

The Fundamentals of Educational Dialogue: Week 6 handout

This handout contains extracts from the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy's page on Paulo Freire. © Copyright Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy and its Authors | ISSN 2161-0002 <https://iep.utm.edu/freire/>

Literacy Campaign:

Paulo Freire began to work with illiterate peasants and workers in the northeastern region of Brazil in 1947, and by the beginning of the 1960s, he had organised a popular movement to eradicate illiteracy. Due to the Portuguese colonization of Brazil, as well as the institution of slavery, the literacy level of most Brazilians was extremely low. The population of the northeastern region of Brazil in 1962 was 25 million, and of these, approximately 15 million were illiterate.

In 1947, when Freire was 26 years old and while he was still teaching language classes at Oswaldo Cruz secondary school, he began to work at the government agency called the Serviço Social da Indústria (SESI)...

Freire worked at SESI for 10 years, and during this time, he learned many important aspects about the Brazilian working class and Brazilian school system that informed how he would later develop as a teacher and political thinker. Freire worked closely with the schools, examining how policy was made and how it affected the quality of education for the students. It was during this time that Freire noticed how some of the Brazilian working-class parents were raising their children. Although Freire had been brought up in a tolerant environment, this was not the case in most other homes. Freire came to SESI with a democratic sensibility, however, he was met with what seemed to be a type of conditioned authoritarianism that affected how parents related to their children and how teachers approached their teaching. Physical punishment toward children was often used both by parents as well as teachers. Freire noticed that the harsh physical punishment the children were subjected to did not serve the intended purpose; instead, children were alienated from their parents and teachers, and an environment of harsh authoritarianism was more firmly established. Consequently, Freire began training teachers and

parents to learn more tolerant ways of teaching and disciplining their children.

During the 10 years that Freire worked for SESI, he gathered many experiences that would later help him shape his doctoral studies and dissertation at the University of Recife. After his work for SESI, Freire accepted a position as a consultant for the Division of Research and Planning. It was during this time that Freire began to establish himself as a progressive educator. He conducted studies in adult education and marginal populations and presented these at national adult education conferences. His early ideas were of cooperative decision-making, social participation, and political responsibility. Freire did not see education as merely a way to master academic standards or skills that would help a person professionally. **Instead, he cared that learners understood their social problems and that they discovered themselves as creative agents...**

In 1961, the mayor of Recife, Miguel Arraes, asked Freire to help develop literacy programs for the city. The goal of these programs was primarily to encourage literacy among the working class, to foster a democratic climate, and to preserve their Indigenous traditions, beliefs, and culture. It was during this time that Freire began to work with his cultural circles and found out just how damaging and pervasive the institution of slavery continued to be, even decades after slavery had been abolished.

Freire decided to use the name **“cultural circles”** instead of literacy classes. He had several reasons for this choice of words, and one reason was the negative connotation of the word “illiterate.” Although most of his students were, as a matter of fact, illiterate, no one wanted to describe or think of themselves as such. Another reason was that Freire’s project did not focus solely on teaching people how to read and write. At the time, literacy was one of the requirements for voting in presidential elections, and Freire meant to create a sense of political awareness by the methods he used to teach as well as the content he shared with his students.

The teachers of the cultural circles were deliberately not called teachers, but rather coordinators, and the students were instead called participants. Instead of traditional lectures, dialogue was encouraged. Freire chose not to use the traditional language primers because their content was often irrelevant to the cultural context of the peasants and the workers he taught. Instead, Freire began with the existential conditions of the learners.

Of the coordinators, Freire required that they be driven by love, be guided by humility, and have great faith in the human potential. Freire asked that the coordinators consider education as a vehicle for liberation instead of domestication.

Philosophical Contributions:

Critical Pedagogy Versus the Banking Model of Education: Paulo Freire's philosophical views grew from his experiences as a teacher and the interactions he had with his students. Rather than continuing with the established cultural patterns of relating to people through a hierarchy of power, Freire's starting point in the classroom aims to undermine the power dynamics that hold some people above others. Freire emphasises that a democratic relationship between the teacher and her students is necessary in order for the conscientização process to take place.

