

# Contribution of Paulo Freire: An Enduring, Eclectic Educator

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## Abstract

*Education has gone through a sea change. In this era of digital social learning, companionship in learning, teacher - learner and learner - teacher relationship has been redefined. Paulo Freire an eminent educator has propounded a radical revamping in pedagogy and outcome of learning. He has challenged everything traditional and domesticating. As a proponent of critical education, he has exemplified a system of learning for personal and social transformation. This article explores the possibility for transformation by learning with the learners, habits of mutuality, reciprocity, respect, value creation, revolutionizing their thoughts for personal development. He demands for a life of curiosity, love and hope. His call to be witnesses of transformation through critical consciousness has to be listened and internationalized if rooting out the social evils perpetuated by the certified graduates should be our priority and responsibility.*

**Keywords:** pedagogy, critical education, learning and development, paradigm for teaching.

The phenomena of education systems in many countries have been murkier by becoming too examination-oriented, and students' academic accomplishments have been often measured in terms of grades and degrees received. The preoccupation with test results and economic successes have watered down the importance of non-cognitive aspects of learning, such as values, ethics, social responsibility, civic engagement, and so on. The unacceptable social evils have been perpetuated by the graduates. It is a great moment to encounter the eminent experimenter Paulo Freire (1921-1997) whose has been quite curious and fascinating, and hence his work and contribution to the world captivate our hearts and minds. His educational process is that students should know their own reality as part of their learning activity and understand their environment that fabricates it. He would say that it is not enough that students read the phrase: 'Eve saw a grape'. They should even understand Eve in her social context; find out who worked to produce the grape and who profited from this type of work<sup>1</sup>. His educational approach transformed the teachers and learners, but it was reported to be "subversive" by the army. He was imprisoned for seventy-five days in 1964 in Brazil and exiled for a short time to Bolivia, four years in Chile, one year in the US, ten years (1970-80) in Geneva with the World Council of Churches and returned to Brazil in March 1980 over 15 years. It has been impactful to discover that Freire as the philosopher, writer, educator and social activist was shaped by the harsh realities of life: abject poverty in his childhood, the relinquishing his law career for teaching, "homelessness" in his banishment and his return "to relearn" to his country.

<sup>1</sup> Gerhardt, Heinz-Peter (2000), Paulo Freire (1921-1997), p.439

This article gives a bird's eye view on Freire's context and his enduring legacy for bare feet literacy which enlightening the illiterate towards a dignified living and livelihood, as an international vagabond of the obvious, a lay liberation theologian, a passionate learner and prophetic educator and a legend of love, curiosity and hope. Freirean educational philosophy and pedagogy are not just a collection of methods or techniques instead they are born out of his educational experimentation in many contexts by the visionary pedagogue himself and others who have found Freirean approach to be profoundly relevant and radically transformational to any dehumanizing emotions, experiences and events.

### Historical Context

Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese from 1500 to 1822 (400 years) which had brought about the evils of slavery, poverty, illiteracy and so on. The general living conditions in Recife were so hapless that half of the residents lived in Mocambos (huts where the community of runaway slaves lived) in 1923. Moreover, the infant mortality rate-an indicator of wealth in Recife-was higher than in French and Belgian cities during 1650-1755 and certainly higher than in any other Brazilian city<sup>2</sup>. The poor and middle class from the arid, drought hit northern areas of Brazil migrated to the city of Recife to work in usinas (sugar refineries) in the late 1800s. Most of the Indigenous died due to the pathetic, enslaved labor conditions in engenhos (sugar mills) and European diseases. The owners of the engenhos bought the Africans as slaves to work in their sugar mills to keep up their main export of sugar. All these pitiable socio, economic and political conditions oriented Freire to ameliorate the Latin American continent and eventually the world through his remarkable contribution to education and democracy.

### Bare Feet Literacy: Enlightening the Illiterate to a Dignified Living and Livelihood

Freire was not suddenly enlightened to take up the cause of education. His closeness to the poor and his personal experience led to commit himself. In 1960, he was the most eager advocate and cofounder

of Popular Cultural Movement (Movimento de Cultura Popular-MCP). In 1961, he was appointed the Director of Cultural Extension at the University of Recife, now the federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE). Having been a special councilor for student relations, in 1962, he got an opportunity to apply his theories derived through his experiment through the "Bare feet can also learn to read" campaign in the neighbouring state of Rio Grande de Notre, on teaching 300 sugarcane workers learnt to read in 45 days for the first time. This project brought forth the seven educational units for curriculum development and teacher education. He developed techniques such as study groups, action groups, roundtable discussions, debates, the distribution of themed flashcards.<sup>3</sup> Since this program was successful, the President of Brazil, Joao Goulart appointed him in 1963 as the director of National Literacy Program to bring in new voters to support reform. Freire emerged as the national figure during the reformist government of Goulart. He strategized to establish 20,000 cultural learning circles throughout Brazil to reach out 5,000,000 (40 million) illiterates and planned to import 35,000 slide projectors from Poland.<sup>4</sup>

