

Paulo Freire

Could the way you are educated be 'oppressing' you?

Key Concepts: Liberation Education, Praxis, The Banking Concept
Key Work: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), *Pedagogy of Hope* (1993)

The efforts of teachers must be "imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power."
Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Chapter 2.

Conscientization: (*Critical Consciousness*) The process of gaining an in-depth understanding of the world around you. For Marxists, it involved becoming aware of the 'oppressive' structures which limit your liberation, which you can then learn to act against rather than remaining passive.

Liberating Education: "*Liberating education consists in acts of cognition (thinking), not transferrals of information.*" It requires a 'problem-posing' approach where the boundaries that usually define the student-teacher relationship are broken down. "*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.*" IT'S A DIALOGUE!

The Banking Concept: Turns students into 'containers' or 'receptacles' to be filled by the teacher, which prevents students from developing skills that make themselves fair-minded "*critical thinkers*" and continues long-standing biases within society. The student's only job is to absorb the information given by the instructor and recall (regurgitate) it when asked. Education basically becomes 'training' where students are moulded to fit into the world as it is, rather than empowered to change it. "The more completely a teacher fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is"

Praxis: In ancient Greece this word meant 'something done by free people'. For Freire, it means a combination of thought/reflection and action. He describes it by saying "*reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed*". Think about the Japanese Proverb: "*Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare*". This encapsulates the idea perfectly.

Post-Colonialism
Although the term is sometimes disputed in relation to Brazil, Freire was writing (in a sense) as a 'Post-Colonial Brazilian'. This basically means that he is at least partly concerned with the long-term consequences of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil (which ended in the 1820s). 'Postcolonialism' tries to deal with the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, by focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonised people and their lands. It ends up being very concerned with lasting 'oppression' left over by the colonial system. This concern with 'oppression' means that it overlaps a little with Marxism. This overlap might help us to understand the writings of Freire. Can you see how his approach to 'liberation' could be seen as very attractive to other countries that have been through this decolonization process, like Ireland?

The 'Banking Concept' DEHUMANIZES because in that process:

- (a) The teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) The teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) The teacher talks and the students listen - meekly;
- (e) The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (g) The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students
- (j) The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere object.

Freire argues that this views men as "adaptable" and "manageable" beings

Key Definitions:

- 1. **Pedagogy** - The process of teaching (both teaching methods and the practice of doing it); how knowledge and skills are exchanged in an educational context.
- 2. **Oppression** - Being subject to cruel or unjust treatment, usually under the authority of another. Being held down or denied power.

How might you think about Freire's 'Liberation Education' with reference to the Irish Constitution? What about the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and its view on Education?

Article 42.1 *The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.*

42.2 - *Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.*

42.3.2° - *The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social*

42.1 - What if your parents don't want you to have a 'liberated' education? What if they think that conformity in 'religious and moral' matters is more important than personal empowerment?

42.2 - Does the fact that parents are 'free to provide this education in their homes' mean that this would be the perfect setting for a 'problem-posing' education?

42.3.2 - Given that this 'article' gives power to the state to judge the quality of 'minimum education' on any of those grounds, does it mean that they could effectively outlaw a Freire-type education if they felt that it was too revolutionary?

If Freire supporters were to judge what happens during preparation for the Leaving Certificate, what conclusion would they come to?

- **Article 12:** *The child's opinion The child has the right to express an opinion, and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child, in accordance with his or her age and maturity*
- **Article 28:** *Education The child has the right to education; the State has a duty to make primary education compulsory and free to all; to take measures to develop different forms of secondary education and to make this accessible to all children. School discipline should be administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity*
- **Article 29:** *Aims of Education. Education should be directed at developing the child's personality and talents; preparing the child for active life as an adult; fostering respect for basic human rights; developing respect for the child's own cultural and national values and those of others; and developing respect for the natural environment.*

12 - Might one reasonably ask, "How is it that the child is to develop a fully informed opinion, if the education she received merely reinforces the status quo?" Are 'liberation education' and 'conscientization' not required in order to develop the critical abilities to fully avail of this right?

28 - If states are required to 'develop different forms of education', and make them available to children, why has every Irish child not been offered the opportunity to attend a Freire-style school. As a point of comparison, investigate *Raheen Wood School*, a 'Steiner School', in County Clare...

29 - Assess for yourself whether the current of the Irish School system satisfy the requirements of the **UNDRC**... Will you like all the answers you get?

What are the most common criticisms of Freire's work? How do you feel about those criticisms?

- I. While in an ideal world a system like Freire's might be great, how could you actually develop a 'National Education' system around these ideas? It would be far too disruptive and expensive... (Maybe it'd be the kind of thing that might be possible in a Nozick-style Utopia!)
- II. Freire ideas can be very 'black and white'. We are either with the oppressed or against them. This may be an interesting starting point for teaching, but taken too literally it can make for an over-simplified (political) analysis. Is there not room for a compromise in approaches?
- III. Even under the guise of 'problem-posing' education, it might still be possible for ideological influences to remain. i.e. even a well-intentioned 'teacher/learner' might perpetuate (carry on) the 'oppressive structures' from which they are trying to liberate themselves. How could you guard against that?
- IV. Apart from being potentially very expensive, a 'neo-liberal' criticism of Freire's ideas might ask: "Well, who will work in the factories that drive our economy, if everybody is busy off 'liberating' themselves?" To what extent does our modern view of how society works depend on a minimum level of conformity on the part of 'the masses'.
- V. Is there a contradiction between Freire's religious conviction (his 'Christian Socialism') which some might argue could carry on oppressive structures, and his constant drive towards 'liberation' through education?

