Summary of

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED
by Paulo Freire

Introduction

In Paulo Freire's hands, literacy is a weapon for social change. Education once again becomes the means by which people can perceive, interpret, criticize and finally transform the world about them.

Freire's attack on the “culture of silence” inhabited by the vast numbers of illiterate peasants in Brazil's poorest areas contributed in an extraordinary way to the development of a sense of purpose and identity among the oppressed and demoralized majority. His work was the result of a process of reflection in the midst of a struggle to create a new social order. He became the authentic voice of the “third world”, but his methodology and philosophy were also important in the industrialized countries where a new culture of silence threatened to dominate an overconsuming and overmanaged population, where education too often meant merely socialization.

Of all those writing and thinking about education over the past several decades, Freire may well be finally the most influential. Speaking from and for the “third world”, and implicitly for all underprivileged people, he proposes a view of education as something positive and also hazardous, a means of liberating people and enabling them to participate in the historical process.

Chapter 1: THE NEED FOR A PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

The central problem for man\(^1\) is the problem of humanization. This has become inescapably and urgently the concern of man because history shows us that both humanization and dehumanization can be real alternatives. But of these too, only humanization can be man's true vocation.

To achieve this therefore there is a need for liberation. But the process of liberation must essentially not be one concerned with individuals and persons as such but a social process. This is because the dehumanization of man has been taking place as the product of an unjust and exploitative social order.

The struggle for this liberation must therefore be carried out by the oppressed to restore the humanity of both the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressor class is too dehumanized to lead a liberation struggle as it has thrived on the dehumanization of the oppressed.

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\(^1\) In this summary, for the purposes of accuracy, we follow Paulo Freire's original usage in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* of terms such as 'man' and 'mankind', although he later accepted that the use of more inclusive language would be preferable.
There are, however, inherent dangers in this liberation struggle that has to be carried out by the oppressed. The oppressed at first tend to see liberation as a way of replacing oppressors, that is, to be like the oppressors. For the oppressor, to be in this world means to have and to have more. For the oppressed, to be in this world is to be under and to be like the oppressor – to yearn to have and have more. In other words, the oppressed internalize the image of the oppressor within themselves.

Therefore the struggle for liberation by the oppressed, together with those in solidarity with them, becomes a struggle by man in the process of achieving freedom with no distinction between oppressed and oppressor. It becomes thus an act of love as against the lovelessness and false generosity which characterizes the oppressor. Therefore freedom has to be acquired by conquest, that is, by positive action. It has to be pursued constantly and responsibly. This has to be carried out as the fight against oppression in a situation where the world and men are in interaction. Hence the need in this fight for praxis, which itself is a process of interaction between reflection and action.

Thus arises a need for a pedagogy of the oppressed. This means the need to explain to the masses their own action. It must necessarily lead to dialogue – the revolutionary transformation of reality, which the liberation movement involves, necessitates a pedagogy with and not for the people. Therefore it has to be achieved through educational projects because the oppressors, who are the rulers, control systematic education and education is only a sub-system of the system as a whole. Therefore this pedagogy must be humanist (subjective) and not humanitarian (objective). For violence is done by those who exploit and the act of rebellion, however violent, by the oppressed can and should really initiate love. It is true that acts of oppression by the oppressed to prevent the restoration of oppressive regimes cannot be regarded as being really oppressive but the danger is for a new regime (of liberation) to harden into a dominating bureaucracy.

The revolutionary leadership must learn to commune with the people. There must be a profound rebirth. The leaders must ever and always trust the people. They must have a critical and liberating permanent dialogue with the people. No slogans, communiques, etc., are adequate or relevant. The revolutionary transformation of society is with the oppressed and not for them. Liberation does not mean merely to eat more but to create and construct, to wonder and venture. For under oppression, on the other hand, the oppressed tend to be violent on each other, imitating the oppressor and becoming self-deprecatory.

An important factor in this movement for liberation is the development of true consciousness. This consciousness is in essence a way towards something apart from itself, outside itself, which surrounds it and apprehends it by means of ideational capacity – that is, the capacity for forming ideas about what it seeks to understand. Thus consciousness is a method which constitutes the process of conscientization. Consciousness involves essentially being with the world and manifests itself externally in the form of acts which in turn brings out intentionality, or the intentions of those responsible for the acts. Thus a revolutionary leadership must practise co-intentional education, that is, the leadership and the people for the purpose of jointly unveiling reality (“co-intent on reality”) must have a critical knowledge of that reality and then proceed to the task of transforming and re-creating that reality. (In other words, of effecting the desirable changes in the real world as a result of critical knowledge.) Thus for the oppressed there will not be pseudo-participation in the struggle for their liberation but a committed involvement.
Chapter 2: THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

The present system of education may be described as the “banking” system. The teacher is the subject and the student the object of the educational process. A narrative style is very much in vogue. Students record, memorize and repeat. Education becomes a process of depositing information and pupils are the depositories. In fact there is no real communication between the teacher and the taught.

