

Paulo Freire: Advocate of Literacy Through Liberation

As head of Brazil's literacy campaign, educator Paulo Freire discovered that overcoming student apathy required restructuring his values, with more emphasis on enabling students and less on control.

Photographs courtesy William M. Timpson



The beginning of literacy—writing their names for the first time—is also the beginning of liberation for Cuban peasants.

As a graduate student in the early 1970s I became intrigued with the writings of Paulo Freire. I had spent four years teaching in inner-city Cleveland schools, and had lost patience with the reflective musings of good-hearted academics who were consumed with trivial tinkering on the margins of schools. Apparently feeling compelled by their own professional hierarchies to employ "science," university scholars conducted tight empirical studies on controllable and trivial issues and debated *ad nauseum* the fine points of statistics and experimental design while the larger, more important questions went begging. Into that vacuum stepped Freire with the spectacular achievements of the literacy campaigns his work inspired and his simple yet persuasive call to action.

Freire himself had been trained in a traditional doctoral program in reading. Yet when he was handed the assignment to head up Brazil's literacy campaign in the early 1960s, he found his expertise of little value in the face of pervasive peasant apathy. The now classic chronicle of his resulting odyssey, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1970), documents Freire's transformation from expert to guide. He pro-

gressed from prescribing standard language practices to building upon indigenous language usage; from using traditional basal readers to employing materials relevant to the peasants' desires to improve their lives; from "filling empty vessels" (as Dickens' *Hard Times* characterized schooling in 19th century England) to empowering small groups to struggle collectively for mastery; from cultivating an educational culture of silence with passive and docile students to insisting that education must inspire hope and action.

Freire's efforts proved so successful that the ruling military junta jailed him. He was "persuaded" to leave Brazil shortly thereafter. He became an international figure, inspiring and advising national literacy campaigns in Africa and Central America, and was not allowed to return to his native Brazil until many years later.

Since graduate school I have explored Freire's work abroad firsthand and evaluated its meaning for educational organizations and leaders (Freire 1973, 1983, 1985). Supported by a Kellogg Foundation National Fellowship from 1981-1984, I spent three weeks in Brazil, six weeks in Nicaragua, and ten days in Cuba seeing what Freire's teachings have meant in practice as each of these nations has attempted to radically expand literacy through a national campaign. The culmination of my exploration was a weeklong seminar at the University of California-Berkeley led by Freire himself.

I left with a profound sense of changes needed in how we think about education, schools, and school leaders. To face our real problems, we will need more artistry and less science, more commitment to change and less attention to maintenance, more process skills and less control, more faith and less efficiency.

The Meaning of Empowerment

Central to Freire's writings is the concept of empowerment, of the learner's need to be active in his or her own education. For this to occur, educators



This poster from the Nicaraguan literacy campaign illustrates the empowerment through education espoused by Freire.

Paulo Freire

Born in Recife, Brazil, in 1921, Paulo Freire grew up amid poverty and underdevelopment exacerbated by the worldwide economic crisis of 1929. His family's slide from middle class to poverty status had a profound impact on his life as he fell behind in school because of the listlessness his hunger produced, and he determined, at age 11, to dedicate his life to the struggle against poverty.

Having experienced firsthand that the ignorance and lethargy of the poor were caused by economic, social, and political domination, and its resulting paternalism, Freire soon realized that the educational system was a major instrument in maintaining this "culture of silence." Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were dominated by a structure in which such critical awareness and response were virtually impossible.

Thus Freire turned his attention to the field of education, completed his doctorate at the University of Recife, and joined the faculty as professor of history and philosophy of education. Soon he began to experiment with teaching illiterates in Recife and there developed a methodology that proved effective in literacy campaigns throughout northeast Brazil.

These literacy accomplishments threatened the established social order that derived great profit and advantage from illiterate, controllable peasants and led to Freire's imprisonment after the military coup in 1964. Released 70 days later and encouraged to leave the country, Freire went to Chile where he spent five years working with UNESCO and the Chilean Institute for Agrarian Reform in programs for adult education. He later acted as a consultant at Harvard University's School of Education and at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and he worked closely with groups engaged in educational experiments in rural and urban areas.

In 1970 Freire published his provocative treatise on literacy and empowerment, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. By showing that traditional formal education only contributed to a silent student culture, by insisting that education must lead to progress, and by building upon indigenous languages, Freire provided both inspiration and an instructional methodology for peoples seeking liberation from exploitative systems. In Latin America and Africa, revolutionary regimes adopted his ideas in promoting national literacy campaigns, and his work was discussed widely in South America and other parts of the world.

