

Understanding Freire's Banking and Problem-Posing Concepts of Education: A Concise Discussion

Abstract:

This article is an attempt to understand the Freirean educational approach from the lens of critical pedagogy. In particular, the philosophical and methodological tools that Freire critiqued and advocated in his work on 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed, first published in 1968, have been discussed dividing the concepts into two sections. First, the article sheds light upon the banking concept of education taking account of its pedagogical and literacy mechanism as proposed by Freire. Second, it introduces and highlights the problem-posing concept as a critique of the banking concept emphasizing Freire's notion of dialogue, praxis, and conscientization. Next, it takes account of some possible pitfalls of the Freirean approach concerning some pieces of evidence of the Freirean era; then, it notes down few misinterpretations of Freire's notion of dialogue advocated by pseudocritical educators. Finally, the article concludes with a precise note on what has been examined in the article and signifying the importance of problem-posing education for becoming a 'transformative being'.

Key Terms: *Banking education, Problem-posing education, Pitfalls*

Paulo Freire has been regarded as one of the most reformist educational thinkers to develop theoretical and practical alternatives to mainstream development approaches (Blackburn, 2000) in contemporary studies in educational and social philosophy, political theories, development education, and particularly adult literacy education (Pongwat, 1979). Freire's thoughts on 'conscientization' and 'dialogical education' renowned by the name 'bottom-up' or 'grassroots' approach at his contemporary epoch gave rise to the participatory approaches that emerged during the 1970s, advocating the democratic call for a critical self-consciousness on the part of the researchers/facilitators as well as a concern with social justice, and seek to lead to some action based on the needs identified by the communities (Blackburn, 2000; Bozalek and Biersteker, 2010).

Over the years, several approaches have evolved advocating idealistic, moral, commodified, scientific, and perhaps by modern and other populist metaphors. However, being democratic and radicalistic by nature, Freirean approaches are still relevant to reconstruct the hegemonical ideologies of education, thereby empowering the minorities to evolve freely and break what Freire (2000) calls [the] 'culture of silence. Freire's views have been both negatively and positively perceived, but he certainly represents a voice from the lesser developed world, an area which is often spoken of but itself seldom speaks (Pongwat, 1979). In the following section, the article talks about Freire's banking education and its critique: the problem-posing education taking account of some philosophical assumptions of Freirean thought.

Banking Education: Freire (2000) gives a detailed account of the banking concept of education in the second chapter of his book, "pedagogy of the oppressed". Taking Freire's views into consideration, the banking concept of "education" can be perceived as an instrument of oppression which fundamentally is 'narrative', be it inside or outside of school (Freire, 2000). Further, he suggests that "education is

suffering from narrative sickness" (p. 71), characterizing the role of a teacher as a storyteller, alienating the topic from student's existential experience, while students as the meek listeners and reproducers of the narrated story in society. As opposed to an instrument of liberation, Freire introduces formal education as a dehumanizing tool that serves the interest of oppressors. There is no better way of summarizing Freire's critique of the banking concept of education than to reproduce here is his original words on the subject:

[Formal] education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and "makes deposits" which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, men cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 2000, p. 72).

Characterizing the nature of the banking concept, Freire (2000) outlines a set of features that depict the notion or role of teachers, students, and the overall mechanism of the formal education process. For Freire, in the formal education process, teachers are the subjects of the study and think-tank while students remain as the meek objects who come to adapt to the chosen programmed content. Freire

argues that the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students. Further, he stresses that the banking system of education regards men as the adaptable manageable beings or cognizable objects for maintaining an oppressive social order: the more students put their efforts into receiving and storing information deposited in them, the less they can attain the critical consciousness that comes from 'intervening in reality as makers and transformers of the world' (Freire, 2000, p. 72).

Therefore, critiquing the banking concept, Freire argues that it fosters falsified humanitarianism to preserve a profitable situation, alters the consciousness from the world, negates ontological vocation preventing the students to change history, inhibits creative power through necrophily, and dichotomize everything proscribing communication and authentic thinking (Freire, 2000, pp. 74-86). Drawing upon the work of Beauvoir (1963), Freire writes that the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them"(p.74), thereby offering euphemistic title of *welfare recipients*, and enforcing them to adapt to their imagined system.

Blackburn (2000) mentions that Freire is not the only one to have attacked formal education. He regards Ivan Illich as one of the contemporaries to Freire who proposed Deschooling Society (1971) 'no less than the total abolition of all institutionalized forms of learning' (p. 6); however, Blackburn thinks that Illich failed to conceptualize a working methodology or lay down the practical basis for an education in which the poor and oppressed might become subjects of their own development, asserting the needs, rather than passively accepting the dictates of State-sponsored education.

