

PAULO FREIRE: FROM CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS TO THE PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

Ljiljana Ćumura

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences, Republic of Serbia, ljcumura@yahoo.com

Vanja Petrović

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Sciences, Republic of Serbia, petrovic.vanja1@gmail.com

Abstract: Throughout history, the way education has been organized has changed as has its content and character. As an expression of collective needs, education has served as a vehicle for accomplishing societal tasks and goals. Often – amid discrepancies between societal goals and existing school practices – reforms have been planned and implemented, meeting with rigorous criticism. The traditional approach to education faced its sharpest criticism at the end of the 19th and in the first half of the 20th century. Europe was at that time the epicenter of new pedagogic trends founded on the critique of tradition and a struggle for a contemporary classroom. A significant approach was critical pedagogy, put forward by Paulo Reglus Neves Freire (1921-1997). Freire developed this creative thesis in the field of adult education by linking the language of criticism to that of possibility. His revolutionary ideas in literacy and educational practice became the trademark of pedagogy all over the world and the great Pierre Furter described him as “the myth of his own time”. The goal of this paper is to present – through an analysis of Freire’s major works – his philosophy and radical approach to education and the pedagogy of the oppressed. The authors ask the following questions: Is the democratization and revolution of the classroom possible? How can education transform the individual and society? Which lessons have we learned from Freire?

The first part of the paper presents an overview of the material, functional, and educational tasks of the school, the traditional approach, and the concept of the active school. The paper includes an illustrative analysis of the didactic triangle, the general model of teaching by Daniel Pratt, and a model developed by Freire – including his banking concept of education, what Freire describes as the oppressive culture of silence, and his centering of dialogue as a key aspect of learning inseparable from practice.

Freire’s pedagogy of literacy entails, above all, the development of critical consciousness, the formation of which enables the questioning of historical and social circumstances to create a democratic society. Critical consciousness enables the teacher to understand social reality and develop a list of words and topics that can stimulate discussion. On the other hand, it enables students to learn to understand and then transform reality. Dialogue between the student and the teacher furthers social change, as Freire states, because “human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection”.

Although he ranks amongst the most famous representatives of radical education reform, Freire is unfairly neglected in the Balkans. This paper is an attempt to incentivize a more studious investigation into his work and contribution to the social sciences, action research, reform processes, and the educational system in general. With this paper, the authors also wish to mark 25 years since the death of this Brazilian educator, activist, philosopher, and one of the most influential theoreticians of education in the 20th century.

Keywords: education, pedagogy of the oppressed, critical pedagogy, radical education reform, Paulo Freire

1. INTRODUCTION

Most scholars involved in researching the classroom – and its impact on the individual – understand it to have molded and improved in line with changes taking place in society. Having built a “learning society,” the classroom has undoubtedly gained an ever-increasing role and honed its capabilities. The classroom has three key tasks: the material, the functional, and the educational. Its *material task* refers to acquiring a certain amount of knowledge and mastering the necessary skills for the successful application of knowledge in practice. The *functional task* refers to the development of basic psychological and physical abilities on which an individual’s further progress will be grounded. The *educational task* entails the building and shaping of an individual, as a human being. It also encompasses the structuring of a person’s outlook on life and the world and his or her’s positive personality traits and character (Ćumura, 2015). The role and importance of the classroom’s educational task have been particularly emphasized throughout history as it serves as the foundation for the socialization of individuals.

All societies naturally aspire to develop and progress on all fronts. The process of searching for higher quality education systems entails the analysis of and improvements upon the daily interaction between the teacher and the students, the process of communicating, and the introduction of innovations into teaching. It is precisely through the particularities of organizing the educational process that we enable and encourage the student to be an active participant in his or her development, which is an essential prerequisite for a creative attitude towards and role in the development of society. As individuals are capable of discovering one’s own possibilities and committing to

realizing them, they can be viewed as active participants in (and not – as is often the case – passive products of the process of) organizing the educational process. More educators are realizing the necessity of setting aside traditional understandings of the classroom because, as the executive headteacher of the Saddleworth School in the UK, Matthew Milburn, says, “Life is too short for classroom teaching”. Interesting solutions are offered by the approach advocated by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, activist, philosopher, and one of the most influential theoreticians of education in the 20th century.