Following the restoration of democracy in Brazil, Freire returned from exile in 1980; he now teaches in São Paulo at the public university UNICAMP. He travels regularly to the United States to speak to educators, community organizers, and others interested in the literacy and empowerment of the disenfranchised.

—William M. Timpson

"When [Freire] was handed the assignment to head up Brazil's literacy campaign in the early 1960s, he found his expertise of little value in the face of pervasive peasant apathy."

must be memorized, to be regurgitated at appropriate times. Passivity therefore prevails. Granted, the literature on "effective" schools (MacKenzie 1983) indicates a pattern of orderliness in those inner-city schools that produces high standardized test performance. Yet I believe a balance is required. Students must be active in the learning process if their thinking is to develop to its fullest potential.

Freire requires the active participation of students. Their language becomes the basis for developing reading and writing skills. Their hopes become the focal points for deciding what material to use. Their abilities are tapped, and an infrastructure of support and resource created as advanced students are enlisted as cooperative group leaders.

As I talked to people in Nicaragua and Cuba who participated in literacy campaigns when traditional schooling was suspended for several months and each nation's resources were mobilized, I felt their excitement. Life was going to get better and education was to be the catalyst.

must have a fundamental belief in the learner's ability to learn. Armed with this belief, this faith in the students' capacity to understand that which relates directly to their lives, teachers move from directing to facilitating, from talking to listening, from doing to observing. School leaders, in turn, must think less about administrative efficiency and more about student learning, instructional facilitation, and long-term change.

Combating the Culture of Silence

In the context of our most difficult schools, Freire insists, we must confront our insistence on quiet and control. Given the evidence of despair and disrepair all around, what is achieved by insisting on order? What results, argues Freire, is a culture of silence that strips learners of their self-confidence, that places "solutions" in the hands of "experts" whose wisdom



In Berkeley, California, Paulo Freire conducts a seminar with students interested in his experiences in national literacy campaigns in underdeveloped countries.

Learning
Together...



National Training Institute in Cooperative Learning

Lake Tahoe Region, California
July 23-26, 1988

Featuring:

Roger Johnson
David Johnson
Edythe Johnson
Gabriele Rico
Rosa Caserez
Robin Fogarty
Jim Bellanca

Please send me free information about...

Cooperative Learning Institute
 In service Materials

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____



Illinois Renewal Institute, Inc.

200 E. Wood St., Ste. 250
Palatine, IL 60067
Toll Free 1-800-922-4-IRI
In Illinois 1-312-991-6300

**"To face our real
problems, we will
need more artistry
and less science,
more commitment
to change and less
attention to
maintenance, more
process skills and
less control, more
faith and less
efficiency."**

Education and Change

The idea of education as a vehicle for progress was consistent with the core of Freire's work. No longer would schooling be an end in itself. No longer would skills be taught in isolation from life goals. Consequently, the curriculum had to emanate in part from the lives of the learners, from their hopes and dreams. The Brazilian counterparts to Dick, Jane, and Spot did not motivate illiterate peasants to learn; but materials and instruction that began with their language, lives, and values, and that spoke to their desire to improve their lot, did.

This educational honesty led to Freire's exile from Brazil, for in the process of learning to read, increasing numbers of the poor were asking difficult and embarrassing questions. Why were they so poor and others so wealthy? What changes were necessary to improve possibilities for themselves, and most of all, for their children?

These questions are risky because

they take education beyond the security of the schoolhouse. Radical critiques are rarely handled well within the public schools because the schools are owned and controlled by the state, which has a vested interest in its own perpetuation.

Restructuring Our Values

For Freire, education has to be linked to change, to progress at an individual level, for personal motivation and commitment to develop. The teacher's role is to facilitate this process, to fuel and channel it, to collect meaningful materials and guide discovery, to be one with the students in a community of seekers. For educational leaders this view requires new expectations, new skills, and radically new connections with the world outside of schools.

We can learn from others, including those in less developed countries. Let us join Freire in restructuring American education. □

References

- Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury, 1970.
Freire, P. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum, 1973.
Freire, P. *Pedagogy in Process*. New York: Continuum, 1983.
Freire, P. *The Politics of Education*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1985.
MacKensie, D. "Research for School Improvement: An Appraisal of Some Recent Trends." *Educational Researcher* 12 (1983): 5-17.

William M. Timpson is Associate Professor, Colorado State University, School of Occupational and Educational Studies, Fort Collins, CO 80523.

Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.