Problem-Posing Education: Problem-posing education, on the other hand, sees education beginning "with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire 2000, p. 72). Unlike the banking education, here knowledge is not deposited into the minds of others, but instead "emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire 2000, p. 72). Education in this sense based on the movement toward what Freire calls conscientizacao (for conscientization). Conscientizacao refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 2000, p. 35). In this regard, one can see that passive adaptation to a regulated and pre-determined reality is in direct opposition to the concept of problem-posing education.

In problem-posing education, students and teachers seek to transform the reality together, rather than to adapt to it. Freire (2000) suggests that in order to initiate the liberatory praxis people should "abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems ... responding to the essence of consciousness—intentionality—reject communiqués and embody communication" (p. 79). Problem-posing education seeks to challenge people to critically create themselves with the world in which they find themselves. Freire (2000) states

Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality. Indeed, in contrast to other animals who are unfinished, but not historical, people know themselves to be unfinished; they are aware of their incompleteness. In this incompleteness and this awareness lie the very roots of education as an exclusively human manifestation. The unfinished character

of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity. (p. 85)

While banking education refuses to allow man the freedom of to decide and to create and treats men as objects, problem-posing education is directed towards all becoming subjects in the process of decision making through their own creation of the world. Problem-posing education is also based on a concept of humanization with men. It realizes that "humanity however cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; ..." (Freire, 2000, p. 85).

Connoting the dehumanizing practice with sectarianism, Freire (2000) demarcates the meaning of being 'authentic human', and argues that "some men's having must not be allowed to constitute an obstacle to others' having, must not consolidate the power of the former to crush the latter" (p. 86).

The emancipatory tenet of problem-posing education as a humanist and liberating praxis demands the oppressed to rise above the fatalistic ideologies and fight for their freedom to become 'a full human'. Freire (2000) argues that "problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor" (p. 86), therefore, he suggests the oppressed to embrace revolutionary fashion (i.e., dialogical from outset); overcome authoritarianism, alienating intellectualism and their false perception of reality. Here, the concept of 'dialogue' and 'praxis' becomes inevitable for understanding Freire's thoughts on problem-posing education which is discussed in the following sections.

Dialogue: Problem-posing dialogue is subjects (teachers and students) dialoguing with each other as equals. Freire states, "...within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (p. 87). For Freire, "dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world"

(Freire, 2000, p. 88). Dialogue is necessary in Freire's approach for education, that it is through a problem-posing approach that conscientization occurs.

Through dialogue, men are thus able to create their own humanness as they name and transform the world. Dialogue does not deposit truth or knowledge into minds. When people dialogue with each other, they are seeking truth and knowledge together; they create it. Dialogue is necessary; "... authentic education is not carried on by "A" for "B" or by "A" about "B," but rather by "A" with "B," mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it" (Freire, 2000, p. 93).

Praxis: Freire believes that in order to escape an oppressive or "domesticating" condition, men must transform themselves and the world through their praxis. Freire (2000) sees the praxis of men in terms of "...reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). Freire thus presents a vision of man-world interdependency, whereby men must confront their world critically (reflection) and then act (consciously) in order to intervene upon the world (through his actions). Freire believes man's vocation in life is to create his humanness; to create conditions that deny man's praxis is to be oppressive. Hence, man must therefore strive to regain this state of praxis or recognize himself as a being in praxis; then only, he can be truly human.

Congruently, another fundamental term Freire emphasizes, as succinctly mentioned in the above section is conscientization. Defining the term Pongwat (1979) quotes professor Elias (1974) who define the term as "Conscientization ... means a radical denunciation of dehumanizing structures, accompanied by a new reality to be created by men. It entails a rigorous and rational critique of the ideology that supports these structures" (p. 29). Although revolutionary in character, the term has been perceived as both the process and quality inculcating a multitude of

Freirean thoughts. For instance, the term as a 'quality' is examined by relating with critical consciousness, critical self-evaluation, and historical commitment; meanwhile, as a 'process', the term has been perceived as historical conditioning and level of consciousness (such as intransitive, magical, naïve and critical), a social process, a demythologizing process, a process of awakening and reawakening consciousness, conscientization as utopia, and a risk-taking process (Pongwat, 1979, pp. 34-59). Conscientization, in its simplicity, is a process of inquiry for being a 'full human' embracing liberatory praxis and dialogue, thereby contributing to transform the regulated realities of any society.

Possible Pitfalls of Freirean Approach: Although Freire has proposed a working self-liberating pedagogical framework for the oppressed, the pitfalls and challenges in implementing his framework are significant. For example, Blackburn (2000) has critiqued and doubted upon two aspects of the Freirean approach: "(i) the particularist notion of power and empowerment in Freirean thought and its disregard for vernacular and traditional forms of power, and (ii) the potential for ideological manipulation, and cultural invasion inherent in the approach" (p. 8). Drawing upon the "fear-power" (Rahnema, 1992, p. 123) dimension of power foregrounded by Rahnema, he critiques the 'ideological neutrality' and 'culture of silence' notions of Freire from "anthropological grounds". Taking account of extreme political exploitation contexts ranging from Northeast Brazil, Latin America to Guatemala during the 1960s, Blackburn (2000) argues that even the enslaved and powerless possess some power "those who appear powerless and fatalistic – stuck in what Freire called a 'culture of silence', or a 'magical' as opposed to a 'critical' consciousness – may in fact express (at least some) power in more subtle ways,

such as sabotage, non-cooperation, and the secret observance of a distinct culture and identity" (pp. 8-9).