True knowledge demands invention and re-invention through restless, impatient, continuing and hopeful inquiry which men pursue in the world, with the world and with each other. Teachers and students must, in fact, become simultaneously both teachers and students; we must have teacher-student and student-teacher.

The essential task of liberation is to change the situation which causes oppression and not to change the consciousness of the oppressed to adapt themselves to the situation which oppresses and exploits them. Such adaptation is dehumanizing and leads to control and domination by the oppressor.

The teacher for liberation must be a partner of the students engaged in stimulating the powers of critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. There must be a profound trust in men and their creative power.

As against education (by the oppressors) for domination, we have education for liberation. This liberation is a praxis, that is, reflection and action, and action of men upon their world in order to transform it. Therefore education has to be not deposit-making but problem-posing, and must therefore be co-intentional (on the part of leaders and people, teachers and the taught) through communication.

Liberating education is not mere transferring of information but of knowing and understanding reality. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without men but men in their relations with the world in a continuous process of interaction. In problem-posing education, men develop their power to perceive critically that everything exists in the world with which and in which they find themselves. They come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in a dynamic process of change and movement. Problem-posing education affirms men as beings in the process of becoming, that is, as uncompleted beings in and with an uncompleted reality.

Unlike animals, man is aware of this problem-posing education and must therefore be also dialogical in order to promote inquiry and further the process of humanization. To prevent such inquiry by any means is to create a situation of violence. To be human, it is necessary to have. But some men's having must not be an obstacle to other men's having.

Problem-posing education therefore fundamentally posits that men subject to domination must fight for liberation. It must promote the drive towards revolutionary change. Therefore, revolutionary leaders must be consistently revolutionary.

Chapter 3: THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

The essence of dialogue is the word. The word is constituted of two dimensions, reflection and action which are in radical interaction. “To speak a true word is to transform the
world.” Without reflection there would be only pure verbalism. It is therefore through praxis, or the interaction of these two, that the word becomes a true word, that is, the one with which men transform the world. But men are built in word, in work, in action, not in silence. Therefore the true word cannot be said by one man. Every man has the right to contribute towards the stating of the true word. Therefore the true word emerges from dialogue.

Dialogue is an encounter with men mediated by the word in order to name the world. Therefore dialogue cannot occur between those who deny the right to speak and those who are denied. Dialogue is a creative act, not a means of domination.

Dialogue has to be based on a profound love for the world and men. It demands an act of courage which involves commitment to other men and the generating of acts of freedom. Therefore, without this love for the world, life and men, there can be no dialogue.

Dialogue has to be based on humility. It cannot be conducted with arrogance. At the point of encounter in a dialogue, there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages. There are only men attempting together to learn more than they now know.

Dialogue has to be based on an intense faith in man, his power to make and remake, to create and recreate, in his vocation to be fully human. It requires a faith that this power can be reborn even when men are thwarted and suppressed by alienation, that is, when men are made to feel that their very handiwork, because of their lack of control over it, is something which is alien, hostile and dehumanizing.

This love, humility and faith must create a mutual trust.

Dialogue must also be based on hope, which is rooted in the awareness of men’s incompleteness as human beings. This leads them to a search for completion in communion with other men. To have no hope is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The very dehumanization resulting from an unjust social order is not a cause for despair but for hope, which must lead men to the constant pursuit of the humanity denied to them by such an unjust social order. Hope does not mean crossing one’s arms and waiting. “As long as I fight, I am moved by hope, and if I fight with hope, then I can wait.”

True dialogue also demands that those who dialogue engage in critical thinking. This thinking is based on the realization that there is an indivisible solidarity between the world and men. It “perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static unity”. “The universe is revealed to me not as space, imposing a massive presence to which I can adapt, but as a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it.” In short, what is demanded is not negative detachment of a fatalistic nature, but creative action leading to the transformation of the world.