What you will invariably find is that the type of criticism that people offer about Freire tends to say as much about their own ideological position as it does about Freire's ideas.

When will I need to refer to Freire in my exam?

Like Marx, Freire also fits in under any essay question that asks you to consider issues such as 'inequality', 'social class', and 'the power structure of society', or ideas such as different perspectives on Human Rights. His ideas also offer you the opportunity to critique your own experience of education. Is the inclusion of Freire on the 'Pol Soc' course a 'dangerous' thing to do in terms of Irish education, because it encourages students to challenge the *status quo*?

Freire and You (Framing your own opinions)

It's important to remember, that Freire presents you with a unique opportunity, because unlike other theoretical areas you examine in 'Pol Soc', you actually have substantial experience of the education system (and so does virtually everyone you will meet). Remember to ask yourself, does my experience of Education encapsulate the whole system, or just a narrow part of the system? Don't be too tempted to just 'go off on a rant' about your own experience of Irish Education, and lose track of the theorist...!!!

Thinker's Background

- Freire was born in Brazil in to a middle-class family in 1921, but suffered hunger and poverty throughout his childhood due to the Great Depression
- He struggled with his own education, falling 4 years behind. This made him aware for the rest of his life that *"My social condition didn't allow me to have an education. Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge."* This relationship between class and knowledge became the focus of his life's work.
- He qualified as a lawyer, but never worked as one. Instead it was his study of philosophy that set his course in life.
- He worked as a 2nd level teacher, before becoming a provincial Director of the Department of Education in the state of Pernambuco. He focussed on the problem of illiteracy. (The link between literacy and power was highlighted by the fact that in some Brazilian elections, literacy was a voting requirement).
- In the early 1960s he established his *'culture circles'* that extended the range of his literacy efforts, but this ended when a **coup** (military overthrow) in Brazil left him imprisoned and eventually exiled for his revolutionary approach.
- He worked in Bolivia, Chile, the UN, and at Harvard after which he published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed in 1968*
- His **Christian Socialism** showed through while working as an advisor to *the World Council of Churches*. (Can you see a link here between how Freire and McDonagh are linked and motivated by their religious convictions?)
- He showed his 'post-colonial' concerns by also working to advise on education in other former Portuguese colonies such as Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique.
- He returned to Brazil after 1979, where he went on to serve as the Secretary of Education in Sao Paolo, and where he eventually died in 1997 of heart failure.

There are lots of words in bold here! i.e. Freire has lots of technical terms. As you try and get to grips with them, can you **paraphrase** those definitions (say them in your own words) to help you remember them and use them again in the proper context. The more links you can find to your own experiences, the easier you'll find this process...

Personal Response

(A.) Start of by asking yourself: "Have there been times in my own education that I can identify as resembling aspects of the *Banking Concept*?" Did that experience 'dehumanize' me? Continue by reflecting on whether or not there have been moments when you've felt the liberating power of education? Are there specific classes or teachers that have had that kind of impact on you?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(B.) Do a quick google search for an article in *the Sunday Times Magazine* called "Is this the Strictest Teacher in Britain?" (13th Nov, 2016) about the *'Michaela'* school system in parts of England. Compare and contrast the two approaches and ask yourself the following question from multiple perspectives: If forced to choose between the two (Freirian or Michaela system) which would you chose...

4. ... for yourself?
5. ... for your own children?
6. ... which would your parents choose for you?

In all cases ask yourself 'WHY' might the responses be different? The different perspective might (maybe even 'should') influence your opinion

When making this choice, bear in mind that Freire would see there as being no middle ground between a 'liberation' and a 'banking' form of education!

Reading Tip: *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* contains lots of language that evokes images of violence in relation to education. If you get a chance to read some of the text, try comparing it to the way in which Vandana Shiva uses the language of violence to discredit the 'Green Revolution'. You'll see a similar language technique, but used to achieve different goals.

Links to other aspects of the course

Educational ideas are spread throughout the Politics & Society Course. How do Freire's ideas stack up against other key thinkers who consider educational issues?

1. Martha Nussbaum's views on 'Liberal' education...
2. Kathleen Lynch and here ideas of educational inequality...
3. John Locke and the idea of the *'tabula rasa'* as well as his ideas of what should be on the education curriculum....
4. Would a feminist approach to education require women to first become 'conscious' of the oppressive structures which surround them? Is this an idea that Freire would endorse?

Favourite Moment: Freire forces teachers to re-evaluate their own positions! That can be a real challenge for people working within an already established system. *"From the outset, [the teacher's] efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in Critical Thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power."*