

A Cure for Narration Sickness: Paulo Freire and Interdisciplinary Instruction

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In his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (2000) argued that “Education is suffering from narration sickness” (p. 71), that students were plagued by an education that intended to simply imprint the patterns of the dominant culture upon them rather than empowering them to take control of their own lives (Blackburn, 2000). Teachers, in Freire’s view, were trying to narrate life to their students instead of allowing students to explore and learn through experience. As a cure for this “narration sickness,” Freire offered a pedagogy of dialogue, centered upon the problems of the learner and focused upon issues that were directly applicable to the lives of his students (p. 71). Freire’s ideas have since been adopted all across the world in a wide variety of educational contexts (Glass, 2001). However, despite wide recognition as one of the most important educators of the 20th century (Kohl, 1997; Roberts, 2007), Freire has not been embraced in the United States to the extent that he has in much of the developing world (Macedo, 2000). One of the major reasons for this is that Freire focused his writing on the context of the developing world, “in places that bear little resemblance to the advanced industrial countries of the West” (Giroux, 1979). Critics of Freire’s ideas have argued that, while Freire’s ideas may have been applicable in contexts like northern Brazil, where huge numbers of people lived in poverty and illiteracy, those ideas bear little relevancy in a liberated and affluent nation such as the United States.

Many other writers disagree with this assertion, claiming that the United States, perhaps now more than ever, needs to incorporate Freirean

pedagogy into its educational system (A. M. A. Freire & Vittoria, 2007; Glass, 2001; Ronald & Roskelly, 2001; Shaull, 2000). In the Foreword to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Shaull (2000) argues that modern Americans are oppressed by the power of technology, and only a critical education of the type Freire advocated will ensure that people are able to utilize technology to change their world rather than watching haplessly as technology changes it for them. Glass (2001) agreed that Freire remains relevant, stating, “A pedagogy of the oppressed is as needed today as when Freire first articulated it” (p. 15). Of course, that pedagogy cannot be applied exactly in the United States as it was in Brazil or Africa. Freire himself stressed that no ideas of significance can simply be picked up from one context and applied wholesale to another—rather, they must be reinterpreted or “reinvented” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 92). One way that Freire’s pedagogy has been and can continue to be reinvented for American society is the application of interdisciplinary and integrated thematic curriculum.

Interdisciplinary Instruction

Before delving into the connections between Freirean pedagogy and interdisciplinary curriculum, it is important to get a sense of what both Freirean pedagogy and interdisciplinary instruction entail. Since very early in the history of education reform, researchers and theorists have explored the benefits of some form of interdisciplinary instruction (Applebee, Adler, & Flihan, 2007; Beane, 1997; Dewey, 1938; Kilpatrick, 1918), which is “a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic, or experience” (Jacobs, 1989, p. 8). One of the central problems of traditional instructional methods is that they tend to make schools “splintered, over-departmentalized,” and fail to help students form meaningful connections (Vars, 1991, p. 14). According to Palmer (1991), “Unless students are able to recognize the connections between and among various facts they learn in their separate courses, they will not have an understanding of what was, what is, and what may be coming” (p. 57).

Interdisciplinary instruction is designed to provide that connection by examining problems of significance from a wide variety of contexts without regard to the narrow confines of traditional academic disciplines (Palmer, 1991). This emphasis on connection, context, and significant problem solving occurs and reoccurs throughout Freire’s work as well (Freire, 1993, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2011; Freire & Macedo, 1987), meaning that interdisciplinary educational approaches provide today’s

educators with the potential to apply Freirean pedagogies to 21st century American classrooms.

Freire's Pedagogy

Freire asked, "how can one apply Lenin to the Latin American context without making an effort to have a critical, political, and historical comprehension of the moment in which Lenin wrote?" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 133). The corollary to that question is, how can one apply Freire to a 21st century American context without making an effort to comprehend the moment in which he wrote? Understanding Freire's pedagogy requires an understanding of his personal history, of the context in which he lived and wrote, because for Freire, context is central to all learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987), and his educational and intellectual context began with his northern Brazilian childhood.

Freire's Background. Freire grew up in Recife, Brazil, one of the most impoverished parts of developing world (Shaull, 2000). Though his family was comfortably middle class during his early childhood, the economic impact of the Great Depression dropped the Freire household directly into poverty. With his father unemployed and the family struggling to survive, young Paulo fell behind in school because hunger impacted his ability to concentrate. This immersion in poverty and disenfranchisement kindled in Freire a lifetime dedication to helping those he considered oppressed (Shaull, 2000).

