

Adult Literacy Education for Conscientization: The Life and Legacy of Paulo Freire Revisited

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Abstract

Paulo Freire was one of the greatest educational thinkers and activists the world has ever seen. He wrote many unconventional books and articles and lectured in many countries about how education can and should make human beings unleash their potential to make what the world ought to be. The socio-economic context in which he was born and grew up shaped his thinking and motivated him to develop radical ideas on the aim, content and process of education in general, and adult education in particular, which thrust him in jail and exile. Many educational philosophers and practitioners have admired his intellectual sophistication but, unfortunately, not all of them have translated his revolutionary ideas into action. The political, socio-cultivating and technical problems particularly in developing societies have tended to constrain full application of his educational methodology.

Keywords: *adult literacy, conscientization, Paulo Freire*

Introduction

In 1921, in a place called Recife in the state of Pernambuco, North-East of Brazil, a child was born whose ideas and work would make an impact on the theory and practice of education in and beyond his homeland. That child was Paulo Freire, who later wrote revolutionary books and articles which were destined to radicalize generations of education philosophers, activists and practitioners in Latin America and all over the world. He developed a liberating pedagogy which would make adult learners become active participants in their individual and collective development. This article makes a modest attempt to revisit his legacy with the intent of highlighting the evolution and essence of his adult literacy education approach which though cherished, runs the risk of not being fully implemented.

Influences on Paulo Freire's educational thought

Recife, where Paulo Freire was born and brought up, was a very underdeveloped area in Latin America, characterized by low life expectancy, severe malnutrition,

low literacy rate and high level of unemployment (Horton & Freire, 1990). Paulo Freire, therefore, understood what poverty was all about as he was born right inside it. His family, however, was a middle class one. His father more was an officer in the military where prestige was quite high. Paulo Freire, therefore, was aware of how those who had some wealth were enjoying themselves. Furthermore, his father was a believer in traditional religions while his mother was a devout Catholic. This combination of parents' religious backgrounds helped in shaping Paulo Freire's understanding of the fact that many things in society were not necessarily mutually exclusive. It also developed in him a great sense of toleration for other people's views and values.

In 1943 he married an educator called Elza Maria Costa de Oliveira who helped him very much in developing his educational thought and method. Unfortunately, she died in 1987, a tragic death which caused a severe depression in him to the extent that he remained inactive for a whole year. He then married Anna Maria Araujo, who wrote a dissertation on the history of illiteracy in Brazil (Horton & Freire, 1990).

Paulo Freire initially had some learning difficulties. Fortunately, his parents were very supportive of his schooling. He, on the other hand, worked very hard in school and he was very much interested in reading. In a conversation with Myles Horton and another unnamed person, he once said:

I discovered that reading has to be a loving event. I still remember when I was not yet married, being alone in the small house where we used to live-reading, making notes, and observations at two o'clock in the morning. Sometimes my mother used to come in to say to me 'it is too much. You have to sleep'. But I had such an almost physical connection with the text. It was this experience that began to teach me how reading is also an act of beauty because it has to do with the reader rewriting the text. (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 26-27).

He first studied law at the Federal University of Pernambuco, and practised briefly as a lawyer but he was more interested in education and was later, in 1947, made Head of the Education and Culture Department responsible for education programmes for peasants and workers. It was there where he became interested in adult literacy and popular education. He began to read extensively and developed his ideas on the subjects. In 1954, he resigned his post and began to teach history and philosophy of education at the University of Recife.

In 1959, he was made a person in-charge of the “Movimento de Cultura Popular” (MCP) which was a very active adult education programme in the area. At the same time, he obtained his Ph.D from the University of Recife, after writing his thesis outlining his emerging adult education ideas. In 1961 he was appointed Head of a new Cultural Extension Service, which was established to cater for popular education in the region. (Torres, 2007).

In 1963, he was asked to head the National Literacy Programme of the Ministry of Education in Brazil. In 1964, however, a military coup overthrew the government and the National Literacy Campaign was halted. The new government passed new laws which deprived many influential members of the previous government of their various rights, and among them was Paulo Freire. Paulo Freire was accused of spreading dangerous foreign ideas throughout the country. He was arrested, jailed and forced to flee the country. He lived in exile, in Chile, for about 16 years.