This program was more than just learning to read and write; instead it was designed for the social, political and economic life of the country. Freire desired the voice of the people to be heard, since Brazil's constitution did allow illiterates to vote. It was creating history. It was getting successful with the enrollment of over two million students. Freire dignifies the learners to "realise their situation as subjects of culture, and the value of people in themselves "I make shoes" said one of them" and I realise that I have the same value as the 'doctor' who writes books". "Tomorrow", a street cleaner employed by the city administration of Brasilia said, when discussing the concept of culture "I shall walk to my work with my head high". An aged peasant stated emphatically: "I now know that I am cultured, because I work, and thereby I change the world"<sup>5</sup> Education is an altruistic act through which

2 Josue de Castro (1966), Death in the Northeast, p.110

3 Gerhardt, Heinz-Peter (2000), Paulo Freire (1921-1997), p.345

4 Ibid p, 346

5 Freire. Paulo (1971) Eeducation: Pratique de la Liberte.p.110

educator leads the students to realize a sense of self, self-respect, self-worth and self-dignity irrespective of their race, religion, region, gender and socio economic status.

### **A Vagabond of the Obvious**

While lessons learnt on the coup d'etat of March 31, 1964, Freire reflectively asserted that he learnt a lesson about the global limits of education. "I don't say that before 1964, I was absolutely convinced that education could be the tool for transforming society...I grew more aware of education's limits in the political transformation of society.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, through education, we can first understand power in society." He became a radical activist as he stated to the World Council of Churches: "My case is the case of the wretched of the world. You should know that I opted for revolution". It is difficult to trace Freire's travels and lectures while he was in exile; however he did give a number of conferences and seminars in Canada, the United States, Italy, Iran, India, Australia and New Zealand. In the late 1960s, Freire also spent two summers at Ivan Illich's Centro Intercultural de Documentacion (CIDOC or Intercultural Documentation Center) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Freire also lectured at the University of Geneva's College of Education. His exile was a blessing in disguise, as it triggered him to transcend the boundaries of Latin America to the world. We noticed that worldwide recognition for his ideas and writing dawned from Chile. He remained a vagabond of the obvious as he went around the world professing that education was not neutral.

### **A Lay Liberation Theologian**

Freire accepted that his mother had a tremendous influence in his choice of religion in spite of his pull to his father's spiritualism. He, later on, saw himself as becoming a Catholic by his choice and this association permeated his pedagogical work. After the Second Vatican Council (1965), the Catholic Church increasingly embraced Liberation Theology and a commitment to the poor. "Base communities" were formed at the local level to involve lay people in interpreting the Bible and carrying out the Church's

work. He was part the nascent philosophy of Liberation in academic circles, and Liberation Theology in Church circles. His work gave a new dimension to religion, especially to Roman Catholicism. His *The Church, Education and the Process of Human liberation in History* reflected the Christian church and its forms during various historical periods. He noted the transition of the Church from educating for oppression to participating with the oppressed in the struggle for freedom. The similar thought patterns were discussed through *The Church in Latin America: Its Educational Role*. The presence of religious attributes in Freire's writings was observed by John Donohue that Freire was "one of the two or three Catholic Christians since the Renaissance to have achieved a sizable and nonparochial reputation as an educational pioneer."<sup>7</sup> He integrated his faith as a layperson into his realities of life and impeccably witnessed it in his thoughts and deeds.