Freire first achieved notoriety with the development of an adult literacy campaign which he intended to extend nationwide (Roberts, 2007). When a military coupe forced Freire into exile, he continued his work, first from other Latin American countries, and then abroad in both Europe and Africa. Among many projects during this time, Freire helped develop an adult literacy campaign in Sao Tome and Principe which centered on work, production, technical knowledge, culture, and national reconstruction (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire was allowed to return to Brazil at the end of the 20th century and became Sao Paulo's Secretary of Education from 1989 to 1991. He died in 1997, still committed to the ideals of education, dialogue, literacy, and social justice (Kohl, 1997; Roberts, 2007). The fact that Freire's method was successfully adopted all across the world in a wide variety of contexts, and that he maintained a strong presence in the field of educational theory for almost fifty years, is a testament to the power of his beliefs and their potential impact in today's world.

Freire's Purpose. Freire believed that the educational system in

Brazil, and in many countries, was broken. Education was not looking for truth “but rather [for] the imposition of [its] own truth” (Freire, 2000, p. 89). True knowledge, for Freire, could only be constructed by individuals. It was a synthesis of both the “Word,” books, and the “World,” experience, forged inside the mind of every individual (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In telling students what they should learn and how they should interpret that learning, schools were effectively purveyors of false knowledge. Students, “Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world...were kept ‘submerged’ in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible” (Shaul, 2000, p. 30).

From Freire’s perspective, the job of critical educators was to provide students with the necessary skill and information so that, “by taking more and more history into their own hands, they [the people] can shape their history. To shape history is to be present in it, not merely represented by it” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 65). Education would provide the key that would allow the oppressed peoples of society to recognize their oppression and better society for both their oppressors and themselves. Freire noted that, “it is the latter [the oppressed] who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both [the oppressors and the oppressed] the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle” (Freire, 2000, p. 47). For Freire, education was more than a mechanism to gain political or economic power: It is path toward the salvation of humanity.

Freire’s Approach—Dialogue. Freire believed the oppressed could forge their own salvation if given the chance for dialogue based upon love, humility, and faith (Freire, 2000). He noted that students had been reduced to passive recipients of a teacher’s knowledge in a process that was far from liberating. Dialogue between and among teachers and learners was his answer to this problem (Freire, 2000). Dialogue was essential because “Nothing about society or language or culture or the human soul is simple: Wherever there are human beings, there is activity; and human acts are processes, and processes are dialectical.” (Berthoff, 1987, p. xii). Freire’s view of dialogue was not as basic as a teaching methodology that could be plugged into an existing curriculum; for Freire, dialogue became the curriculum, as “the fundamental goal of dialogical teaching is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about the experiences shared in the dialogue process” (Macedo, 2000, p. 17). A true and complete dialogue, of course, does not simply focus on a single aspect of a problem: It moves

around and throughout the context of a problem, recognizing the widest possible range of issues and interests. Jacobs (1989), while explaining the need for interdisciplinary instruction, noted:

Only in school do we have 43 minutes of math and 43 minutes of English and 43 minutes of science. Outside of school, we deal with problems and concerns in a flow of time that is not divided into knowledge fields. We get up in the morning and confront the whole of our lives. (pp. 4-5)

In the same vein, Freire was advocating a dialogue based upon real life and real experience, and real life is definitively interdisciplinary.

For this Freirean dialogue to be successful, teachers and students must enter that dialogue with humility and trust. Both humility and trust are essential if teachers are to involve students in any sort of partnership because “many young people are suspicious of invitations to plan with teachers because experience tells them that teachers may not welcome their ideas or that some teachers create the illusion of democracy by ‘engineering consent’ to predetermined plans” (Beane, 1997, p. 53). Dialogue “must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another” (Freire, 2000, p. 89) or as yet another instrument by which those in power oppress those out of power. One of the leading writers on integrated thematic instruction, Beane (1997) agreed that “bringing democracy to life in the classroom requires that student have a genuine say in the curriculum and that their say count for something” (p. 50). By providing students with a genuine voice in curriculum, Beane advocated a planning model that would allow students to be present and active in shaping their education just as Freire believed that the oppressed needed to be present and active in shaping history (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In a Freirean dialogue, content and method are fused into an education designed to give voice to the concerns and issues of the students while providing them with particular skills and knowledge, which will empower them to address those concerns themselves. This is certainly a form of interdisciplinary education.