From Chile, he went to Harvard University where he wrote extensively and lectured. His ideas began to receive much more international attention, especially following the publication of the world famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970. He joined the World Council of Churches in Geneva as a consultant and travelled to many countries, including Tanzania, to assist them in developing educational programmes. The author recalls a brilliant presentation which Paulo Freire made at the University of Dar es Salaam in the early 1970s in which he said that education should be a process whereby ‘a teacher dies as a teacher and resurrects as a student and a student dies as a student and resurrects as a teacher’. In 1980, the ban against him was lifted in Brazil and he went back to a Catholic University, Sao Paulo, where he headed the Public System of Education. In 1987, he got a UNESCO Peace Prize. (Carrillo, 2007)

Principles underlying his educational thought

Paulo Freire, unfortunately, died in May 1997 at the age of 75 years (DVV, 2007). He left behind him many books and other publications which have greatly influenced the thinking and practice in education in general and adult literacy education in particular. All the books and other writings advocate education for liberation rather than domestication and education for transformation rather than adaptation. Regarding literacy education, for example, his book titled *Reading the Word and the World* which he wrote with Macedo in 1987 calls for a view of literacy as cultural politics.

In this context, literacy education should not only impart reading, writing and numeracy skills but it should be a set of practices which either empower or

disempower people. As such, therefore, it must be analysed according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promote democratic and emancipatory change (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Literacy then becomes a mechanism by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture and language practices.

Virtually all the publications by Paulo Freire underscore the following principles, among others. First, there is no neutral education. For him, education may be designed and offered to either maintain the *status quo* by imposing on the people the values and culture of the dominant class in society or to help them become critical, active, free and responsible members of society. The former is education for ‘domestication’ while the latter is education for ‘liberation’, which Paulo Freire cherished. This kind of education focuses on the learners’ needs and experience, involves the learners in the teaching and learning process through a genuine dialogue, and goes beyond mere transmission of knowledge and skills needed for effective functioning within a given socio-economic order to the creation of a critical consciousness and increasing the learners’ capacity to transform their lives, their environment as well as the socio-economic order itself.

Second, the educational process should be ‘problem posing’. In other words, education and development activities need to be pursued as a common search whereby all participants are presumed to be thinking and creative people with ability to identify and solve their own problems as individuals and as members of society. The role of the educator or teacher is not to identify students’ life problems a priori and then design lessons to give them the knowledge they need to solve their problems. Rather, the educator’s role is to assist the students or learners identify problems, find the root causes of the problems and then devise means and methods of solving them.

Third and closely related to the second one, is reflection and action, which Paulo Freire calls ‘praxis’. In this regard, for example, community members may experience dissatisfaction with some aspects of their lives. Under the circumstances, education ought to provide a moment whereby the community members reflect critically about what they are doing, identify any new information or skills which they need, and plan action. As they analyse their successes, mistakes and the root causes of the problems, they become more and more capable of transforming their lives.

Fourth, dialogue has to be the dominant method of interaction. Education needs to be conducted as a social process whereby the sharing of knowledge and experience

is put in the first place relative to the transmission of knowledge. The educator-educatee or teacher-learner relationship is horizontal, both of them learning from each other. In this case, the educator or teacher is not simply a ‘narrating subject’. Nor are the students or learners patient, listening subjects or receptacles to be filled by the teacher with the narrated content (Freire, 1970). Instead, Paulo Freire advocates a liberating pedagogy characterized by dialogue in which:

...the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students - teachers. 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. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow (Freire, 1970, p.67).

Dialogue, therefore, becomes an “I-though relationship between two subjects” in which both parties face each other as knowledgeable equals in a situation of genuine two-way communication (Freire, 1973, p.52). Paulo Freire rejects “the banking concept of education” whereby the teacher is there primarily to transmit knowledge to students, depositing it into their heads as he would deposit money into a bank account (Freire, 1970; 1973).

Fifth is conscientization by which the marginalized people are made aware of the fact that their poor living conditions are “neither inevitable nor normal but caused by social processes which can be reversed” by the ordinary people acting together (Ferguson, 1982, p. 24). Thus, utilizing individual and collective previous experience, conscientization aims at arousing pride, a sense of dignity, personal confidence and self-reliance among the adult learners.

Sixth, there has to be radical transformation in the lives of learners, their environment, their community and society as a whole. Education, in this context implies a class perspective, seeking to empower the poor and bring forth changes in their social position. Much, however, will depend on the extent to which education is delinked from the apparatus of the state and the bureaucratic organization of educational institutions. All these principles are based on the assumptions that all human beings are equal; they have the right to knowledge and culture, the right to criticize their situation and to transform it, and that they have the capacity to develop a critical reflection on their objective situation through dialogue.

