

The Critical Pedagogy Reader

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Rethinking Literacy: A Dialogue

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Macedo: The notion of *emancipatory literacy* suggests two dimensions of literacy. *On the one hand, students have to become literate about their histories, experiences, and the culture of their immediate environments. On the other hand, they must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so they can transcend their own environments.* There is often an enormous tension between these two dimensions of literacy. How can emancipatory literacy deal effectively with this tension so as not to suffocate either dimension?

Freire: First, I think consciousness is generated through the social practice in which we participate. But it also has an individual dimension. That is, my comprehension of the world, my dreams of the world, my judgment of the world—all of these are part of my individual practice; all speak of my presence in the world. I need all of this to begin to understand myself. But it is not sufficient to explicate my action. In the final analysis, consciousness is socially bred. In this sense, I think my subjectivity is important. But I cannot separate my subjectivity from its social objectivity.

When you ask me how to deal with the individual dimension of social consciousness, your question implies a certain relationship of tension. I believe that a critical education, an education along the lines of what Henry Giroux calls radical pedagogy, has to consider this tension and has to understand how this tension between the individual and the social practice takes place. One has to learn to deal with this relationship. In formulating a theory of education one should neither deny the social, the objective, the concrete, the material, nor emphasize only the development of the individual consciousness. In understanding the role of objectivity one must stimulate the development of the individual dimension as well.

Macedo: The fundamental question is how to deal with the individual consciousness as emphasized in an emancipatory literacy when this consciousness may be at odds with the collective social consciousness.

Freire: If you study the various ways of living and being validated in a society as complex as that of the United States, you find, for example, an undeniable taste for individualism. But the taste each person shows for individualism is that person's particular expression of a social consciousness.

Macedo: This is part of the point I wanted to address: how can one develop critical consciousness without looking at the concept of the reality of social consciousness? That is, is it possible to avoid the permanent shock that exists between individual consciousness and collective consciousness?

Freire: If we take the individualist's treatment of the social dimension, a pedagogy becomes critical when an educator like Henry Giroux or Stanley Aronowitz has a dialogue with students and methodically challenges them to discover that a critical posture necessarily implies the recognition of the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. I would call this critical because in many cases individuals have not yet perceived themselves as conditioned; on the contrary, they passionately speak of their freedom.

When challenged by a critical educator, students begin to understand that *the more profound dimension of their freedom lies exactly in the recognition of constraints that can be overcome*. Then they discover for themselves in the process of becoming more and more critical that *it is impossible to deny the constitutive power of their consciousness in the social practice in which they participate*. On the other hand, they perceive that *through their consciousness*, even when they are not makers of their social reality, *they transcend the constituting reality and question it*. This behavioral difference leads one to become more and more critical; that is, students assume a critical posture to the extent that they comprehend how and what constitutes the consciousness of the world.

Macedo: Does the assumption of this critical posture put an end to the tension we discussed earlier?

Freire: Not at all. The tension continues. But for me, a delineated pedagogy can underscore the presence of this tension. *Yet the role of critical pedagogy is not to extinguish tensions*. The prime role of critical pedagogy is to lead students to recognize various tensions and enable them to deal effectively with them. Trying to deny these tensions ends up negating the very role of subjectivity. The negation of tension amounts to the illusion of overcoming these tensions when they are really just hidden.

We cannot exist outside an interplay of tensions. Even those who live passively cannot escape some measure of tensions. Frequently there is an ongoing denial of tensions, but these tensions should be understood. I believe, in fact, that one task of radical pedagogy is to clarify the nature of tensions and how best to cope with them.

Macedo: What role can a critical literacy program play in the interrelationship between productive discourse, text, and oral discourse?

Freire: It is impossible to carry out my literacy work or to understand literacy (and here I will have to repeat myself because I have no better way to

answer your question) by divorcing the reading of the word from the reading of the world. *Reading the word and learning how to write the word so one can later read it are preceded by learning how to write the world, that is, having the experience of changing the world and touching the world.*

Macedo: How do you specifically develop the consciousness of the world in the process of literacy?

