

## **Critical Pedagogy and Beyond**

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### *Abstract*

In this paper I deal with critical pedagogy's historical contribution to the contemporary debate on the alternatives to schooling. In particular, I analyse Paulo Freire's method and its actual applications, and I suggest an interpretative framework to evaluate its successes and its limits. Furthermore, I consider a critical analysis of critical pedagogy based on a teaching/facilitating experience in a formal education setting in the United States. Finally, I contend that educational alternatives to schooling should question the pedagogical fictions of learner and teacher as theoretical generalizations of schooling practice, and should acknowledge the participative nature of knowledge building processes.

What is critical pedagogy? According to McLaren (1995), there is not just one critical pedagogy. Therefore, a viable answer to this question could not be just a definition, but rather a collection of issues, themes and approaches. It is possible to structure such a multiplicity as a multidimensional space, whose coordinates could be time, space, degree of institutionalisation and political involvement among others. In particular, following the time coordinate back to the 1960s, we meet the seminal work of Paulo Freire within the Brazilian movement for popular education (Freire, 1976). Along the spatial coordinate, this activity represents the most important contribution to critical pedagogy of what was then called the Third World. It is also a model of adult learning, as well as an example of structured and planned learning activity beyond the boundaries of formal educational systems. At the other end of both the formalisation and the spatial coordinate, we find the work of North American theorists, as the already mentioned McLaren (1995), and Giroux (2006), who in recent years have been particularly focused on North American school policies and practices. As these theorists are particularly concerned with the political impact of practical and theoretical pedagogy, they are close to Freire along the coordinate of the political involvement of critical pedagogy. Such a parameter ranges from the revolutionary engagement of Nicaraguan teachers (Assmann, 1980) up to the learner-centred approaches adopted by Australian management consultants. As to the aim of education, all the proponents of critical pedagogy emphasize its emancipatory potential, though North Americans seem less worried than Freire by the counterproductivity of institutional settings. Moreover, in general critical pedagogy underlines the active role of the learner in the process of building her/his own knowledge. Furthermore, Giroux highlights critical pedagogy's emphasis on "breaking down disciplines and creating interdisciplinary knowledge" (Giroux, 1999,

p. 1). As most proponents of critical pedagogy recognize the link between the social allocation of knowledge and the perpetuation of social inequality, they also strive for orienting educational contents and practices towards the aim of learners' empowerment. Such an aim appears to be the core of what we could call, in Foucauldian terms, the critical pedagogy discourse. As Freire's pedagogy is commonly considered a major contribution to this discourse, it is worthwhile recalling how it leads to learners' empowerment.

Freire's dialogical approach emphasizes the interaction between teacher and learner and their joint contribution to the process of knowledge building. Freire regards this process as radically opposed to the practice of banking education, i.e. the distribution of ready-made knowledge through the activity of teaching. Dialogical knowledge building instead requires the active participation and contribution of both teacher and learner. As social powerlessness and marginalization imply deep self-devaluation, the first task of Freirean educators is to help learners to recognize and reevaluate their own existential context. Therefore, educators research and collect key words and themes of the culture of the potential learners. Moreover, they codify such words and themes in visual representations. "These representations function as challenges, as coded situation-problems containing elements to be decoded by the group with the collaboration of the coordinator" (Freire, 1976, p.45). While decoding these images, the learners begin to recognize their own identity through their own words. Nevertheless, such identities also begin to be challenged, because by naming the world and their own position in the world, the learners recognize personal and social contradictions. Therefore, the learners are ready for a new and creative codification, which is explicitly critical and aimed at action. They begin to reject their

role as mere objects in nature and social history, and they start to become the subjects of their own life.

Freire's method has been devised, implemented and tested as an adult literacy strategy. Its more impressive result, that is the emerging of the learners from their passive adherence to reality, relies on the process of acquisition of reading and writing skills. By mastering this process, the learners actually begin to act as agents of their own life. In particular, Freire began to apply his dialogical approach through the debate within culture circles in Recife, before launching his first literacy campaign in Angicos (Lyra, 1996). The method of collecting, coding and decoding themes was actually refined during this early stage of Freire's pedagogical activity (Freire, 1976). Therefore, it is possible to envisage an implementation of the dialogical method also beyond the literacy field. Moreover, Freire's theoretical assumptions, which Freire himself presented as explanations and justifications of his method, could inspire and inform social activities in an educational perspective broader than literacy programmes. However, whilst the dialogical method has not substantially changed during thirty years, Freire's thought has undergone subsequent shifts, which show the influence of the surrounding ideological climate. As a consequence, in order to devise a possible application of Freire's thought beyond its seminal literacy-focused activity, it is necessary to follow the evolution of Freire's theoretical approach. Moreover, Freire himself was personally involved in educational projects in areas that are far beyond the rural Brazilian setting of his initial experience. Therefore, the analysis of his own responses to different challenges to his approach could enrich the debate on the perspectives of critical pedagogy with the example of its most considered theorist.

