education and to reform standards, methods, curricula and services in order to keep up with the changes in the society. Free from its duties of “depositing knowledge” the university can concentrate on producing knowledge, responding to the community’s needs. This can only be possible with the democratization of the institution and its openness to dialogue and cooperation, exerting what Freire defines as a dialogue: when one talks *with* the other, instead of talking *to* the other. Equality among the participants of this dialogue is a *sine qua non* condition for its success.

At the classroom level, the pre-condition to establish a democratic dialogue between teacher and students is the openness of teachers to see the student as an equal, as a colleague working on the same project, which is education, with the intention of producing knowledge, which can be translated into new interpretations, applications or formats of a basic curricula, analyzed in new combinations, associations, comparisons and possibilities.

A strong connection between praxis and theory is at the base of Freire’s revolutionary proposal. In this view, the learning process must emphasize the importance of experience, personal and collective experiences that influence the view points of teacher and students, as well the possibilities of solutions for the proposed problem. Thus, as experience is originated in a practical context, so must be the results of the learning process. This approach induces the students to see themselves as subjects in the process, where their previous experiences are valid and the contents are linked to their immediate environment and reality. It stimulates the criticism and motivates students to responsibly act to change the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. 30<sup>th</sup> edition, New York, Continuum, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Gadotti, Moacir. “Por que continuar lendo Freire?” *O Estado de São Paulo*, São Paulo, 02-05-2007, p.12.

One of the most prevalent criticisms of the Freirian method is that it puts curriculum at risk, jeopardizing its contents, given that students have “too much freedom” to intervene in the process, introducing their own experiences, views and interpretations. Freire had the opportunity to answer to this question on many occasions. He noted that his proposal was against the authoritarian model of education, never against the authority of the teacher, who he viewed as an agent whose role was to guide the process, and to stimulate the learners’ curiosity – bringing them new information, which was to be investigated, examined, combined, compared – and creativity to re-formulate problems and interpretations.<sup>6</sup>

The scholar stressed that to be a tolerant teacher or instructor does not mean to agree with everything, in a permissive way:

Permissiveness, which at times gives the impression of leaning toward freedom, ends up working against it. The climate of lawlessness, or free-for-all, that it creates reinforces the authoritarian position. On the other hand, certainly, permissiveness denies the training of the democrat, of those men and women freeing themselves in and by fighting for the democratic ideal, just as it denies the “training” of the obedient, of those who have adapted, those of who the authoritarian dreams.<sup>7</sup>

Patricia Bizzell refers to the anxiety of loss of control over the learning process that affects instructors who intend to work towards a more democratic structure and relationship with their students, proposing a different understanding of power, in which teachers abandon coercive practices without losing their teaching-learning goals. In this case, power would not be absent, but it is not applied hierarchically from the instructor to the student. Rather, everyone’s power is equal and they all have a chance to influence the classroom agenda.<sup>8</sup>

In order to do so, it is important to establish the goals and rules of each task, clarifying the purpose and objectives of each topic in a way that students can participate in the process, and by understanding the rules, they would accept and cooperate. In this case, the authority of the instructor relies in his knowledge of the contents, the activities and tools he/she is able to use in order to stimulate curiosity, creativity and confidence in the students to express their ideas, views and interpretations, and to add their personal experiences during this exercise.

Although the “final result” of the learning process can never be rigidly pre-defined, since it should be constructed in partnership between teacher-students, considering personal tendencies and interpretations, a general target being previously established by the instructor in agreement with the students, so everybody knows what is expected from the learning experience.

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<sup>6</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Teachers as cultural workers. Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder, Westview Press, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Bissell, Patricia. “Classroom authority and critical pedagogy”. *American Literary History*, v. 3(4), 1991, 847-63.

This issue brings up another important criticism of Freire's approach, which is concerned with the difficulty of measuring and assessing students' achievements when applying his method. Authoritarian institutions maintain their hierarchical structures based on punishments and rewards, allowing its members to climb to higher steps after being "judged" on a scale on which he or she has no influence. Freire denied any value to this type of assessment, affirming that it contributes mostly to the belittling and humiliation of the individual, instead of helping to build active and engaged citizens committed to make a better society.