Freire: The consciousness of the world is constituted in relation to the world; it is not a part of the self. The world enables me to constitute the self in relation to "you," the world. The transformation of objective reality (what I call the "writing" of reality) represents precisely the starting point where the animal that became human began to write history. It started when these animals started to use their hands differently. As this transformation was taking place, the consciousness of the "touched" world was constituting itself. It is precisely this world consciousness, touched and transformed, that bred the consciousness of the self.

For a long time these beings, who were making themselves, wrote the world much more than they spoke the world. They directly touched and affected the world before they talked about it. Sometime later, though, these beings began to speak about the transformed world. And they began to speak about this transformation. After another long period of time, these beings began to register graphically the talk about the transformation. For this reason, I always say that before learners attempt to learn how to read and write they need to read and write the world. They need to comprehend the world that involves talk about the world.

Literacy's oral dimension is important even if it takes place in a culture like that of the United States, whose memory is preponderantly written, not oral like that of Africa, for example. Considering these different moments, which took place over millennia, and also considering the modern experience, it is not viable to separate the literacy process from general educational processes. It is not viable to separate literacy from the productive process of society. The ideal is a concomitant approach in which literacy evolves in various environments, such as the workplace. But even when literacy cannot take place in various environments, I think it is impossible to dichotomize what takes place in the economic process of the world from the process of discourse.

As to your question of whether economic discourse is an act of production relative to acts of literacy, I would say that a critical pedagogy would have to stimulate students to reflect. Since this reflection by its very nature should be critical, learners will begin to comprehend the relationship among many different discourses. In the final analysis, these discourses are interrelated. Productive discourse and discourse about or accompanying productive discourse always intersect at some level. The problem of understanding the culture in which education takes place cannot negate the presence and influence of economic production.

Macedo: *Speaking of cultural production, I would like to ask you about the relationship between education, including literacy, and culture.* We have to take into account various definitions of culture, however. By "culture" I do not mean that which is representative of those dominant elements of the elite class, that is, cul-

ture with a capital C. Culture is not an autonomous system, but a system characterized by social stratification and tensions. To be precise, I have in mind Richard Johnson's definition of culture, which includes the following three main premises:

1. Cultural processes are intimately connected with social relations, especially *with class relations and class formations, with sexual divisions, with the racial structuring of social relations, and with age oppressions as a form of dependency.*
2. *Culture involves power and helps to produce asymmetries in the abilities of individual and social groups to define and realize their needs.*
3. Culture is neither autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a *site of social differences and struggles.*¹

Given the range of factors that interact in cultural production and reproduction, how can an emancipatory literacy transcend social class barriers to interface with all these other factors related to culture? Can you also speak about education generally and literacy in particular as factors of culture?

Freire: Literacy and education in general are cultural expressions. You cannot conduct literacy work outside the world of culture because education in itself is a dimension of culture. Education is an act of knowledge (knowledge here is not to be restricted to a specific object only) on the part of the very subject who knows. Education has to take the culture that explains it as the object of a curious comprehension, as if one would use education to question itself. And every time that education questions itself, in response it finds itself in the larger body of culture. Evidently, the more it continues to interrogate itself about its purpose in culture and society, the more education discovers that culture is a totality cut across by social classes.

In Brazilian society, for example, one cannot deny certain behavior patterns characteristic of different social class behavior. For example, taste, which is also cultural, is heavily conditioned by social class boundaries.

Macedo: I did not intend to focus only on social classes in cultural production and reproduction. I think we need to investigate other cultural influences on education.

Freire: When a pedagogy tries to influence other factors that could not be strictly explained by a theory of class, you still have to pass through class analysis.

Given this understanding, we still must acknowledge that social classes exist and that their presence is contradictory. That is, the existence of social classes provokes a conflict of interests. It provokes and shapes cultural ways of being and, therefore, generates contradictory expressions of culture.