As Ćumura, Barbanti, and Trevisan (2021) noted, Freire “has become an outstanding figure in the academic world for his unique combination of theory with practical experience in the field of adult education. He became famous in the early sixties for his powerful method of literacy training, but his writings went beyond mere techniques for literacy training and became a landmark for critical pedagogy all over the world. Freire’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* had been translated into several languages and discussed widely by educators, politicians, academics, and community organizers. With *this piece of art*, Paulo Freire established his place in the universal history of education” (Ibid, 119-120). This paper is an attempt to incentivize a more studious investigation into his work and contribution to the social sciences, action research, reform processes, and the educational system in general. Also, with this paper, the authors wish to mark 25 years since the death of Paulo Freire.

2. PURPOSE

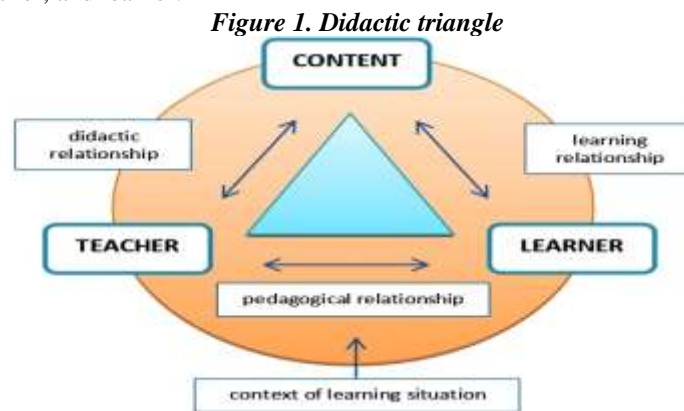
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3. REVOLUTION IN THE CLASSROOM

To begin with, it should be noted that two main approaches are present in the educational systems: the traditional approach and the concept of active teaching. The *traditional* approach is characterized by classes, grades, pre-defined curricula, centrally developed programs and little possibility of deviating from them, and the definition of goals as the adoption of the program (i.e., the acquisition of knowledge from individual school subjects). In addition, the dominant role of the teacher is reduced to lecturer and evaluator and the students’ to listening and rote memorization. Lecture is the central method coupled with a dominant frontal form of work. Assessment consists of checking the degree of program adoption and the motivation for learning is external (does not come from within the student).

On the other hand, *active teaching* focuses on the student as an active subject of the teaching process. Active teaching curricula are flexible and orientational (open to adaptation in line with the students’ interests and linking the contents of different subjects) and not centrally developed. In addition, the acquisition of knowledge is connected to the experience of the students themselves, the motivation for learning is internal, and active methods are dominant, that is, the focus is on expanding the possibilities for gaining personal experience. With this in mind, we can see that the goal of an active classroom is to encourage personal development and individuality and not just the acquisition of knowledge based on a pre-defined curriculum. In an active classroom, the teacher is an organizer of instruction with an accented motivational role. The teacher is also a partner in affective interaction and a regulator of social interactions within the classroom and group as a whole. The progress in a student’s development is evaluated relative to his or her starting point, motivation, and interest in the work and activities.

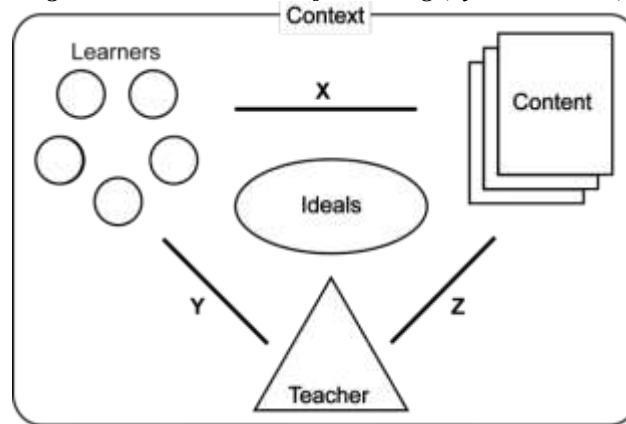
Both of the approaches to teaching can be typified with the help of the so-called *didactic triangle* (Figure 1) with its three pillars: content, teacher, and learner.



Source: Own, 2022.

The didactic triangle is characterized by three relationships: pedagogical (teacher–learner), didactic (teacher–content), and learning relationship (learner–content), all of which are essential to didactical analysis. As Hillen and Landis (2014) noted “the aim of a didactical analysis is to make the content meaningful to the learner. That is, the teacher is responsible for stressing topics that, from the teacher’s reflective perspective, will be essential to the students’ present and future lives. This is the so-called professional teacher’s liberty as it stresses the teacher’s duty to act in a self-reliant fashion. In a nutshell, the reflective teacher has to make meaning out of the subject matter for the benefit of students’ learning and development” (Ibid, 208-209). Daniel Pratt later supplemented the didactic triangle (teacher – learner – content) with the elements *context* and *ideals* (Figure 2).