True education therefore means the need for communication, which in turn is based on dialogue. Thus, the dialogical character of education, which must therefore mean the practice of freedom, demands what the dialogue will be about and this leads us to the programme content of education. Determining this programme content involves the first investigation of meaningful themes (“the thematic universe”), that is to say, the organized, systematized and developed re-presentation to individuals of the things about which they want to know more. These things, which are the vital concern of men, must be represented meaningfully as problems which they have to solve through the educative process of dialogue leading to action. This means that the programme content of
education cannot be elaborated according to what the educator thinks best for his students.

Men, unlike animals, not only live but exist, that is, they not only struggle to survive but are involved in “the process of becoming”. Men are conscious beings aware of themselves and thus of the world. Men have to face limit situations, that is, situations which pose problems seemingly insurmountable, but because they are beings of praxis (unlike animals), men overcome these limit situations by limit acts, that is, acts which surmount the seemingly insurmountable situations. They become historical-social beings who transform and create. They dimensionalize time, that is, divide it into epochs. An epoch is characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges which interact with their opposites in a dialectical manner.

Therefore the themes of the epoch, that is, the problems that have to be posed, should bring out clearly and concretely these ideas, values, concepts, hopes and challenges as well as the obstacles which impede the liberation and humanization of men. It is this complex of interacting themes that constitutes the “thematic universe” of the epoch.

These “limit situations” imply that there are those who want to continue them and those who want to be liberated from them. Therefore, to transcend these limit situations we have to discover “the untested feasibility lying beyond them” - that is, the practicable way in which situations can be successfully surmounted.

From this point of view, the fundamental theme of our epoch is domination and liberation. There can be no absence of themes. If there appear to be no such themes it means that the consciousnesses of the oppressed who are dominated (in a particular area) have been utterly weighed down by their limit situations. It is therefore necessary that they have a critical understanding of reality in this context. In understanding such limit situations, an investigation has to be made by analyzing each situation and understanding it as a whole. Therefore all themes can be found only in the relationship of men and the world in their interaction. Thus, investigators and people should act as co-investigators. This kind of thematic investigation becomes a common striving towards the awareness both of reality and self. Thus even where men are superstitious or naïve, they must rethink their assumptions in order that they might effect a change. This is known as “the realization of the becoming process”.

"Men are because they are in a situation.” Any man lives in a given context, in a particular family, country and social situation, etc. The more men not only critically reflect upon their existence, but also critically act upon it, the more they will achieve their humanity.

The task of the dialogical teacher is to represent the thematic universe not as a lecture but as a problem. Individuals weighed down by reality, merely feeling their needs, will thus be made to emerge from reality perceiving the causes of their needs.

In cases where investigators are unable to make a preliminary investigation of what a theme should be through dialogue, they can select basic themes and one of these basic themes can be the “anthropological” concept of culture, that is, the sum total of all the institutions of any particular human society in the process of its evolution.

Men must come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world through their own suggestions and those of their own comrades. Thus we
cannot frame a programme of education to be imposed from above but we must search for this programme dialogically with the people.

Chapter 4: DIALOGICAL AND ANTI-DIALOGICAL ACTION

Authentic revolutionary action demands a revolutionary praxis which ensures that people are not merely activists but that they proceed to carry out their revolutionary tasks through the process of action and reflection in communion with the leaders. The leaders will of course be in a position to co-ordinate and at times direct the action, but they cannot proceed to do so without the praxis of others involved.

Therefore there can be no room for manipulation, sloganizing, regimentation, laying down rules, etc., by the leaders who have to live with the people and not within them by domination. Hence dialogue is essential for authentic revolution because man cannot be truly human without communication. In the action of liberation, we have not just actors per se, but actors in communication with one another. The revolution is made neither by the leaders for the people nor by the people for the leaders, but by both acting in solidarity.

What is very real about the human condition is that men are in the world and with other men – and that some men are against others, that is, oppressing and oppressed classes. Authentic revolution seeks to change this dehumanizing state of affairs. In this sense there is only the history of man made by men and in turn making them. Therefore the objective of any true revolution requires that people act as well as reflect upon their real condition which they seek to transform.

Where there is domination and oppression, there is no room for the people’s critical thinking. Leaders of a dominating and oppressing class cannot think with the people or let the people think for themselves. They may think about the people but they cannot think with the people. Thus, in the process of authentic revolution, men liberate themselves in communion. Both oppressors and the real liberators make use of science and technology – the former to reduce men to the status of things, the latter to promote humanization.

The oppressor believes in the myth of the ignorance of the people, and is always out to exercise power, to order and command.