In general, dominant segments of any society talk about their particular interests, their tastes, their styles of living, which they regard as concrete expressions of nationality. Thus the subordinated groups, who have their own tastes and styles of living, cannot talk about their tastes and styles as national expressions. They lack the political and economic power to do so. Only those who have power can generalize and decree their group characteristics as representa-

tive of the national culture. With this decree, the dominant group necessarily depreciates all characteristics belonging to subordinated groups, characteristics that deviate from the decreed patterns.

This is especially interesting when you understand the asymmetry generated by social institutions, and how important a role critical literacy programs play in demystifying the artificial parameters imposed on people. Critical literacy has to explicate the validity of different types of music, poetry, language, and world views.

From this viewpoint the dominant class, which has the power to define, profile, and describe the world, begins to pronounce that the speech habits of the subordinate groups are a corruption, a bastardization of dominant discourse. It is in this sense that sociolinguists are making an enormous contribution to the demystification of these notions. What they show is that, scientifically, all languages are valid, systematic, rule-governed systems, and that the inferiority/superiority distinction is a social phenomenon. A language is developed to the degree that it reaches a certain stability in a particular area and to the extent that it is used in the comprehension and expression of the world by the groups that speak it.

One cannot understand and analyze a language, then, without a class analysis. Even though we may have to go beyond class boundaries to understand certain universal properties of language, we should neither reduce the investigation of language to a mechanical comprehension, nor reduce it to only social class analysis. But we have to do the latter to gain a global view of the total system under investigation.

I think all of us ultimately speak the same language (in the abstract sense) and express ourselves in different ways.

This has to do with the question you asked concerning different discourses. If you take the Brazilian case, you have the type of language spoken by the dominant class and other types spoken by workers, peasants, and similar groups. These are part of the abstract notion we call Brazilian Portuguese. This is not language as an abstraction, but language as a concrete system spoken by different groups. It is important, then, to comprehend these different varieties of language. They involve different grammars and different syntactical and semantic representations that are conditioned and explicated by people in varying positions relative to forces of production.

Language is also culture. Language is the mediating force of knowledge; but it is also knowledge itself. I believe all of this also passes through the social classes. A critical pedagogy poses this dynamic, contradictory cultural comprehension and the dynamic, contradictory nature of education as a permanent object of curiosity on the part of the learners. We find a general simplicity concerning the appreciation of these phenomena. It is as if all had been already known and decreed by the dominant groups. It is as if all that takes place at the level of culture had nothing to do with other discourses, such as the discourse of production. *A pedagogy will be that much more critical and radical the*

more investigative and less certain of "certainties" it is. The more "unquiet" a pedagogy, the more critical it will become.

A pedagogy preoccupied with the uncertainties rooted in the issues we have discussed is, by its nature, a pedagogy that requires investigation. This pedagogy is thus much more a pedagogy of question than a pedagogy of answer.

Macedo: Let's talk about literacy as the "language of possibility," enabling learners to recognize and understand their voices within a multitude of discourses in which they must deal. *How can an emancipatory literacy guarantee the legitimation of one's own discourse, which may be in a relationship of tension with other discourses?* That is, if emancipatory literacy calls for the celebration of one's discourse, you will inevitably have competing discourses, all with the same goal in mind. Is it possible to have enough space within an emancipatory literacy effort to enable learners to appropriate their own discourses and simultaneously move beyond them, so as to develop competency and ease while dealing with other discourses? What roles can black American discourse, women's discourse, and the discourse of ethnic groups play in the emancipatory literacy process?

Freire: This question transcends a mechanical and strict comprehension of the reading act, that is, the act of learning the word so one can then read and write it. This question involves a dream that goes beyond the expectation of just learning to read the word. Your question implies a profound comprehension of the act of reading. To respect different discourses and to put into practice the understanding of plurality (which necessitates both criticism and creativity in the act of saying the word and in the act of reading the word) require a political and social transformation.

Your question reminds me of my dream of a different society, one in which saying the word is a fundamental right and not merely a habit, in which *saying the word is the right to become a part of the decision to transform the world.* To read the word that one says in this perspective presupposes the reinvention of today's society. The reinvention of society, on the other hand, requires the reinvention of power. A political perspective that only dreams of a radical change of the bourgeoisie and the seizing of power is not sufficient.