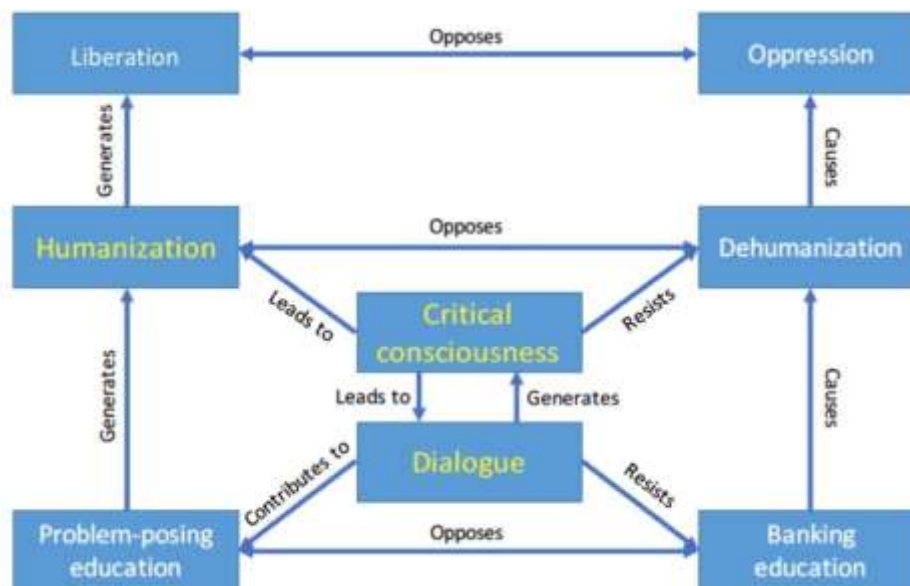
Figure 2. General Model of Teaching (by Daniel Pratt)



Source: Pratt, D. (2016)

Paulo Freire introduced several important concepts into educational practice (Figure 3). Concepts central to Freire’s critical pedagogy are critical consciousness, dialogue, humanization, banking education, praxis, oppression, and liberation (Freire, 1995; 2002).

Figure 3. The main elements of Freire's conception of education



Source: Zhong, Y. (2018)

One of the most important concepts in Freire's work is *conscientization*, the ability to critically perceive the causes of reality. However, Freire wrote that "a transition from a naive to a critical consciousness is a key in the process of liberation and it should not be assumed that a critical consciousness leads automatically to a process of transformation" (Freire, 1995: 30). This means that a critical consciousness is a necessary but not sufficient condition for collective change.

Freire puts forth a pedagogy in which the individual learns to cultivate his or her own growth through situations from his daily life that provide useful learning experiences. *This is not pedagogy for the oppressed; it is rather a pedagogy of the oppressed.* The subject should build his reality from the circumstances that give rise to the daily events of his life. The texts that the individual creates permit him to reflect upon and analyze the world in which he lives – not in an effort to adapt himself to this world, but rather as part of an effort to reform it and to make it conform to his historical demands. Freire proposes that the individual learns to do just that – to understand and transform reality. In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to practice *dialogue*, because as Freire said "man does not create himself in silence, but through words, actions and reflection" (Freire, 2002: 61).

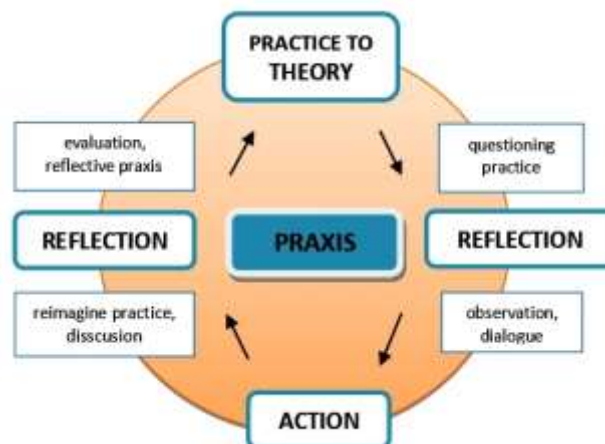
4. HOW CAN EDUCATION TRANSFORM THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY?