Freire's **critical pedagogy**, or **problem-posing education**, uses a democratic approach in order to reach the democratic ideal, and, in this sense, the goal and the process are consistent. He explains how the teacher who intends to hold herself at some higher level of power than that of her students, and who does not admit to her own fallible nature and ignorance, places herself in rigid and deadlocked positions. She pretends to be the one who knows while the students are the ones who do not know. The rigidity of holding this type of **power dynamic** negates education as a process of inquiry and of knowledge gained.

Freire is very critical of teachers who see themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge while they see their students as empty receptacles into which teachers must deposit their knowledge. He calls this pedagogical approach the "banking method" of education. **This pedagogical approach is similar to the process of colonisation, given that the colonising culture thinks of itself as the correct and valuable culture, while the colonised culture is deemed as inferior and in need of the colonising culture for its own betterment.** The banking method is a violent way to treat students because students are human beings with their own inclinations and legitimate ways of thinking. The banking method treats students as though they were things instead of human beings.

Instead of the banking method, Freire proposes a reciprocal relationship between the teacher and the students in a democratic environment that

allows everyone to learn from each other. The banking method of education is characterised as a vertical relationship:

teacher



student

The relationship developed through the banking method between the teacher and the students is characterised by insecurity, suspicion of one another, the teacher's need to maintain control, and power dynamics within a hierarchy that are oppressive. The critical pedagogy that Freire proposes allows for a horizontal type of relationship:

teacher ↔ student

This relationship is democratic insofar as both the teacher and the student are willing and open to the possibility of learning from each other. With this type of relationship, no one is above anyone, and there is **mutual respect**. Both the teacher and the student acknowledge that they each have different experiences and expertise to offer to each other so that both can benefit from the other to learn and grow as human beings.

Instead of tacitly promoting oppressive relationships through the banking method of education, Freire chooses the process of critical pedagogy as his pedagogical model. This is because **critical pedagogy utilises dialogue among human beings who are equals rather than oppressive imposition**.

Another negative consequence of the banking method is that students are not encouraged, and thus do not learn how to think critically, or to feel confident about thinking for themselves. The relationship between a student and a teacher who uses the banking method is similar to that of a farmer who obeys the orders of his/her boss. As was the case with the peasants with whom Freire worked, when a person's day-to-day experience is dominated by another person or group of people, most of the dominated people are not capable of developing the ability to think, to question, or to analyse situations for themselves. Instead, **their consciousness develops primarily to obey the orders imposed on them**.

To promote democratic interactions between people, Freire suggests that teachers problematize the issue being discussed. When issues or questions are problematized by teachers who work through critical pedagogy, **readily made answers are not available. Students realise that although some questions do have clear-cut answers, many of our deeper questions do not have obvious answers.** When students learn that teachers are human beings just as everyone else, and that teachers do not know everything but that they are also learners, students then feel more confident in their own search for answers and more comfortable to critically raise questions of their own. The banking method denies the need for dialogue because it assumes that the teacher is the one who possesses all the answers and the students are ignorant and in need of the teachers' knowledge. In order to problematize a subject, the teacher assumes a humble and open attitude. Given the teacher's personal example, the students also become open to the possibility of considering the different positions being discussed. This promotes a dynamic of tolerance and democratic awareness because critical pedagogy undermines relationships where some people have power or knowledge, and some do not, and where some people give orders and others obey without questioning. **Problematizing promotes dialogue and a sense of critical analysis that allows students to develop the disposition for dialogue not only in the classroom but also outside of it.** This is of utmost importance because the disposition and value of dialogue spills over in a positive way to the students' other relationships, at home, in the workplace and in the community.

Internalisation:

Paulo Freire worked with people who came from a context of pervasive historical oppression. Most of his students came from families who had been previously enslaved, and Freire came to understand that abolishing slavery did not automatically mean that people were free. ...Freire recognized that the oppression of a human being runs much deeper than political institutions and legal guarantees. He discovered that while we may actively seek our freedom, besides the institutional obstacles like colonisation and dictatorships, there are also **internal obstacles that prevent us from being free.** The concept of internalisation treated in this section is psychologically deep and rich in meaning.

...Whenever we internalise our oppressors, **we behave in the way the oppressor would have us behave even if they were not present.**

...examples would be those of internalised racism or internalised patriarchy. To internalise racism, for instance, means that a racist person need not be present to oppress another—the person who has internalised racism behaves in a way that promotes the power of the oppressor and reifies the oppressive structure. An example of internalised racism in the 21st century would be dark-skinned people promoting whiteness, for instance by using whitening creams. An example of internalised patriarchy may be when a man feels like crying but does not because he does not want to seem weak. All of these are different ways in which people internalise an oppressive structure and then seek freedom and power within that structure....