The intent of the method is not the abandonment of assessments and measurements of learning. Instead, it purports to apply them in a very clear way, based on what was agreed to as a goal for each unit, what was actually developed in the classroom, and ultimately centered on the individual and how he or she progressed. Since they defend the idea that the learning process is continuous, and see the assessment as another moment to learn, Freire's followers emphasize the need for feedback to students in a way that they will have a chance to review and re-think what they did.

### **Combining the student's experiences and the content of the syllabus**

The methodology suggested by Paulo Freire is rooted in a deep respect for the human being allied to a strong conviction that education is meant to change the world by fighting against any form of oppression. In this view instructors are called on to acknowledge the practical knowledge that every student brings to the classroom, and to make an extra effort toward getting to know more about the immediate reality of the students, considering their geographic, class, and cultural space.

Freire warns the teacher not to expect less from a lower class student or to accept grammatical errors because of the student's cultural background. As knowledge derived through schooling is considered a tool for economic and social improvement, as well as for political struggle, to deny students these tools would contribute to keep them "oppressed", preventing them from personal progress that would ultimately lead to a better life for their family and a more equalitarian society.

When the instructors use the students' reality as a starting point to plan the curriculum, assessment, activities and approaches, they help to build self-confidence in the student and a solid base for new knowledge by allowing students to add new information to what already exists and to produce new ideas. History teachers, for example, must have a basic knowledge of the community history as they teach about ancient Egypt or the Second World War. And because many of the community's facts, cultural aspects and history are not published, the student becomes the instructor as he or she brings to the classroom new information about their own environment.

Technology and mass media are other key tools in the learning process, even in the most remote areas, in a time were television and radio are very common, and the use of the Internet among students is growing very fast. This means that today there is much more

information about everything (both good and bad), than it was fifteen years ago. Connection between daily facts and discussion of issues in the curriculum helps the student to clarify concepts and ideas about the contents, and at the same time, about current issues that affect his community or the world. It is very common that young students dominate the use of technologies like computer software and websites, much better than their instructors. In both cases, the dialogical relationship proposed by Freire is even more present, as the student teaches the teacher, and the teacher learns from the student.

### **Reading the world, reading the word**

How can Freire's notion of the 'escola-cidadao' contribute to the goals of the university in its formation of committed Caribbean citizens? The globalization of the world has increasingly demanded, as suggested by Freire, that societies *think global, and act local*, which means thinking beyond the borders of institutions, provinces and countries, and at the same time to take action to intervene first in the community then in the world at a large.

Hobsbawn<sup>9</sup> and Bourdieu<sup>10</sup> maintain that globalization has, as a counter-point, emphasized diversity, and this is the new frontier for sociological, political and historical studies. In the same way, Octavio Ianni points towards a *racialization* of the world, where ethnic diversity has a strong influence on the political game.<sup>11</sup> The university has also been called on to respond to this challenge, to become a forum for debate, the production of ideas and policies. To be a citizen in Freire's view is to be an active subject, working for a better society, engaged and debating, in a continuous process of learning-teaching, open to diversity and to the ideas that come from different perspectives.

Given that the university is engaged in producing new professionals, the needs of the market and the needs of the students or potential students are very influential in the planning of curricula and the format of new courses. In this aspect, the university has made advances in a constant dialogue with the job market.

The adoption of Freire's methodology at the university level would, in this way improve this relationship between the university, the community and the job market, while preparing professionals who are also active citizens in a new "universal society".

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<sup>9</sup> Hobsbawn, Eric. *The Age of Extremes*. New York, Little Brown and Co., 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *La miseria del mundo*. Fondo de Cultura Economica, Ciudad del Mexico, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Ianni, Octavio. "A racialização do mundo". *Tempo Social*, v.8(1), 1996, 1-23.

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