Freire distinguishes between *education for assimilation* and *education for liberation*. Considering that lecturing and memorization are used excessively in education with very little analysis of the importance of that being memorized, Freire points out that oppression is manifested via the traditional educational system as students are viewed as containers in which knowledge can be deposited. For Freire, the traditional educator is a procrastinator with whose help knowledge is postponed every day (Freire, 1995). Freire calls this *the banking concept of education*. In the book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire lists 10 key concepts of this model, which he describes as a powerful instrument of social control and an example of education for assimilation. In this model, the teacher speaks and the students listen; the teacher makes and imposes choices while the students obey; the teacher disciplines and the students discipline themselves; the teacher chooses the content of the program and the students adapt to it; the teacher teaches and the students are taught, and; the teacher has knowledge while the students do not. This concept turns students into "repositories" to be filled by the teacher. Contrasting education for assimilation is education for liberation (Freire, 1995).

In describing *education for liberation*, Freire calls the teacher an artist with influence on the students. However, he adds that just because a teacher is an artist does not mean that he or she is up to the job. The teacher can enable students to become who they are (Horton & Freire, 1990), which is why one of the most important concepts in Freire's work is critical consciousness. Freire implies a *dialogic exchange* between teachers/educators and students, where both learn, both question, both reflect and both participate in meaning-making. "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire, 1995).

Praxis is an important element of Freire's conception of education. Praxis is reflective, active, creative, contextual, and has a social purpose (Figure 4). Paulo Freire defines it as a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2002).

Figure 4. Praxis – Reflection - Action



Source: Own, 2022.

The combination of reflection and action is at the heart of praxis. But, as Freire (2002) said “it is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection”.

According to Freire (2017), teachers should understand that teaching does not mean imparting knowledge or content, nor is it an action. Teachers do not shape “undefined bodies” but instead create possibilities for construing one’s own knowledge. He adds that the pedagogy of the oppressed entails a commitment to social justice and shaking the foundations of existing and unequal power structures. Miller (2004) also points out that the basic purpose of education is not only to impart knowledge and information, but to transform society by helping students develop awareness and curiosity. As Jarvis (1987) states, it is clear to Freire that education is a human process, but also one with *revolutionary potential* because its results will confirm that human beings are capable of transforming and humanizing the world.

5. WHICH LESSONS HAVE WE LEARNED FROM FREIRE?

Freire developed his creative thesis in the field of adult education by linking the language of criticism to that of possibility. His revolutionary ideas in literacy and educational practice became the trademark of pedagogy all over the world and the great Pierre Furter described him as “the myth of his own time”.

It takes courage and it is a great challenge to practice pedagogy that includes critical consciousness, the approach that develop critical literacy, curiosity, self-reflection, critical thinking and critical agency; education that provides the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students/learners to explore for themselves the possibilities of what it means to be engaged citizens and active participant in the transformation of the society. Freire’s concept of education makes both critical consciousness and social action possible. It provokes and challenges students to critically engage with the world so they could act on it.

Peter Mayo, the UNESCO Chair in Global Adult Education at the University of Malta, said that Freire consolidated in him several things: “He helped me develop a sensitivity to the politics of knowledge and to confront a very disturbing question: on whose side am I when I teach/act? He has also taught me to appreciate the virtues of and ethical issues involved in dialogical education and to realize that this approach to learning, once again based on a dialectical engagement with the material world, implies not *laissez faire* pedagogy but a directive pedagogy. For someone like me who was brought up and still lives in a country with a long history of direct colonialism, it meant much to come across such a powerful anti-colonial voice as that of Freire. Reading Freire (...) enabled me to learn a lot about the social dimensions of knowledge” (Mayo, 2004; 2007).

6. CONCLUSION

One can come across a plethora of opinions about Freire’s work, but it is clear that he enabled the creation of one of the most creative syntheses of adult education theories in the 20th century as part of which he delineated the language of criticism from the language of possibility. Paulo Freire’s radical pedagogy represents an incentive to think about different ways of learning and imparting knowledge. It represents a reconstructionist program of encouraging social changes through educational processes. Freire’s pedagogy of literacy education involves not only *reading the word*, but also *reading the world*. This involves the development of critical awareness. The formation of critical consciousness allows people to question the nature of their historical and social situation – to read their world – with the goal of acting as subjects in the creation of a democratic society (Ćumura, 2018; Freire, 2002). “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 2002: 61). We should be aware that all changes begin with us. Let’s make this world a better and more humane place, starting with the transformation of the individual, the community, and of education. From the narrative and theory to the praxis; from the *word* to the *world*.

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