The issue is the role of subjectivity in the transformation of history. *For me, historical transformation, which is part of your question, is more important than taking power.* We ought not to be concerned with the mere shifting of power from one group to another. It is necessary to understand that in seizing power one must transform it. This *re-creation and reinvention of power* by necessity passes through the reinvention of the productive act. And the reinvention of the productive act takes place to the degree that people's discourse is legitimized in terms of people's wishes, decisions, and dreams, not merely empty words.

Discourse as a transformative act begins to assume an active and decisive participation relative to what to produce and for whom. The reinvention of power that passes through the reinvention of production cannot take place without the amplification of voices that participate in the productive act. In

other words, people, not merely a minority of specialists, would have to decide on what to produce based on real necessities, not invented ones that ultimately benefit only the dominant group.

The reinvention of production, without which there would be no reinvention of power, would stimulate the reinvention of culture and the reinvention of language. Why are the majority of the people silenced today? Why should they have to muffle their own discussion? When they are called upon to read, why do they read only the dominant discourse? Literacy programs generally give people access to a predetermined and preestablished discourse while silencing their own voices, which should be amplified in the reinvention of the new society I am dreaming of. The reinvention of power that passes through the reinvention of production would entail the reinvention of culture within which environments would be created to incorporate, in a participatory way, all of those discourses that are presently suffocated by the dominant discourse.

The legitimation of these different discourses would authenticate the plurality of voices in the reconstruction of a truly democratic society. Then, in this envisioned society the comprehension of the reading act and the writing act would forcibly change. Present understanding of literacy would also have to change. By definition, there would be real respect for those learners who have not yet become familiar with saying the word to read it. This respect involves the understanding and appreciation of the many contributions nonreaders make to society in general.

You, Donaldo, told me that you are often shocked to learn that some African peoples, for example, who fought brilliantly to reappropriate their culture and throw out the colonizers, are later depreciated by the new leadership because they cannot read the word. Any people who can courageously break the chains of colonialism can also easily read the word, provided the word belongs to them. Their new leadership fails to recognize that in the struggle for liberation these people were involved in an authentic literacy process by which they learned to read their history, and that they also wrote during their struggle for liberation. This is a fundamental way to write history without writing words. It is shocking that even though they were successful in the most difficult aspect of literacy, to read and write their world, they were belittled in this much easier aspect, that which involved reading and writing the word. Your question highlights the profoundly political aspect of literacy, making me see that what you refer to as "the language of possibility" has to be based on respect for existing possibilities.

Another point that arises from your question is that of the rights of multiple voices. Taking Latin America as an example, let's think about the so-called indigenous populations. These populations were in place before the white population arrived. Thus, the white population became involved with an established civilization that also had its own voice or voices. These populations have the right to the voices that were silenced by the Hispanic-Portuguese invasion. Any literacy project for these populations necessarily would have to go through

the reading of the word in their native languages. This literacy cannot require that the reading of the word be done in the colonizer's language.

If we foresee a possible revolution in these societies, we have to develop space for the literacy of possibility to take place. I remember vividly a conversation I had with Fernando Cardenal and Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua in which they both expressed sentiments similar to those we are now discussing. They spoke extensively about the Mosquito Indians. They both felt that in any literacy campaign, Mosquito culture had to be respected totally. Also, they felt that the Mosquitos' language would have to be a fundamental element in the literacy process. A literacy program that negates the plurality of voice and discourse is authoritarian, antidemocratic.

Macedo: Could you elaborate on the ways in which subjectivities are constituted in the schools? That is, the ways in which schools influence and shape students' ideologies, personalities, and needs.

Freire: First, I would say that schools do not really create subjectivity. Subjectivity functions within schools. Schools can and do repress the development of subjectivity, as in the case of creativity, for example. A critical pedagogy must not repress students' creativity (this is true throughout the history of education). Creativity needs to be stimulated, not only at the level of students' individuality, but also at the level of their individuality in a social context. Instead of suffocating this curious impetus, educators should stimulate risk taking, without which there is no creativity. Instead of reinforcing the purely mechanical repetitions of phrases and lists, educators should stimulate students to doubt.

