



## The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society



Freire, Paulo



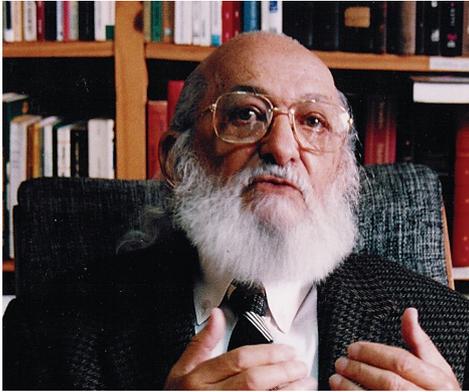
**Key Concepts:** Power, Oppression, Conscientization, Education for Humanization and Liberation.



**Influential Work:** *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970)

# Paulo FREIRE

(1921 to 1997)



## Freire in Context

Paulo Freire was born in Recife, Brazil and raised in a middle class family. He grew up through the great Depression and outward symbols, such as his father always wearing a tie and having a German-made piano in their home, pointed to the family's middle-class heritage but stood in contrast to their actual conditions of poverty. Reflecting on their situation, Freire noted, 'We shared the hunger, but not the class.' After completing secondary school and with gradual improvement in his family's financial situation, he was able to enter university and became a teacher. Through his early years, working with impoverished youth, Freire became convinced that traditional pedagogy was oppressive and dehumanising. Thus, he worked to develop a pedagogy that could liberate through '*conscientization*'. In the 1960s he led a massive popular education movement in Brazil to deal with massive illiteracy. By 1963-4 his methods has spread and there were courses for co-ordinators in all Brazilian states with the aim of reaching 2 million illiterates. Freire was imprisoned following the 1964 coup d'état as the new regime considered his teaching to be subversive. On his release he went into exile and was unable to return to Brazil until 1979.

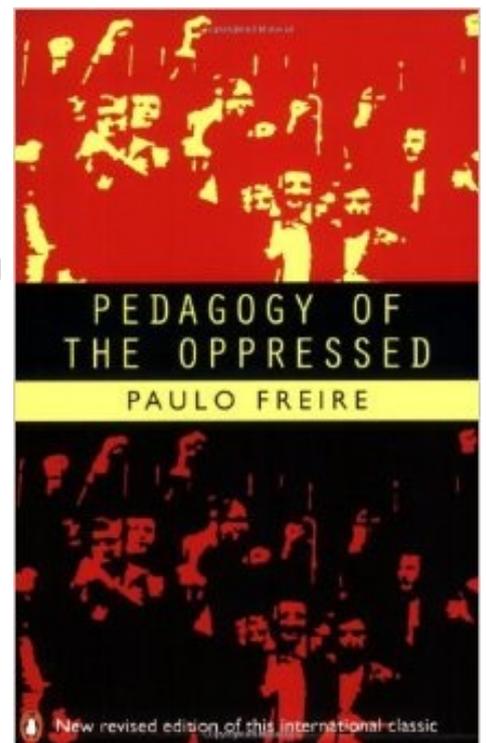
## Critical Pedagogy

He argues that through traditional education students were being '*dehumanized*', and in order to reassert their own humanity, a different educational model was needed.

In his critique of traditional pedagogy Paulo Freire talks about the '*banking concept of education*'. He points out that too often, students are asked to memorize and repeat ideas, phrases and formulas without understanding the meaning behind them. This process '*turns [students] into 'containers' to be 'filled''* by the teacher. As a result, students are treated as objects, as receptacles to receive, file, and store deposits. Put simply, they become containers for what the teacher has deposits in their '*banks*'. '*The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world*'.

Freire believed that knowledge and culture is always changing. He calls this **historicity**, the quality of being historical beings. As humans we are always caught up in the process of becoming. Reality too is historical and therefore always becoming. This means that reality isn't something static to be understood but it is dynamic and what's true today may not be tomorrow. If knowing is a permanent process then he asks who can claim to know? Education must be a democratic and dialogical process because the act of knowing their world is a mark of all free human beings. So in sharp contrast, then, to the banking concept he developed the idea of '*problem-posing education*' .

Like Marx, he saw society as characterized by a struggle between those with power and those who are powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed. '*Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral*'.