Freire lived and worked in Brazil until 1964, when a Brazilian military force overthrew the federal government. During his educational activity, which peaked with

his appointment as Coordinator of the National Literacy Program of the Ministry of Education and Culture in 1963, his main concern was to advance a pedagogical proposal for Brazil's transition from a colonial agrarian society to an independent and industrialized one (Gerhardt, 1993). In Freire's view, the three main issues of this transition, i.e. industrialisation, urbanisation and literacy, had to be addressed through the construction of a new, democratic society. Democracy had to be learned by practising it (Freire, 1976). Therefore, Freire's concept of transformation remained within the boundaries of the perspective of liberal democracy. The conscientization of the masses, that is their emergence as an active subject to the political scene, was also meant as a means to broaden participation within a representative democratic system. Nevertheless, after the military coup and during the exile, Freire's position moved towards revolutionary radicalism. The dichotomy of oppressors versus oppressed assumed the role of the main contradiction in Freire's vision (Freire, 1976). Furthermore, the very meaning of conscientization shifted to consciousness raising as a revolutionary factor. Freire even stopped using the term *conscientização*, i.e. conscientization, because he did not want to contribute to the misleading conception that it would be sufficient to interpret the world critically and not to transform concomitantly the social structures conceived as oppressive (Chasin, 1985). However, he maintained that education could play an important role in this transformation. The opportunity to prove it came when Mario Cabral, then Minister of Education of Guinea-Bissau, contacted the Geneva-based Institution of Cultural Action (IDAC), which was presided by Freire. IDAC was asked to develop a national literacy programme for Guinea-Bissau, a small African country and a former Portuguese colony. As a decolonised country under a revolutionary leadership, Guinea-Bissau seemed to be an ideal terrain to put into practice the Freirean pedagogy of the

oppressed. Nevertheless, despite the support by the local political power, the literacy campaign turned out to be inadequate to the complexity of the country's situation. In particular, not only could the local personnel not apply the dialogical method, but Freire's plan was also unable to tackle the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the country. Hence, the Department of Education of Guinea-Bissau officially declared, in 1980, the literacy campaign a failure (Facundo, 1988). However, Freire was successfully involved in two other literacy campaigns. The first one was in the African state of São Tomé and Príncipe, another former Portuguese colony, whose government entrusted Freire with a literacy programme in 1975. Such a programme was officially declared highly successful by the local ministry of education (Gerhardt, 1993). The second was the literacy crusade of 1980 that was successfully conducted in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. However, in the same year Freire returned to Brazil. In the subsequent period of his life Freire was directly involved in political projects. In particular, he was a co-founder of the Workers Party, and in 1989 he was appointed Secretary of Education of the city of São Paulo. Like thirty years before, he had again to deal with both the advantages and the limitations of an institutional system. Moreover, he had to adapt his approach to a new setting, that is, the huge metropolitan area of the biggest industrial Brazilian city. Unfortunately, and similarly to what happened with a pilot literacy campaign held in Brasilia before the military coup, the efforts of the education department of São Paulo had a modest result. After two years, Freire resigned officially in order to resume his academic activities and his lecturing and writing.

The analysis of Freire's different and sometimes controversial educational experiences gives us more than a hint about the possibility to apply Freirean critical pedagogy out of the context of its initial elaboration. In particular, it suggests taking

account of at least five parameters that could help us to define an educational context. The first parameter is the urbanization rate, which generally, but not necessarily, goes with an increasing social complexity. The second one relates to the position of the potential learners in the productive process. The third parameter is the degree of homogeneity of the potential learners, whose perceived identity can be shared to various extent. The fourth one is the degree of institutionalisation of the educational activities. Finally, the fifth parameter refers to the position of the country in the international political, economical and military context. It is then possible to relate the outcomes of the implementation of the dialogical method to these parameters. It is arguable that Freirean educational activities have proven more successful in rural areas than in urban settings, and accordingly they worked better with peasants than with urban *lumpenproletariat*. Nonetheless, it appears that they have also failed in rural settings where there was no ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. Moreover, it also seems that they could not be easily integrated in institutional educational systems.