Conscientização:

As previously mentioned, Paulo Freire worked with people who had been socialised within institutions shaped by the oppression of colonisation. It bears repeating that although slavery was formally abolished in 1888, people continued to sell themselves into slavery during Freire's time. Freire worked with the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of former slaves, and he noticed that the power dynamics of the institution of slavery continued to affect how people saw themselves and how they related to the people around them.

Conscientização is often described as the process of becoming aware of social and political contradictions and then to act against the oppressive elements of our socio-political conditions. This entails developing a critical attitude to help us understand and analyse the human relationships through which we discover ourselves.

....Freire began the process by creating the conditions through which his students could realise their own agency. He describes this first step as being able to identify the difference between what it means to be an object (a thing) and a subject (a human being). Once the first step of the process has been taken, namely the recognition of their agency, **Freire emphasised to his students how the consequences of their choices did in fact shape their personal history as well as contributed to the creation of human culture.** Equally important, Freire also highlighted the fact that every single human being has the ability to change the world for the better through their work....

Working Assumptions:

This handout has been developed as part of the materials for the course 'The Fundamentals of Educational Dialogue' by Farah Ahmed and Meaghan Brugh: <https://mbrugh.github.io/fundamentals-of-ed-dialogue/>

Besides the (above) main philosophical contributions... Paulo Freire also thought about and developed other important ideas. These ideas are the working assumptions without which Freire's work would not have been able to be developed. Although these ideas are just as important as his main philosophical contributions, these ideas are not usually given as much attention by Freire scholars. This section will briefly explain Freire's working assumptions, **namely, his view of human nature, authenticity, dialogue, and love.**

Freire believed, as he often wrote, that the ontological vocation of every human being is to become more human. He believed that every person is always a work in progress, unfinished and open to further growth. This idea plays a central role *vis a vis* his other ideas because Freire worked from the assumption that people could change, learn, and grow to become better, more humane human beings. Freire's idea of human nature allowed him to articulate his ideas regarding hope, which he believed was grounded on human beings' incompleteness, beings who are unfinished and always in the process of becoming.

Another idea that played a central role in Freire's philosophy was that of authenticity. Freire understood that the oppression the people he worked with had experienced had stunted their ability to live authentic lives and relate to the people around them in authentic ways. Especially at the beginning of his work, Freire noticed how many of the peasants he worked with had a deterministic view of history and their socioeconomic and political situations. Part of Freire's goal was to help his students realise that their reality was not determined, but rather that history is made by one's choices.

As mentioned, Freire observed that when a person internalises an oppressor, it is difficult for her to be authentic. This is because when we internalise or host an oppressor, our intentions are split between our desire for freedom and the oppressive tendencies we have internalised, which means that we may feel the need to compete or oppress others in order for us to get ahead. Alienated from ourselves, our work, and other people, and due to the dehumanising social structures that promote non-democratic relationships, living an inauthentic life may lead us to feel anxiety and potential meaninglessness.

Dialogue is another central working assumption for Freire, who encouraged people to be open, tolerant, and willing to learn from each

other. For Freire, dialogue meant the presence of equality, mutual recognition, affirmation of people, a sense of solidarity with people, and remaining open to questions. **Freire wrote in length about dialogue and dialogic relationships, which he characterised as loving, humble, hopeful, and exhibiting faith in humanity. Dialogue is the basis for critical and problem-posing pedagogy,** as opposed to banking education, where there is no discussion and only the imposition of the teacher's ideas on the students.

Love is perhaps the most central working assumption that Freire develops and continues to come back to throughout his many years of work. In a video documentary, Freire says of himself, "I'm an intellectual who is not afraid of being loving. I love people and I love the world, and it is because I love people and I love the world that I fight so that social justice is implemented before charity." Freire wrote about the role that love plays in the commitment to a liberating education early on in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he wrote a section on Che Guevara and the feelings of love toward the Latin American peasants Guevara sought to liberate. Freire continued coming back to the role of love in education throughout his many writings until the end of his life. In one of Freire's last books, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, he further explores the role of emotions in the process of conscientização. He believed that education was an act of love, and it thus required courage to be politically committed to work toward the empowerment of our students and belief in their potential.