Schools should never impose absolute certainties on students. They should stimulate the certainty of never being too certain, a method vital to critical pedagogy. Educators should also stimulate the possibilities of expression, the possibilities of subjectivity. They should challenge students to discourse about the world. Educators should never deny the importance of technology, but they ought not to reduce learning to a technological comprehension of the world.

We can conceive of two positions that are false here. The first would be to simplify or negate the importance of technology, to associate all technological processes with a concomitant dehumanizing process. In truth, technology represents human creativity, the expression of the necessity of risk. On the other hand, one should not fall into a denial of humanism.

The world is not made up of certainties. Even if it were, we would never know if something was really certain. The world is made of the tension between the certain and uncertain. The type of critical pedagogy I am calling for is not easy to attain in a society like that of the United States, one that has historically acquired an extraordinary advancement in technology and capital production. This extraordinary advancement has given birth to a series of myths, including the myth of technology and science. Educators should assume a scientific position that is not scientific, a technological position that is not technologic.

Macedo: How can this critical pedagogy fundamentally stimulate the influence of subjectivity in terms of the development of students' creativity, curios-

ity, and needs? In societies that are technologically advanced it becomes that much more difficult to avoid falling victim to the myths to which you refer, myths that may discourage the possible role of students' subjectivities.

Freire: Yes, but at the same time these societies stimulate the role of individuality, that is, the individuality within an "individualistic" frame. The individualistic frame, in the end, also negates subjectivity. This is a curious phenomenon and we need to understand it dialectically. It could appear that a position that is profoundly individualistic would end up stimulating and respecting the role of the human agency. In truth, it denies all dimensions of human agency. Why does the individualistic position end up working against the real role of human agency? Because the only real subjectivity is that which confronts its contradictory relationship to objectivity.

And what does the individualistic position advocate? It dichotomizes the individual from the social. Generally, this cannot be accomplished, since it is not viable to do so. Nevertheless, the individualistic ideology ends up negating social interests or it subsumes social interests within individualistic interests.

The comprehension of the social is always determined by the comprehension of the individual. In this sense, the individualistic position works against the comprehension of the real role of human agency. *Human agency makes sense and flourishes only when subjectivity is understood in its dialectical, contradictory, dynamic relationship with objectivity, from which it derives.*

This leads to an enormous problem for critical pedagogy in technologically advanced societies. One method the critical educator can try is what you and I are doing right now, using discussion as an attempt to challenge each other so that we can understand the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, so that we can in the final analysis understand the enormous and undeniable role of science and technology, and also so that we can understand the risk taking inherent in a humanized life. This type of discourse is one method a critical educator could use to demystify a whole network of mythology: the myth that one should not waste time, for instance. What does wasting time mean? Does one avoid wasting time only in order to make money? Or does it mean one cannot waste time making money? *What is it to waste time and what is it to make time?* In the end, the work of an educator in a critical and radical perspective is the work of unveiling the deep dimensions of reality that are hidden in these myths.

Macedo: You often mention the role of subject that should be assumed by students. Your preoccupation leads us to Giroux's treatment of what he calls "human agency." What do you think about the role of human agency in the dominant society regarding the complex relationship between literacy campaigns in particular and education in general?

Freire: This is one of the central themes of a radical pedagogy. It is a theme that has been accompanying the history of thought and dividing the various positions vis-à-vis the answers given. For me, this theme is another profound issue for the end of the century.

Your question brings to mind a statement by Marx. When he referred to the making of history he said that man makes history based on the concrete conditions that he finds. Evidently, it is not from the legitimate dream that a dominated class, for example, has to liberate itself. It is from concrete conditions, or more accurately, from the relationship between the concrete and the possible.

A generation inherits concrete conditions in a given society. It is from this concrete, historical situation that a generation finds it is possible to continue the continuity of history. However, the present generation has to elaborate and work on the transformation of the present concrete conditions, because without such effort it is impossible to make the future. If the present conditions are only fundamental, the present does not envelop the future within it.