### **A Passionate Learner and A Prophetic Educator**

In March 1980, Freire's home coming was possible after 16 years, 1964 to 1980 declaring to the press in June that he had returned "to relearn my country".<sup>8</sup> He worked as a professor in the postgraduate Education program at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo from 1980 to 1990. In 1987 he was reinstated as a senior professor at the State University of Sao Paulo. He also became Professor Emeritus at the Federal University of Pernambuco. He was the President of the 'Wilson Pinherio Foundation Sponsored by the PT. He also offered his service to 'Varela'. He became one of the founding members of the Worker's Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores-PT). In January 1989, he was appointed as the Secretary of Education in Sao Paulo till May 1991. He was committed for two years and later returned to teaching and learning.<sup>9</sup> From 1985 until his death in 1997, Freire served as the honorary president of the International Council for Adult Education. From 1987-1995, Freire served on the UNESCO International Jury, a body that meets

7 Donohue, John (1972) "Paulo Freire, Philosopher of Adult Education," *America* p.167.

8 Freire, Paulo. (1994). *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. p. 22

9 Gerhardt, Heinz-Peter (2000), Paulo Freire (1921-1997), p. 455

6 Freire, P. and Shor, Ira (1987), *A Pedagogy of Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*, p.31

annually in Paris to choose the best literacy project and experience from five continents. He breathed his last on 2 May 1997 in Sao Paulo at the age of 75 due to heart failure. Freire emerged as one of the most influential educators of the 20th century. “Freire provided one of the most creative syntheses of the 20th century adult education theory”.<sup>10</sup> Most scholars agree Freire’s contribution relies not on introducing new ideas but an eclectic mix of leading thinkers in philosophy, educational theory, theology, political science, sociology, anthropology, history and linguistics. His work has been perennially inspiring scholars, practitioners, politicians and social activists alike, including Carlos Alberto Torres, Donald Macedo, Moacir Gadotti, Daniel Schipani, Peter McLaren, Henry Giroux, Daniel Schugurensky, Stanley Arnowitz, Kathleen Weiler, Tom Heany, Myles Horton, Peter Mayo, Peter Lownd, Bell Hooks, Cornel West, Angela Valenzuela, James H. Cone, Donald Macedo, Joe L. Kincheloe, Carlos Alberto Torres, Ira Shor, Shirley R. Steinberg, Michael W. Apple, Leonardo Boff, and Jonathan Kozol among others. Freire’s work was foundational in the development of participatory action research, transformative learning theory<sup>11</sup> and the popular education movement.

His pedagogy has been synonymous with critical pedagogy, critical literacy, dialogical pedagogy and praxis learning. It has been instrumental in developing popular education, participatory action research and transformative learning theory. His philosophical writings impacted the academic disciplines namely theology, sociology, anthropology, applied linguistics, pedagogy, and cultural studies. Freire’s seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has been translated into 65 languages and has gone through 65 editions in Brazil. It is the third most cited social science book in the world according to Elliott Green who is a professor at London School of Economics. The city of Tucson, in the state of Arizona (U. S. A.) considers it to be too subversive for reading and has banned it as it had been done in Latin American Dictatorships, and apartheid South Africa. Freire’s

emancipatory model of teaching has been widely adopted in previously colonized countries and continents such as Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Philippines, India, and Papua New Guinea. The World Bank funded the Southern Highlands Rural Development Program’s Literacy Campaign, which is based on a Freirean model of pedagogy.

### **A Legendary Life of Love, Curiosity and Hope**

Freire insisted that his pedagogy was neither a system nor a method but an approach that educators must “create anew” in each context. Freire’s mystique and the dialogue among scholars and practitioners continue to discover new insights from his dynamic pedagogy long after his death. The most significant legacy is that he has created the conditions by which thousands of people, the children and grandchildren of former slaves, could learn to read and write, learn about their agency and freedom, and learn to love. In a 1990 interview with Carlos A. Torres, Paulo Freire mused, “What is my legacy?” Freire answered his own question: “I think that it is possible to be said about Paulo Freire, when I die, that Paulo Freire was a man who loved, who could not understand life’s existence without love and without knowing. Paulo Freire lived, loved and tried to know. Paulo Freire was constantly curious and asking questions to himself”.<sup>12</sup>

Anyone a lifelong friend or the intellectuals familiar through his writings from afar, fondly remember Freire with deep respect. Theatre artist David Diamond comments, “when I first read Paulo Freire, I was stunned and relieved and exuberant, for he was able to articulate what I knew and felt, but did not have the words for. So it is with many who have been touched in some way by Freire’s work. He is most often referred to in the same sentence as the words love, compassion and hope.”<sup>13</sup> Freire’s words and deed inspire us to explore ways to make learning lively, democratic, subversive of privilege, and capable of merging the quests for personal and collective liberation. Education, according to Paulo Freire, is meaning-making through dialogic

10 Schugurensky, D. (1998). *The Legacy of Paulo Freire: A critical review of his contributions*. P.19

11 Mezirow, Jack. (1991), *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, p.79

12 Schugurensky, Daniel. (1998), *The Legacy of Paulo Freire: A Critical Review of his Contributions*, p.27

13 Wink, Joan. (1997), *Remembering Paulo Freire, Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, Fall- 2, 101-102

reciprocity between teachers and students, where both learn, both question, both reflect, and both participate. He remains a foremost teacher, learner and lover the least. He comes across as an incorrigible optimist who believed in human potential for transforming his/her life, his unwavering Catholic faith for justice, a passionate man for learning, teaching, and loving, and a beacon for the least and the lost.