Pitfalls of traditional literacy

Paulo Freire raised a number of criticisms on the traditional literacy education process. He noted that the materials that were being used in teaching adults were

just like those which were being used for children in the formal education system, irrespective of the fact that adults' characteristics required different kinds of reading materials as well as teaching and learning strategies.

On the other hand, the language, situations and examples contained in the primers (textbooks) were drawn from urban, petty- bourgeoisie life without any significant relation to the problems, needs and interests of the rural poor classes. In addition, the teacher-learner relationship was one of a superior and inferior. The teaching process was therefore paternalistic, making education a precursor of class relations. This was a total denial of andragogical principles recommended for adult teaching and learning (Knowles, 1970).

Above all, learning was largely geared at adapting the adult learners to the values and interests of the dominant class in society rather than enabling them transform the socio-economic order itself. That was education for domestication per excellence. It was not at all education for liberation or 'conscientization'. The latter denotes the awakening of consciousness, or a change of attitudes involving an accurate, realistic awareness of one's position in nature and society; the capacity to analyse critically its causes and consequences comparing it with other situations and possibilities, and action geared at transforming existing socio-economic conditions.

This approach to adult literacy education emanated from his thoughts articulated in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) which set the stage for a profound criticism of conventional pedagogy. Deeply rooted in a political and social analysis of the living conditions of the poor, conscientization aims at developing the awareness of the marginalized individuals and groups in society regarding those conditions. Utilising individual and collective previous experience, this approach seeks to arouse pride, a sense of dignity, personal confidence and self-reliance among the participants or adult learners.

Rather than simply promoting reading, writing and numeracy, literacy education becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed or marginalized people are equipped with the necessary tools to become subjects rather than objects in the creation of their own destiny. Literacy education should therefore be designed and practised as primarily a forum for initiating democratic and emancipatory change. It must create a critical consciousness and capacity for engaging in economic, social, political and cultural transformations. In this context, Paulo Freire made specific recommendations on how to go about developing teaching and learning materials as well as on the best way of using them in teaching literacy classes.

Development of teaching and learning materials

Paulo Freire, in collaboration with a team of anthropologists, educators and students in Brazil, initiated a multiphase plan to develop a programme of literacy education for rural peasants which would be in line with conscientization and enable them to read and write in a very short period of time. A team of researchers should first visit a community to investigate the main issues in the people's social situation like domination, poverty, exploitation and marginalization. In the light of the identified issues, themes that generate critical debate in the community can be selected. After that, codification including visual representations of typical existential situations experienced by members of a learning group or circle will be developed. This will be followed by creation of agendas to serve as guidelines for facilitators in the teaching – learning process and, lastly, audio-visual materials will be prepared to facilitate teaching and learning.

The research is intended to discover the 'thematic universe' of the people in the given community. It is done through informal interactions with the inhabitants in the area. It includes linguistic research aimed at unveiling typical expressions and words closely related to the learning group members' existential situation. The words ought to include those weighted with the greatest emotional content. In this way, the people's longings, frustrations, disbeliefs, hopes, and aspirations are revealed. The content of literacy education will therefore be informed by the culture of the participants, which includes how people work, create and make life choices. Each visual representation is made to appear as a coded situation. It is anticipated that, through these codifications, the learning group participants will gain greater critical awareness as they learn to read and write. The created agendas will guide the teachers or facilitators in the teaching and learning process. The audio-visual materials, including cards illustrating the 'phonemic families', need to correspond with the generative words.

Presentation of the study programme

After the teaching and learning material have been developed, teaching and learning can start, going through the following five steps. First, a picture showing a typical situation in village life is projected together with a generative word. Second, the learning group participants discuss the implications of the picture and are encouraged to find a semantic link between the word and the object. Third, the word is presented alone and then separated into syllables. Fourth, the phonemic families are presented through discovery cards leading to recognition of vowels. Fifth, the learning group participants will 'make words' of the separated syllables.

When the last step is reached, the learning group participants have not only started to read the word but they are also reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Reading in this context goes beyond mere recognition of words to a realization of the objective and subjective realities the words represent which need not only to be understood but also to be altered for the betterment of the learners as individuals and as members of society. For Paulo Freire, this type of literacy education is highly recommended because it is informed by the learner's needs and experience, involves the learners in the teaching– learning process through genuine dialogue and goes beyond mere transmission of knowledge and skills to the creation of a critical consciousness and zeal for socio-economic transformation.