The scientific and humanist leaders on the other hand, although their level of revolutionary knowledge may be higher than that of the people, must dialogue with the people. This will enable critical knowledge of reality possessed by the revolutionary leaders to strengthen and nourish that knowledge of reality which the people have acquired on a different level through their daily experience.

The revolutionary process has to be a dynamic one, educational and dialogical, and therefore a cultural process which must not be allowed to be overcome by reaction, bureaucratic power or counter-revolution.
ANTI-DIALOGICAL

1. **Conquest.** This demands that men be subjugated, kept passive and made to adapt, and therefore remain oppressed.

2. **Divide and rule.** This aims at preserving the status quo. People's problems are here not looked upon as part of a totality but focalized into problems of local areas. This prevents the people from having a proper understanding of their real condition, and militates against the process of the oppressed people's unification and united action on their part.

3. **Manipulation.** This is achieved by means of myths propagated by the oppressors. This prevents people from thinking critically and also the emergence of an authentic organization of the people for their real liberation.

4. **Cultural invasion.** By this process, the oppressors impose their views of the world and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression and also be creating in them a sense of inferiority.

DIALOGICAL

1. **Co-operation.** This is based on the communion between leaders and the people and promoted the process of liberation.

2. **Unity for liberation.** This must necessarily be based on cultural action on the part of leaders and the people, which permeates all spheres of living and is based on a real understanding of their total situation.

3. **Authentic organization.** This involves the process by which real unity is forged for the common task of liberation.

4. **Cultural synthesis.** This is achieved through continuous dialogue between the leaders and the people, thereby enabling them to create their own guidelines for action.
About Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil. In 1947 he began work with adult illiterates in North-East Brazil and gradually evolved a method of work with which the word conscientization has been associated.

Until 1964 he was Professor of History and Philosophy of Education in the University of Recife and in the 1960s he was involved with a popular education movement to deal with massive illiteracy. From 1962 there were widespread experiments with his method and the movement was extended under the patronage of the federal government. In 1963-4 there were courses for co-ordinators in all Brazilian states and a plan was drawn up for the establishment of 2000 cultural circles to reach 2,000,000 illiterates!

Freire was imprisoned following the 1964 coup d'etat for what the new regime considered to be subversive elements in his teaching. He next appeared in exile in Chile where his method was used and the UN School of Political Sciences held seminars on his work. In 1969-70 he was Visiting Professor at the Centre for the Study of Development and Social Change at Harvard University.

He then went to the World Council of Churches in Geneva where, in 1970, he took up a post as special consultant in the Office of Education. Over the next nine years in that post he advised on education reform and initiated popular education activities with a range of groups. He was the first president of the Paris-based Ecumenical Institute for the Development of Peoples (INODEP), which promoted social analysis programmes with groups around the world, and which serves as a model today for the Freire Institute.

Paulo Freire was able to return to Brazil by 1979. Freire joined the Workers' Party in Sao Paulo and headed up its adult literacy project for six years. When the party took control of Sao Paulo municipality following elections in 1988, Paulo Freire was appointed as Sao Paulo's Secretary of Education. Freire died in 1997.
CONCEPTS USED BY PAULO FREIRE

Praxis (Action/Reflection)
It is not enough for people to come together in dialogue in order to gain knowledge of their social reality. They must act together upon their environment in order critically to reflect upon their reality and so transform it through further action and critical reflection.

Generative Themes
According to Paulo Freire, an epoch “is characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving towards their fulfilment”. The concrete representation of these constitute the themes of the epoch. For example, we may say that in our society some of these themes would include the power of bureaucratic control or the social exclusion of the elderly and disabled. In social analysis these themes may be discovered in a concrete representation in which the opposite theme is also revealed (i.e., each theme interacts with its opposite).

Easter Experience
Paulo Freire says that “those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow for ambivalent behaviour… Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.”

Dialogue
To enter into dialogue presupposes equality amongst participants. Each must trust the others; there must be mutual respect and love (care and commitment). Each one must question what he or she knows and realize that through dialogue existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created.

Conscientization
The process of developing a critical awareness of one’s social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs.

Codification
This is a way of gathering information in order to build up a picture (codify) around real situations and real people. Decodification is a process whereby the people in a group begin to identify with aspects of the situation until they feel themselves to be in the situation and so able to reflect critically upon its various aspects, thus gathering understanding. It is like a photographer bringing a picture into focus.

Banking concept of knowledge
The concept of education in which “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing”.