### **A Perpetual Path Breaker and a Catalyst for Transformation**

Paulo Freire had been conferred the title of Doctor (*honoris causa* - honorary degrees) by more than 30 universities and over 35 organizations granted a number of awards, medals and prizes during his life time and posthumously and was an honorary professor of 28 universities around the world. The most comprehensive listing of awards, prizes and honorary titles available in English can be found in Ana Maria Araujo Freire's biographical introduction to *The Paulo Freire Reader*.<sup>14</sup> Paulo Freire has been called "foremost a teacher and an educator of teachers".<sup>15</sup> He was also remembered as "the greatest living educator, a master and a teacher"<sup>16</sup>. Although Freire's writings, 25 books, are theoretically complex and often difficult to read, their enduring influence is evidenced by the fact that they are available in 35 languages.

In 1991, the Paulo Freire Institute in Sao Paulo was established to take up the cause of popular education. After his death, it has been generating dialogue and supporting research into pedagogical approaches and educational theories among scholars and critics in 18 countries by 21 scholarly nuclei. Many of these institutes were founded by a network of Freire's colleagues, friends and proponents of his pedagogical approach. They are well-known in their work on Freire in sociology, education, philosophy and political science. Many of the co-founders and directors of these institutes continue to collaborate on scholarly works and innovative projects in local communities around the globe. Even before his death, numerous schools and institutions worldwide

14 Freire, A.M. A. and Donaldo Macedo (1998), "Introduction", *The Paulo Freire Reader*, p.22-33

15 Elias, J. L. (1994). *Paulo Freire: Pedagogy of Liberation*, p. 32

16 Taylor, Paul.V. (1993), *The Texts of Paulo Freire*. p.1

adopted Paulo Freire's name. 'Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School' functions as an independent public charter high school in Holyoke, Massachusetts from the fall of 2012 infusing social justice into every aspect of the school, governance structure and curriculum. There are similar educational institutes in Finland, England, the United States, South Africa and Spain bearing his name and transforming the people.

### **Egalitarian and Eclectic Relationship Builder**

The teacher-student relationship is horizontal, democratic, mutually accepting and trustworthy. Both the teacher and learner teach and learn as well. Freire revolutionizes the teacher-student relationship, "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 teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in their turn while being taught also teach."<sup>17</sup> The terms such as teacher of the students and the students of the teacher do not exist whereas giving rise to teacher-student with teachers-students. According to Freire, egalitarian and respectful relationships bring forth knowledge. He says, "... dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming -between those who deny other men the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied to them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression."<sup>18</sup> There is a revolutionary and a respectful relationship between teacher and student. Democratic educators seek to replace the traditional teacher-student hierarchy with egalitarian interactions. Freire writes, education "cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and its people... founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence."<sup>19</sup> Freire called

17 Freire, P. (1970), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, p.67

18 Freire, Paulo (1970), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, pp. 76 -77

19 Freire, Paulo (1970), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, pp. 78 -79

for a “horizontal” relationship of a teacher’s role in a democratic classroom. Freire refines his notion of directivity and the teacher-student relationship, “dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally; but it does mark the democratic position between them.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Teacher as a Knower, an Artist and an Activist**

Freire mentions that teacher is an artist expressed two elements namely forming and knowing. He aesthetically narrates the embellishing aspects of a teacher: “One is that no matter if education is exercised informally at home or formally at a school, through informal relationships between teachers and students and kids or formally in primary school between teachers and students, education has to do with a permanent process of formation. ... I am in my perspective a helper of the students in their process of formation, of their growing up. This process is necessarily an artistic one. It is impossible to participate in the process of getting shaped, which is a kind of rebirth, without some aesthetic shaped, which is a kind of rebirth, without some aesthetic moments. In this aspect, education is naturally an aesthetical exercise. ...education is also an act of knowing. For me, knowing is something beautiful! To the extent that knowing is unveiling as object, the unveiling gives the object ‘life’”, calls into ‘life’, even gives it a new ‘life’. This is an artistic task because our knowing has a life-giving quality, creating and animating objects as we study them. ... an educator who has a strategic and directive role to play in transforming pedagogy. Then, education is simultaneously a certain theory of knowledge, going into practice, a political and aesthetic act. Then, education is simultaneously a certain theory of knowledge, going into practice, a political and aesthetic act. These three dimensions are always together, simultaneous moments of theory and practice, art and politics, the act of knowing at once creating and recreating objects while it forms the students who are knowing.”<sup>21</sup> Freire opinions that education is a formation of mind (knowing), they are

