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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Returning to Freire

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Returning to Freire

by Joshua Rashon Streeter

In a moment where some wonder how equity and racial justice intersect in the classroom, no matter the content, I return to Paulo Freire. As a foundation of equity work rooted in anti-racist, decolonial, and abolitionist practice, [Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#) offers an essential starting point for educational reform. While these practices have been used by individual teachers across higher education institutions in the United States, I return to Freire's work to consider developing institutional change with BIPOC faculty and students at the helm. This toolbox considers how a philosophical belief structure applied to teaching and learning (i.e., a pedagogy) provides the ability to analyze, tear down, and rebuild educational structures.

Who is Freire?

Paulo Freire (1921-1997), the author of the seminal text [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), was a Brazilian educator and philosopher. His work is considered the foundation of "critical pedagogy" and prompts what he called "critical consciousness." Critical pedagogy is best defined as a collection of "radical principles, beliefs, and practices that contribute to an emancipatory ideal of democratic schooling" ([Darder et al., 2003, p. 2](#)). Critical consciousness is the ability to question historical and social situations and read the world around oneself ([Freire, 2000](#)). Therefore, the "lack of critical consciousness creates the necessary environment for oppression to rampantly spread through systems from the individual to the macro levels, causing massive, widespread system failure" ([Jemal, 2017, p. 604](#)).

What are the implications of Freire's work in higher education?

Freire ([2000](#)) believed that teaching is a political act. Not referring to a discussion of political leaders, parties, or issues, but instead the fact that educators shape, develop, and influence student's work, practice, and thinking patterns. The topics and subjects discussed in a class and how they are delivered is a pedagogical choice. Educators need to consider their texts, strategies, policies, and behaviors. Thus, teaching *is a political act*—highlighting what is not taught as much as what is and identifying aspects of the [hidden curriculum](#) in conversation with the overt curriculum. (For more information on how to re-imagine your course with these ideas in mind, see "[Revolutionizing my Syllabus: The Process](#)" and the "Ten Ways to Make Progress toward Active Inclusion" section of "[Beyond 'Decolonizing' the Syllabus.](#)")

One way to re-construct classroom spaces and re-frame student positionality is to push back against the "banking model" of education. Freire ([2000](#)) stated that the banking model of education stops intellectual growth as students become "receptors" or "collectors" of information without a connection to real-world applications, which gives students no autonomy over their learning and provides a pathway for oppression, control, and dominance (Freire, [2000](#)). To combat this, [dialogic exchange](#) between

educators and students engages both groups in meaning-making together. This alters the student-teacher relationship, changes power dynamics, and allows students to take [ownership of their own learning](#).

Freire's work (2000) also identified the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor and the colonized and colonizers. His work identifies a few essential aspects of liberating oppressed people. He states that the oppressed must become aware of their conditions (Freire, 2000, p. 64) and that they must be "engaged in the fight for their own liberation" (Freire, 2000, p. 53). In other words, we must make visible and name structures that retain and uphold power within the classroom and educational system at-large, and do so by considering our own privilege, place, and positionality as it relates to [institutionalized racism](#).

Why return to Freire at this moment?

Freire identified several elements of pedagogy that connect to evidence-based practices in higher education, including dialogue, reflection, inquiry-based education, and reciprocity. However, to consider critical [pedagogies as liberatory practices](#), the fundamental role of education itself must change—shifting the role of education in society from indoctrination to "education as the practice of freedom" (Freire, 2000, p. 81).

Freire identified praxis (i.e., a cycle of action and reflection) as the key to re-thinking, re-imagining, and re-building the very systems that continue to oppress individuals. This requires teachers and other school leaders to engage in the hard and ongoing self-work while developing new ways of working with oppressed individuals. Freire (2000) states, "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly" (p. 60).

Freire's work directly aligns with JMU's mission to "prepare students to be educated and enlightened citizens." I use Freire's work in the university classroom and find that college students view his concepts as both intellectually challenging and throughout provoking. For example, last week in my Equity, Access, and Inclusion in Education and Performance course, we explored Freire's Cultural Circles to move from dialogue to action and analyze social code (see chapter 6 in [Black Appetite. White Food.: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice Within and Beyond the Classroom](#)). A review of related literature points to the role of critical consciousness to "expand young people's commitment to challenging pervasive injustice, but also increases academic achievement and engagement" (El-Amin et al, 2017). Additionally, researchers identified that "school-based programming designed to foster critical consciousness has been shown to increase academic engagement and achievement and enrollment in higher education" (El-Amin et al, 2017).

Conclusion

Summer 2020 made more visible the racial unrest in the United States and pointed out how educational systems must be re-imagined and re-built. Freire presents several ways to enact anti-racist pedagogies and practices, offering the opportunity to acknowledge, name, and change the educational system.

Freire reminds us that revolutions do not wait to happen; so, if you are waiting for an (educational) revolution... this is it.

Want to learn more? Start here with three books from the JMU Library.

[*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*](#)

[*Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*](#)

[*The Student Guide to Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'*](#)

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