As previously recalled, both at an early and a later stage of Freire's activity, the dialogical method could be hardly applied in formal education. Nevertheless, in the 1980s Freire's thought was rediscovered in the quest for pedagogical alternatives in the North American schooling system. Actually, Freire himself had worked in the United States for six months at Harvard University, between 1969 and 1970. He was then already renowned as a pedagogy theorist, and he was often coupled with Illich as the champions of a combination of worthwhile adult education and healthy political radicalism. After ten years, when the Reagan era started the decline of revolutionary alternatives, Illich's trenchant analyses of modern institutions' counterproductivity were discarded by North American academics as both impractical and politically uncertain. In particular, Illich's deschooling proposal (Illich, 1971) was probably

feared to undermine the defence of the North American educational system, which began to come under neoliberal attack. Moreover, Illich's radical claim of the right of the learners to build their own knowledge resounded dangerously with the neoliberal emphasis on individual free will. Despite his deep criticism on modern western individualism (Illich, 1973), Illich was thus rejected as an intellectual pariah by the academic left. On the contrary, Freire's dialogical approach could support the claim of progressive teachers for a progressive role of education, which they generally equated with the schooling system. In a time when neoliberal policies and statements took people back to the barbaric principle of the struggle for survival, progressive teachers could easily look back with nostalgia to the principles of tolerance, dialogue and critical evaluation expressed by liberal modern culture. Therefore, their rediscovery of Freire's pedagogy is not surprising, as it revamped such traditional progressive values with a strong criticism on authoritarian education. Actually, Freire's thought goes beyond the boundaries of the liberal tradition. However, it is doubtful that his revolutionary stance could have been more than a personal belief in the neoliberal United States. Moreover, whilst Freire accepted to trespass the limits of his bourgeois formation, he never challenged the universalistic or, in his Christian perspective, ecumenical vision of modernity. He stretched this vision by merging dialogue and dialectics, but his flexibility did not go beyond a redeemable otherness, as that one of Brazilian and Nicaraguan peasants. When he had to face the less reducible otherness of Guinea-Bissau peasants, he tried to assimilate it through his conceptual apparatus, and he failed. It is ironic that just when in Europe an increasing number of theorists began to recognize this irreducible otherness (Latour, 1988; Levinas, 1991), Freire's thought and work enjoyed a renewed, growing popularity in the United States. However, thanks to this popularity, authors and themes of the European philosophical



and pedagogical tradition entered North American pedagogical arena through Freire's books. Moreover, the label of critical pedagogy, under which Freire's thought has been classified in the United States, has helped to link the issues of anti-authoritarianism, democratic education and consciousness raising. As these issues intertwined, they gained visibility and began to influence the educational agenda. Therefore, critical pedagogy discourse should be praised for its contribution in building a space for a debate that is both pedagogical and political.

However, because this debate is aimed at personal, social and political transformation, its effectiveness should be tested also through its concrete outcomes. Already in the 1980s, the analyses of these concrete outcomes underlined both the advantages and the limits of the implementation of a Freire-inspired dialogical approach in a formal educational setting. I will describe an example of such reflective analyses as a significant step toward the contemporary educational debate, which is at last questioning the joint dogmas of schooling and modernity.

Elizabeth Ellsworth facilitated the course *Media and Anti-Racist Pedagogies* in 1988 at Wisconsin-Madison University, U.S. (Ellsworth, 1989). She had until then used the language of critical pedagogy in its educational activity. Nevertheless, the demand of the course could not be met with "the teaching of analytic and critical skills for judging the truth and merit of proposition" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 229). Students and teacher entered the course having already chosen an anti-racist stance, and they did not intend to engage in analytical debates with people holding other positions. Ellsworth underlines here that rational dialogue, as an activity engaged by fully rational subjects, is not only fictional, but also counterproductive. Moreover, the teacher, as a white middle-class woman, did not think of having a better understanding of racism than her multiracial class. Furthermore, she contended