being shaped artistically (art) for an affirmative act or practice of learning (politics). Knowing, forming and acting confluence at the practice of teaching. A teacher is a knower or an epistemologist, an artist, and a politician or an activist. Freire believes that every human being is endowed with curiosity which grows, matures, changes and produces knowledge. It is one of the bases of educational practices and brings about happiness to the pleasure of questioning mind. He says that the joy of learning is ensured by asking the fundamental questions and rebutting forbidden questions with uncomfortable answers. There lies real humanistic education or education for liberation. He experientially contemplates that a banking education is prescriptive, authoritarian, traditional, domesticating system where teachers transfer information from their heads and deposit into students’ heads. Teachers play the role of depositors and students become as depositories. This teaching-learning relationship is carried through a vertical discourse rather than a horizontal dialogue. He counteracts traditional one with his problem posed liberating pedagogy which is critical, collaborative, gathering momentum, and transforming.

An enduring, eclectic and transforming educator plays multifaceted roles as a creator of virtues, a witness of respect for freedom and democracy, a convincer, a political militant, a humble catalyst, a critical cognizer, a reinventor, a responsible self formator, an authority to destroy authoritarianism, a reknower, an egalitarian, a facilitator, a knower, an artist, an activist, a seeker, a challenger, and a procedural director. Above all s/he is a reciprocal, respectable, patient, tolerant, loving and hopeful person. Personally speaking, it has an intellectual encounter with him through his writings and speeches. Freire consciously puts forth his views on the attitudinal and pedagogical approaches of a transforming teacher. S/he should have an attitude of respect for their students and have to appreciate their language as beautiful, not shame them for their accent or diction, know the common form of language, and make them understand on the command of dominant language for their struggle for transformation. Freire commends and recommends for live of respect, receptivity, reciprocity, reorientation and revival. We have been transcending to an age of digitally social

20 Freire, Paulo (1994), *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*, pp. 116-117

21 Freire, Paulo and Shor, Ira, (1987), *A Pedagogy of Liberation Dialogues on Transforming Education*, p. 118

world and knowledge economy. Education definitely and distinctively paves ways for life of personal and social transformation. Education leads towards transformed minds for all while transcending every barrier that befalls on its ways.

### Conclusion

Freire believes that every human being is endowed with curiosity which grows, matures, changes and produces into knowledge. It is one of the bases of educational practice and brings about happiness to the pleasure of questioning mind. He says that the joy of learning is ensured by asking the fundamental questions and rebutting with inappropriate answers. There lies real humanistic education or education for liberation. Even if it is risky to ask forbidden questions, we should never let curiosity die in ourselves. He experientially contemplates that a banking education is prescriptive, authoritarian, traditional, domesticating system where teachers transfer information from their heads and deposit into students' head. Teachers play the role of depositors and students become as depositories. This teaching-learning relationship is carried through a vertical discourse rather than a horizontal dialogue. An enduring, eclectic, transforming educator plays a multifaceted roles such as creates of virtues, a witnesses respect for freedom and democracy, a convincer, a political militant, a humble catalyst, a critical cognizer, a reinventor, a responsible self formator, an authority to destroy authoritarianism, a reknower, an egalitarian an eclectic, a facilitator, a knower, an artist, an activist, a seeker, a challenger, a procedural director, a reciprocal, respectable, patient, tolerant, loving and hopeful person. It has an intellectual encounter with him through his writings and speeches. There has to be an attitudinal and pedagogical approach of a transforming teacher should be an attitude of respect for their students and appreciate their language as beautiful, not shame them for their accent or diction, know the common

form of language, and make them understand on the command of dominant language for their struggle for transformation. An educator commends and recommends for a life of respect, receptivity, reciprocity, reorientation and revival. The age of digitally social world and knowledge economy will definitely and distinctively pave ways for life of personal and social transformation. Education leads towards transformed minds for all while transcending every barriers that befall on its ways.

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