Rejecting the “banking” model. Freirean dialogue was a rejection of what he termed the “banking” model (Freire, 2000). In this model, knowledge is possessed by the teacher and deposited in the heads of the students. It places the students in a position of passive reception rather than active engagement. This is not true acquisition of knowledge, because, as Freire stated, “Knowledge 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” (p. 72). The banking model’s focus on rote memorization, according to Freire, not only fails to create true knowledge, by Freire’s

definition, but it also generally fails in its intended purpose of passing on the teacher's knowledge to the students, because,

Only by learning the significance could they [students] know how to memorize it [content], to fix it. Mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing the object. That is why reading a text as pure description of an object (like a syntactical rule), and undertaken to memorize the description, is neither real reading nor does it result in knowledge of the object to which the text refers. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 33)

Instead of the banking model, Freire advocated a “problem-posing” educational model (Macedo, 2000, p. 12) where students and teachers would communicate and collaborate to create knowledge that would allow them to change their own situations and the world, for “without communication there can be no true education” (Freire, 2000, p. 93). Interdisciplinary education can provide the context that Freire saw as essential, helping students to develop the significance of content and, therefore, achieve true knowledge (Vars, 1991).

Problem-centered approach. For this type of education to work, both teachers and students must learn together—in effect, both are learners, both are teachers (A. M. A. Freire & Vittoria, 2007; Freire, 2000). Educators “must never provide the people with programs which have little or nothing to do with their own preoccupations, doubts, hopes, and fears” (Freire, 2000, p. 96). This is precisely the type of learning that is recommended by most advocates of interdisciplinary education. Beane (1997) defined integrated curriculum as “a curriculum design that is concerned with enhancing the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around significant problems and issues, collaboratively identified by educators and young people, without regard for subject-area boundaries” (p. x-xi). Freire (1993) enumerated essentially the same process in his description of the curriculum goals of Sao Paulo in *Pedagogy of the City*.

Freire was very concerned that schooling did not provide for liberation but rather reinforced existing power relationships. He argued that “When curriculum designers ignore important variables such as social-class differences, when they ignore the incorporation of the subordinate cultures’ values in the curriculum, when they refuse to accept and legitimize the students’ language, their actions point to the inflexibility, insensitivity, and rigidity of a curriculum that was designed to benefit those who wrote it” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 124). By allowing educators to place content in the context of culture, interdisciplinary instruction can offer a solution to this problem as well (Beane, 1997).

Developing connections. Developing connections between academic content and the lives of learners is central to Freirean pedagogy (Freire, 1997, 2000; Freire & Macedo, 1987) and is the driving force behind interdisciplinary instruction (Beane, 1997; Cook, 2009; Jacobs, 1989). Though he was known as an expert on literacy, Freire saw literacy in a much broader context than simply teaching people to read. In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, the authors noted that true literacy instruction is really the establishment of the “dynamic relationship between reading of the word and the reading of reality” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 64). Academic skill and knowledge have no real meaning or relevance until they have been placed in context. Freire believed that “the reader’s development of a critical comprehension of the text, and the sociohistorical context to which it refers, [is] an important factor in our notion of literacy” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 157). This is why the literacy lessons developed for Freire’s adult literacy projects invariably included scenes from the daily lives of his learners (Freire, 2011) and passages about the historical context of activities that were important to those learners (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For example, one lesson from Freire’s adult literacy curriculum in Sao Tome and Principe focused entirely upon how the history of that country had affected agriculture (p. 67). This is an interdisciplinary strategy designed specifically to connect the literacy goals of the curriculum to knowledge that is of interest and relevance to the students. Freire understood that all aspects of learning are connected, and that true understanding of any one concept required the development of a wide variety of connections and contexts, noting that “it is through multiple discourses that students generate meaning of their everyday social contexts” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 154). Once they have generated that meaning, they can begin to transform those contexts.