that by describing the difference between teacher and learners as a different degree of understanding, with the teacher always being in a better position, dialogue becomes a mere rhetorical strategy to bring the student to the level of the teacher. Ellsworth could instead only talk about her partial and partisan experience, and she let her students talk about theirs. However, she would refuse to consider such partiality as defective, because she recognized that any voice is partial, unfinished, limited. Moreover, she acknowledged that every voice can, and should, be criticized because it has implications for others. Furthermore, she observed that these implications are part of power relationships. For instance, she recalled that in the institutional setting, her role would always give more weight to her statements than to those of her students. “Yet theorists of critical pedagogy have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalance between themselves and their students” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 306). This is not so important if, following Giroux, “all voices and differences become unified in their effort to identify and recall moments of human suffering and in their attempts to overcome conditions that perpetuate that suffering” (Giroux, 1988a, p. 72). Nevertheless, this means conflating unity with sameness and confusing a common stance as a negotiated common position with *a priori* common identity. If identity is instead conceived as “nonessentialized and emergent from a historical experience” (Alcoff, 1988, p.433), it could be a stage in an ongoing process or, in other terms, a contextual rather than an essential condition. Of course, this leaves us at constant risk to become oppressive to others. However, this does not prevent us from acting. On the contrary, it pushes us to negotiate with others. Whilst it does not reassure us with the certainty of an already common ground, it nonetheless leaves us the freedom to shape and reshape alliances for constructing circumstances in which humans of difference can thrive.

Ellsworth's actions and reflections push the educational debate beyond the horizon of critical pedagogy. Nevertheless, in her critique she continues sharing with her former inspirers, generalizations such as 'learner' and 'teacher'. Within pedagogical theories, these generalizations replace the multiplicity of human subjects with abstract substantivized functions. We do not even notice this substitution, because pedagogical discourse has made us used to dealing with 'learners' and 'teachers' as meaningful abstractions. Nevertheless, both the former and the latter are but expressions of the banking education system, in which the process of delivery of objectified knowledge defines senders and receivers as teacher and learners respectively. Therefore, the dismissal of banking education should imply also the rejection of its functions, which have been given the abstract form of 'learner' and 'teacher'. If these forms instead survive the rejection of schooling, the alternative will amount to internalizing schooling values and practices, so that everyone will be charged with the authoritarian function of being the teacher of herself/himself. As we are to promote participative transformation, we can at last recognize that the functions of learning and teaching are not able to account for the multiplicity of subjects and relations which engage in the collective process of knowledge building. Schooling has claimed such process as its specific activity, and it has reduced it to a unidirectional transfer of information from teachers to pupils. The traditional education discourse has then turned the particular functions of the two schooling subjects into the abstract pedagogic generalizations of teacher and learner. For at least a century, progressive educators bravely strove to shift the focus of educational activities from the former to the latter. Nevertheless, 'teacher' and 'learner' remain as fictional representatives of humanity as Robinson Crusoe and Friday on their island (Defoe, 1923). We could, as Tournier did, turn upside down their relationship, and let Friday explain to Robinson

that there are better things than civilization (Tournier, 1969). This postcolonial version of the tale, despite its revamped ethics, does not yet challenge the fiction of the two islanders' isolation. In other terms, the revised tale continues describing Friday and Robinson as floating in a social vacuum. In the same way, pedagogical discourse keeps teacher and learner floating in an abstract theoretical space. On the contrary, actual processes of knowledge building are wide social ones. They involve fuzzy networks of objects and humans, who in addition are primally embedded in the social fabric. As Freire's example shows in the limited field of a literacy programme, even the more committed pedagogical abstraction can prove unable to tackle the complexity of this embeddedness. Whilst mass schooling forcibly denied the latter by imposing the fiction of the abstract individual student, its alternatives have instead at last the opportunity to acknowledge it. In other words, the current educational alternatives could reverse mass schooling's devastating abstract individualistic approach. In particular, they could recognize knowledge building processes as social endeavours, and they could encourage the convivial virtue of collaboration against the socially disruptive principle of individual competition. Otherwise, they risk just giving Friday the role of Robinson, and turning everyone, as previously recalled, into her/his own teacher. Freire recognized this risk, but his teleological, modern vision prevented him from fully acknowledging the openness of transformative processes. Pushing forward his position, we should challenge pedagogical generalizations, and ask ourselves what diversity we silence in their name.

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