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READ 8100
Fall 2002
September 29, 2002

Reactions to Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire

Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Focus Questions

- What would Freire say about inquiry?
- How do these ideas relate to issues in K-6 literacy?

Dear Mr. Freire:

I just finished reading your thought-provoking text, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Even though I was less than a year old when you first wrote this text, many of your ideas resonate with me today as I ponder what it means to teach from an inquiry stance and how this stance relates to issues of K-6 literacy. Your words are an inspiration to me as I constantly reflect on my teaching and struggle to be a teacher who facilitates problem posing education rather than propagating an educational system that values the "bank-clerk" mode. As you know, American schools are increasingly driven by a culture that values certain ways of knowing and certain kinds of knowledge. Our climate of high stakes testing and assessment does not value students and teachers reflecting "simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action, and thus establish an authentic form of thought and action"(83). From my perspective, our administrators (and even some colleagues and community members) fear "critical consciousness". Please share a cup of coffee with me as I share my thoughts with you.

In Chapter 1, you state that "True generosity lies in striving so that these hands---whether of individuals or entire peoples---need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and working, transform the world"(45). I love this vision of education---the idea that we help everyone make meaning of the world and of reality so that they are in a position to change their lives, and one person at a time, the world for the better. I think an inquiry approach to education encourages students (and teachers!) to take responsibility and ownership of their learning rather than receiving it passively. I think that through an inquiry approach to education, we could achieve what you call "...the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well"(44).

When you stated in Chapter 1 that the oppressed can be “hosts” of the oppressor (48) because they are so immersed in the culture of oppression, would you say Bahktin’s following statements reflects your belief?

“The tendency to assimilate others’ discourse takes on an even deeper and more basic significance in an individual’s ideological becoming, in the most fundamental sense. Another’s discourse performs no longer here as information, directions, rules, models, and so forth---but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior...” (p. 342)

You observe, “Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed...so often do they hear they are good for nothing, now nothing, and are incapable of learning anything...that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness”(63). I am sad to say that in my current situation, I see too many students who view themselves so negatively. They have been labeled and tracked with very little or no say in their educational experiences. Now as they are on the cusp of adulthood, these negative and limited views of themselves and what they could aspire to are ingrained, and it is difficult to help them see that “...they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world...”(63). In a way, I feel oppressed when I look at the seemingly insurmountable bureaucracy and stilted, stale curriculum and power structure of my school, of my district, but being conscious of the fact that I am oppressed in a sense is a step in “liberating” myself. I am hopeful toward achieving a learning environment with a “revolutionary leadership” that must “...accordingly practice co-intentional education. Teachers and students (leadership and people, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge”(69). This mindset reminds me of the video we saw about Dr. Fecho and his colleagues at their inner city Philadelphia high school that reflected “revolutionary leadership” and created this kind of learning environment. It also reminded me of what Dewey had to say about creating educative kinds of learning experiences rather than “miseducative”!

Several ideas you presented in Chapter 2 really spoke to me as I reflect on what you would have to say about inquiry. Many teachers, administrators, and school curricula value the “banking concept of education” you explore in this chapter. In this era of high stakes testing, I say we definitely suffer from what you term as “narration sickness”(71)! Just look at all the commercial, pre-packaged scripted teaching packets/programs that seem to saturate the market, especially in schools or districts that are not deemed as “meeting standards.” I find it particularly interesting that the mode of banking education may be most prevalent in areas with students we might traditionally perceive as “oppressed” although I am sure this is true for certain groups who have been labeled in the supposedly highest achieving schools. This concept of banking education is definitely in opposition to Rosenblatt’s transactional view of reading and writing--- banking education does not value meaning making but views students as passive little receptacles of information. I really enjoyed the list of oppressive characteristics of the

banking educational system and oppressive society you enumerated on p. 73. This list is in great contrast to the qualities of inquiry that my classmate Sharon Murphy generated this past week:

- Dis-ease. There are many questions raised without answers.
- Establishes more than the teacher as validator of knowledge/work.
- Feeling of responsibility to yourself and the class.
- Recognizes classroom as a complicated, non-laboratory place filled with complex, caring human beings.
- Fights culture of school that wants THE right answer.
- Doesn't hide what is occurring in class and makes class part of determining what is occurring.
- Patience- doesn't give up too quickly and realizes community/learning/inquiry doesn't happen overnight.

Unlike the banking concept of education, you cite that "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other"(72). This chapter really made me think about what and who are privileged in our system of education, and who is oppressed? What role am I playing (inadvertently but nevertheless, doing so) in the oppression? That is a difficult question to consider, but it is an important one. What practices are in place that privilege certain ways of knowing, certain groups, certain bodies of knowledge? Why does our system of education seek to oppress certain groups?

Most importantly, I am thinking: **How can I use inquiry to break the cycle of oppression?** I think your answer my question on p. 75 when you assert, "But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization." Your belief that "They may perceive...that reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation" (75) makes me think again about the continuum of experience that Dewey envisioned and his belief that **"Experience does not go on simply inside a person" (39)**. Shades of Rosenblatt's transactional theory also sprang to my mind as I thought about how we transact with the world around us. You reaffirm this belief on p. 89 when you say, "...this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simplex exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the discussants."

I think that based on your comments on p. 79, you would advocate inquiry-based learning: "Problem-posing education, responding to the essence of consciousness---- intentionality---rejects communiqués and embodies communication." This mode of learning reminded me of a text I just read for my EDMS 8010 course, Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning by Paula Rogovin, an elementary teacher at the New Manhattan School in New York City. Inquiry is the entire basis of her curriculum and teaching. She values what the students want to know, and she and her students are

partners, co-collaborators in the teaching and learning process. Her students are not quiet, obedient, docile little first graders who do everything she dictates; instead, they are actively involved in their education and meaning making across the curriculum. In her inquiry based classroom, "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"(80). Students thinking for themselves is valued in this kind of classroom; on p. 108, you maintain, "Producing and acting upon their own ideas---not consuming those of others---must constitute that process."

In chapter 3, you pose the concept and role of dialogue. On p. 88, you propose "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do wish this naming---between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right speak has been denied them." Bakhtin says this:

"The living utterance, having taken a meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue." (p. 276)

How do the dialogic threads our students brush up against help to empower them or possibly oppress them? I especially liked your statements on p. 90 and 91 that affirm, "...dialogue cannot exist without humility" and "...dialogue cannot exist without hope." I think both of these are necessary on the part of a teacher and students, too, in an inquiry-based classroom. I think we have all seen oppressed students in our classrooms who reflect your belief that "...hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it"(91).

I have many more questions and thoughts to share with you, but it is growing late, so I will close for now. I look forward to hearing other thoughts from my classmates as we conduct our own inquiry into your ideas and what they mean to us both as educators investigating what it means to approach literacy from an inquiry stance as well as the implications of those ideas for K-6 literacy classrooms. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to learning more about your ideas!

Sincerely,

Buffy Hamilton