For this reason the present is always a time of possibility (as Giroux has said so eloquently in his introduction to *The Politics of Education*). I think Giroux understands this perfectly when he asserts that outside the present it is impossible to make history. That is, the making of history has to take into consideration the present that came from a particular past, the base lines of this present which demarcate the making of history. When Giroux says that the present is a present possibility, not determinism, he is situating human agency in a key way, because in the relationship between the subjectivity of the present and the objectivity of the present, there is the undeniable role of subjectivity.

If subjectivity were always the result of historical transformations, objectivity would, ironically, then become the subject of the transforming subjectivity. To the extent that Giroux says that this present is a present of possibility, he is raising the issue of the role of human agency, and this is important in any critical, radical pedagogy.

Macedo: Following Giroux's discussion of public spheres' expansion of opportunities for cultivating democratic principles, to what extent do you think such areas as labor unions, the church, and social movements can be expected to play a role compatible with the goals of a critical pedagogy?

Freire: An educator who does not develop himself, who does not consider Giroux's reflections and exigencies, is out of touch with his times. In Brazil I have stressed Giroux's perspective, using a terminology that is apparently somewhat different. For example, I have insisted that a radical and critical education has to focus on what is taking place today inside various social movements and labor unions. Feminist movements, peace movements, and other such movements that express resistance generate in their practices a pedagogy of resistance. They show us that it is impossible to think of education as strictly reduced to the school environment. One cannot always deny the possibility of the schools, but we have to recognize that historically there are times when the school environment provides more or fewer opportunities.

I would say that in twenty years of military rule in Brazil there were times when there were severe repercussions if one rejected the dominant ideology. There were times when the schools were totally closed to any form of critical pedagogy. The

period during the 1970s when most of the Latin American countries (for example, Uruguay, Chile, Argentina) experienced military dictatorships coincided with the emergence of Parisian theories of reproduction derived from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. These theories led a number of Latin American educators to refine the possibilities of using the school environment to promote an education of resistance.

In the past four years or so, with both social and political changes in Latin America—the attempt to redemocratize Brazil, for example, or the struggle for liberation in Nicaragua—there has been a certain confidence in reestablishing the use of institutional space for experimenting with the development of a critical pedagogy.

I think, though, that even today, in an era when using the schools is possible, in order to counter the introduction of dominant ideologies, it is necessary to recognize that public environments are extremely important for pedagogical production of political and social resistance. Within this landscape of spheres of resistance, educators who seek transformation now have choices. Some may choose to work in public environments outside the schools. Others may prefer to work in their specialized fields in the schools.

I do not deny either approach. The ideal would be to establish and appreciate the relationship between these two approaches: the more traditional, structured, and systematized education that takes place in the schools versus the more dynamic, free, and contradictory (though more creative) approach within social movements. A point I developed extensively in the book I did with Antônio Faundes is that educators' comprehension of what is taking place today in these social movements and spheres of public action is most vital for critical pedagogy. Political organizations that fail to learn from the agents of these public movements will also fail to achieve historical and political resonance.

I totally agree with Giroux's view relative to the roles of public movements in the promotion of democratic principles. Giroux's critical appreciation of these movements centers on seeing them as agencies of discussion. It is within these public spheres, in fact, that antihegemonic movements have been generated. For me, the basic problem for educators and political people who dream of change lies in how to apprehend the struggle, in the sense of generating a new hegemony evolving from the manifestations and experiences within these movements.

The task of a critical educator is to approach the real world of these public spheres and social agencies, to make a contribution. An educator's major contribution would be to appreciate the theoretical elements within these movements' practices. The critical educator should make the inherent theory in these practices flourish so that people can appropriate the theories of their own practice. The role of the educator, then, is not to arrive at the level of social movements with a priori theories to explicate the practice taking place, but to discover the theoretical elements rooted in practice.

NOTE

1. Richard Johnson, "What Is Cultural Studies Anyway?" *Anglistica* nos. 1, 2 (1983).