Problem posing education begins with the idea that learners need to recognise their oppression.

He says *'The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom'*. This is why education for critical consciousness or **conscientization** is needed. Conscientization is *'the most critical approach to reality, stripping it down so as to get to know the myths that deceive and perpetuate the dominating structure'*.

Freire wanted learners to be able to *'read the word'*— to end illiteracy, and also to *'read the world'* - the ability to analyse social and political situations that influenced and especially limited people's life chances. For Freire, like Marx, questioning and understanding the world was not enough; education should lead to action as well. Education therefore is a **'praxis'**. It must a combination of action with *'serious reflection'*. This reflection or *'reflective participation'* takes place in dialogue with others who are in the same position. Freire was critical of action alone, which he calls *'activism'*. Whereas the banking method directly or indirectly reinforces a fatalistic perception of the situation, the problem-posing method presents the situation as a problem and affirms men and women as being in the process of *becoming* who can transform themselves and their world.

## Education as the Practice of Freedom

Freire's method of conscientization centres around learners coming together in **culture circles** consisting of somewhere between 12 and 25 students and teacher, all involved in dialogue and learning with and from each other. They do not rely upon others, even teachers, to explain their oppressed circumstances. *'Through dialogue, 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 reciprocity of roles means that students teach teachers as teachers teach students. Dialogue encourages everyone to teach and everyone to learn together. The oppressed thereby use their own experiences and language to explain and surmount their oppression.

Because Freire worked with illiterate adult peasants, he insisted that the circles use the ways of speaking and the shared understandings of the peasants themselves. In the circles the learners identify their own problems and concerns and seek answers to them in the group dialogue. Freire used *'codifications'*, to allow them talk about day-to-day circumstances. Codifications may be photographs, drawings, poems, even a single word. For example, a photograph of workers in a sugar cane field permits workers to talk about the realities of their work and working conditions without identifying them as the actual workers in the photograph. This permits the dialogue to steer toward understanding the participants' specific circumstances but from a more abstract position. Teachers and learners worked together to understand the problems identified by the peasants, a process that Freire calls *'decoding'*, and to propose actions to be taken to rectify



***'The greatest humanistic and historical task of the oppressed is to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.'***

**Paulo Freire**

or overturn those problems. The circles therefore have four basic elements: 1) problem posing, 2) critical dialogue, 3) solution posing, and 4) plan of action.

## Power

Influenced by Marx, Freire believed that the prevalent ideas of a society are always the ideas of those groups who hold power.

He says that sometimes teachers operate on the belief that they teach in a vacuum and that they can close the classroom door on outside influences. Instead, he argues that teachers must recognise the political role of education and how education reproduces the dominant interests and ideologies. *'As educators we are also politicians. When we confront this we are forced to confront the subject of power'*.

Freire argues that those in power expect education to reproduce the dominant interests and ideologies, but there is another task which education can accomplish. This is the task of human liberation. This pedagogy to end oppression, Freire writes, *'must be forged with, not for, the oppressed'*, irrespective of whether they are children or adults.

For Freire, education must be centred upon developing critically conscious, *'humanized'*, learners who act to liberate themselves, and the world, from injustice.

## In Summary

- He was critical of traditional modes of learning which he referred to as *'banking'* education
- Instead, he wished to develop education for critical consciousness leading to social transformation.
- He believed a problem-posing pedagogy based on the learner's present interests and experiences
- The aim of education is humanization and liberation
- This was to be attained through dialogue, critical inquiry and praxis
- For Freire, education is never neutral. All education is political – either educating to support and maintain the status quo or helping to critique and change reality. Problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor.
- His most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has influenced education all over the world
- Freire worked primarily with illiterate adult peasants in South America, but his work has applications as well to schools and school-aged children. It is to be a pedagogy for all.

## Material Consulted

Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin

Freire, P. (1973) *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Seabury Press



***'As groups begin to see themselves and their society from their own perspective and become aware of their potentialities, hopelessness is replaced by hope. Society now reveals itself as something unfinished, it is not a given but a challenge. This new critical optimism leads to a strong sense of social responsibility and of engagement in the task of transforming society'***

**Paulo Freire**