Literacy in the Modern World

One of the most important aspects of Freirean pedagogy is the understanding that literacy instruction involves more than just teaching the basics of reading. In the forward to *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Freire and Macedo (1987) wrote,

literacy cannot be reduced to the treatment of letters and words as purely a mechanical domain. We need to go beyond this rigid comprehension of literacy and begin to view it as the relationship of learners to the world, mediated by the transforming practice of this world taking place in the very general milieu in which learners travel. (p. viii)

In effect, this means that learners must not only know how to read and write words, but they must know how language is used to affect

them, and how they can use language to effect change in the world. In Freire's words, "literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 141). This drives to the heart of what Freire believed was the purpose of education—to empower the disempowered so that they can better the world for all (Freire, 2000). In the Brazil of the mid to late twentieth century, that meant teaching the illiterate majority to read so that they could use that literacy to gain access to the political and economic realms which dominated their country.

To reinvent Freire in a twenty-first century American context, however, requires a focus on more than basic reading and writing skills. Giroux (1987) argued that "As both the master of specific skills and particular forms of knowledge, literacy had to become a precondition for social and cultural emancipation" (p. 2). Freire knew that "literacy cannot be viewed as simply the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language." (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 142). Literacy is a road to social and cultural emancipation. However, to be truly literate in 21st century American society, and, therefore, to be able to fully engage both in the betterment of the self and of society, means to have access to and mastery of a wide variety of subjects and disciplines (Literacy GAINS, 2009; NCTE Executive Committee, 2008). Reading and writing alone are insufficient because literacy today is a multimodal ability (Silvers, 2011).

Freire's Interdisciplinary Project

This was likely just as true in Freire's Brazil, for despite common identification of Freire as being concerned primarily with the issues of reading and writing, Freire himself, in one of his last major educational projects, developed a specifically interdisciplinary program. As part of the overall school reform project in Sao Paulo in 1989 as Secretary of Education, Freire instituted a curriculum reform called the Interdisciplinary Project (Wong, 1995). It was a collaborative effort designed to develop connections between the disciplines of learning, as well as between teachers, students, and their communities (P. Freire, 1993). Implementation of the Interdisciplinary Project involved four phases (Wong, 1995). First, schools and districts needed to affirm commitment to participation in the project. Next, teachers and administrators within the school would examine the issues and concerns of their students and community to develop on overarching theme to drive their interdisciplinary curriculum (Rossatto, 2001). Third, teachers would take their current content and

reorganize it around the theme chosen in step two (Wong, 1995). Lastly, teachers would develop exercises for students to apply content to real problems associated with the theme, “so that students can understand the themes, generate new themes, organize and/or produce knowledge that enables them to critically interpret the reality within which they live while expanding their reading of the world” (Saul, 1993, p. 162). The entire interdisciplinary system was designed to develop active engagement between the students and the world around them in order that those students could begin to shape that world for themselves.

Conclusion

Paulo Freire dreamed of “a democratic school that would stimulate students’ critical curiosity, that would transcend the educational rigidity which calls for mechanical memorization. It would be a school where teaching and learning were viewed as inseparable parts of the same process of knowing” (Freire, 1996, p. 88). He hoped that through dialogue, trust, and a learner-centered approach, schools would provide an opportunity for students to empower themselves and remake an unjust world into a just one. Though Freire has died, his dream of a more just world lives on.

Despite the views of many educators that Freire’s “methodology as well as his educational philosophy are as important for us [in the United States] as for the dispossessed in Latin America” (Shaul, 2000, p. 29), Freire’s ideology has not enjoyed the popularity in the United States that it has had across the developing world. However, even though it has not been associated directly with Freire’s name, interdisciplinary thematic instruction, which has been implemented in the United States, is definitely consistent with Freire’s principles. Interdisciplinary instruction does not attempt to fill students’ heads with teacher-generated facts, but, rather, it labors to develop connections among and between learners and their world. Interdisciplinary instruction is problem-centered; it focuses on the creation of meaningful knowledge by students and teachers working together. Freire might not receive credit for inspiring the modern interdisciplinary movement, but his ideas are, at the very least, complementary to it. Given its focus on the experiences of the student in solving meaningful problems, Freire would almost certainly agree that integrated thematic instruction on the order posed by Beane (1997) or Jacobs (1989) is a genuine reinvention of Freirean principles for American schools, a possible cure for the “narration sickness” that Freire saw infecting education. As to credit, given Freire’s focus on humility, he probably would not have been interested in that anyway.

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