Limitations to application of conscientization

Notwithstanding the plausible principles and recommendations advocated by Paulo Freire, this approach to teaching adult literacy has been confronted with a number of limitations. Apart from technical problems such as inadequate resource base to allow full use of the dialogical teaching and learning strategies, there have been broader political and cultural constraints to the application of conscientization particularly in the developing countries. Politically, the radical approach to education has tended to be resisted by virtually all Third World states. Freyhold (1979, p.166), for example, observed that Paulo Freire's idea of making literacy primers more 'problem posing' was not readily entertained in Tanzania on the ground that:

If we allow peasants to criticize the advice of the extension agent, we undermine his authority... If peasants begin to discuss whether they want to grow cotton or not they might decide against it, and if they produce no cotton where are we going to get our foreign exchange from?

Indeed, Freire himself admitted that elites in society would not allow education to perform its radicalizing role. They would impose political limits beyond which education could not advance. This kind of concern was also shared by Nyerere who, in his ground-breaking speech which he eloquently delivered at the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in 1977, in Dar es Salaam, noted that: Adult education is thus a highly political activity. Politicians are sometimes more aware of this fact than educators, and therefore they do not always welcome real adult education (Hinzen, 2006).

Nevertheless, in Tanzania, another approach to adult literacy education known as Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques, (REFLECT) was preferred. Based on principles and practices of Participatory Rural

Appraisal (PRA) techniques and partly on Paulo Freire's thinking, REFLECT aimed at promoting dialogue and empowerment by engaging adult learners in developing their own learning materials, taking ownership of emerging issues, and taking action to change their behaviours and attitudes (Archer & Cottingham, 1996). However, the effectiveness of the REFLECT approach was also limited. Mushi (2010) for example, observed that in the communities utilizing this approach, such as Kiroka and Sembeti in Morogoro and Kilimanjaro regions respectively, issues which were discussed in literacy circles (classes) were not being translated into action. The villagers, for example, recognized that there was gender inequality but nothing was done to reverse the situation (Mlekwa, 2001).

There are also socio-cultural challenges to the application of Paulo Freire's conscientization approach in most developing countries which, for decades, have been sustained by the transmission of information, wisdom and custom in a hierarchical way. In these societies, teachers tend to be accorded much respect just like the elders and are tempted to 'perform' or are reluctant to reveal their ignorance before the students or learners who usually have high expectations about their knowledge. Similarly, educational institutions resort to the top-down approach partly out of their desire for legitimacy and status: the higher up the educational hierarchy, and the more bureaucratic the institutions are, the more they see themselves as the custodians of the so-called body of specialized knowledge (Mlekwa, 1990).

As a result, many literacy workers in the world who claim to be using Paulo Freire's conscientization approach to literacy education are in practice adhering to the traditional one. Paulo Freire underscored the practice of conducting a thorough investigation of local issues, culture and generative words but literacy planners and practitioners have continued to use large scale and centrally printed primers. Despite the importance Paulo Freire attached to using dialogical techniques in teaching and learning, there is no genuine dialogue in most literacy classes. Simple exercises of rote reading, writing and mathematics still prevail in the literacy classes. Pictures, words, teachers and talking have not yet given way to codifications, generative words, facilitators and dialogue respectively.

Conclusions

Appearance of Paulo Freire on the world stage was not an historical accident. It was a product of the historical and intellectual development processes taking place in Latin America and in the World as a whole. In 1997, the brilliant Brazilian philosopher and activist passed away. Never again shall this great adult educator

who always appeared simple in attire, but sophisticated in intellectual acumen, be seen. The good news is that he has left many books, articles, and other publications which address various aspects related to liberation in education in general and in adult literacy education in particular.

Despite the aforementioned limits to the application of his conscientization approach, one believes that it is still possible to use adult literacy education to rekindle hope and enthusiasm among the marginalized illiterate societies to transform their lives and their environments. In the context of Third World societies, however, this must go hand in hand with promotion of mass welfare and introduction of structural transformations in society which allow genuine dialogue and popular participation in decision making processes. After all, education is a creation of society. Thus, anything that does not augur well with the internal dynamics of society will be subjected to interrogation or subjugation.

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