In the like manner, Blackburn (2000) reckons that Freirean and other participatory activists have devalued traditional and vernacular forms of power, and is highly "derived from European Leftist traditions ..., in particular, Marx's notion of power in capitalist societies" (p. 9). Further, he states that although Freire did not explicitly embrace the idea of "increased control of material resources by the poor as the way to increased power per se, he did envision empowerment as – at the very least – the gaining of greater political and social space by the poor and the oppressed" (Blackburn, 2000, p. 9). Blackburn (2009), ultimately, highlights the intricacies and complexities of societal structures, thereby questing Freire's notion of 'magical' consciousness, and other higher levels of consciousness arguing that "people may not want to be empowered in the way that is being prescribed" (p. 9).

On the other hand, the notion of ideological manipulation is another pitfall of the Freirean approach. Blackburn (2000) offers pieces of evidence from two cases one from Mexico (summer school indigenous language revitalization program) and another from Nicaragua (the 1980's mass literacy program), in both cases, he claims that the Freirean approach is misused. He outlines that in both of the cases the missionaries and educators served their 'hidden agenda' by prescribing 'a particular world-view': limiting to the bible readings thereby serving religious interests (in the first case) and neglecting the local realities in the name of promoting the national revolutionary culture, thereby serving political interests (in the latter case) (Blackburn, 2000, pp. 9-10). Taking account of the above-

mentioned examples, one can easily notice the inability of Freire to envision the possibility of hypocritical nature of educators or the products of banking education who mainly advocate for what Freire (2000) himself calls "conceived humanism... [as it] "overlooks the concrete, existential, present situation of real people" (p. 93)".

Alongside the criticisms that seem merely based on possible resistance of human nature towards change, or more succinctly philosophical dilemmas of human agency to embrace the transformation, and question the oppressor's regulated realities, Freire's educational approach is found to have been misinterpreted from a dialogical perspective too. Donald Macedo, in the introduction of Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' critiques that "many pseudocritical educators, in the name of liberation pedagogy, often sloganize Freire by straitjacketing his revolutionary politics to an empty cliché of the dialogical method" (Freire, 2000, p. 17). Further, he pinpoints that those educators "refuse to link experiences to the politics of culture and critical democracy" and confine the dialogical praxis into "a form of middle-class narcissism" to find "a group-therapy space for their grievances" and secure "a safe pedagogical zone to deal with his or her class guilt" (Freire, 2000, p. 17). Having discussed various critiques and misinterpretations on the Freirean approach, the following section summarizes the paper taking account of what has been examined yet in the paper.

Conclusion: Despite the attempts that have been made to understand the Freirean approach of education in this concise discussion, Freire's philosophical and methodological concerns are multi-paradigmatic, and demands one to think much more democratically and rationally. It should also be noted that the Freirean approach is not a panacea for all pedagogical issues that appear in developmental contexts since there is no one-size-fits-all solution to any given scenario or problem.

And, we must be wary not to believe that education can revolutionize the world on its own (as Freire repeatedly warned), we must also be careful not to assume that nothing worthwhile can be accomplished via our educational efforts.

In the above sections, we observed that the educational approach foregrounded by Freire and the philosophical groundings that underpin it, necessitate a critical inquiry from the position of the educator, and requires one to reject the mechanics of "banking education", thereby reinventing oneself from "doxas" to "logos" (Freire, 2000, p. 81) together with the oppressed for creating an enabling environment for their empowerment. We also saw how the educators deploy Freirean techniques, in the form of falsified humanitarianism, whether to serve their religious or political interests.

This, in turn, invites a few remaining concerns on the relevancy and usefulness of Freire's ideas in the present-day world. Freire, undoubtedly, like other great thinkers have been misunderstood and misused throughout history, yet his ideas of authentic humanism, conscientization, dialogue and praxis are still relevant and cannot be discarded in the field of education. However, his works are less incorporated in the formal education system be it school or university level curricula across the globe embracing the fallacy that his works are cumbersome to understand (Baral, 2011; Freire, 2000).

Freire's contribution in the field of education is immense, as we discussed above, however, his notable contribution is to demystify the processes through which one can transform the regulated realities becoming the subject of such transformation. In fact, Freire's ideas can be employed in the multidimensional aspect of our lives with humility, love and compassion considering history as a possibility for becoming 'being' of ourselves.

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