Title
Pushing Oneself Toward Critical Consciousness: A Self-Study of a Freirean Educator

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I was duly warned only two hours into my first day of pre-service. Having just finished teacher training, I found myself responsible for the lowest performing class of fourth graders at Public School Number 187 in New York City.[1] After being escorted up to my room, I was handed my class list and a box full of my students' academic records, given a firm handshake and left to set up shop: I decorated my bulletin board, arranged desks into small groups, and swept out the collected summer's worth of dust. An hour later, the school guidance counselor dropped by to tell me which students I needed to really worry about. She started thumbing through my box of student records, her face alternating between wistful grins and grimaces depending on what name was on the file in front of her. When she got to the last file in the box, my class list was already neatly organized in terms of good kids, hyper-but-good kids, and kids I definitely needed to watch closely. Some form of this warning ritual recurred every year I taught in the United States, across three different schools from the Bronx and Upper Manhattan in New York to the Navajo Nation in New Mexico.

Throughout my career, be it in my early work as an adult literacy instructor in Brazil's urban *favelas*, my later work with adult education in Mozambique's rural agricultural communities, or my time teaching in U.S. elementary classrooms following these earlier travels, I saw students reap the consequences of similar treatment and classifications in their respective school systems. In Brazil and Mozambique, some refused to participate in adult literacy classes because their experience in formal schools had left them feeling that they were incapable of learning. Others felt that adult education had nothing to offer them, as their previous experiences in formal schools (though the extent of participation varied widely between urban Brazil and rural Mozambique) had done little to improve their current living conditions. In Brazil, Mozambique, and the U.S., I learned more fully the ways in which current educational systems do not always serve students' best interests, instilling marginalized students with feelings of incompetence rather than a sense of their potential.

The gradual conditioning of each of these experiences is what has led me to write this essay, an exercise in self-study (Berry & Russell, 2012; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) that utilizes analysis of my own experiences as an educator to promote dialogue between practitioners and reflection upon our individual teaching practices. Specifically, as I revisited my personal writings and memories of my experiences as an educator in Brazil, Mozambique, and the U.S., I consistently found myself noting three recurring themes: educational systems can be socially reproductive, hegemonic and oppressive. Through this essay, I seek to promote dialogue regarding the ways in which Freirean theory can provide a means of engaging productively with these inequitable realities.

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[1]All names of individuals, schools, and organizations mentioned throughout this article have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Through an analysis of my own classroom experiences using an adapted self-study methodology, I argue here that the status quo in education for marginalized groups can be typified by inequalities that are so structural in nature that they are accepted by students as inevitable. However, education can and should be a democratic, humanizing, and emancipatory process. Following the steps put forward by Paulo Freire, teachers and students can become active co-creators of knowledge, with both parties contributing democratically to the learning process rather than leaving students to be passive recipients of information. When education becomes such a process of creation rather than repetition, teachers and students realize their value to society as active participants; they begin to realize their full potential as people, and as a result, education becomes a truly humanizing process. This fuller recognition of one's own humanity has emancipatory power, as marginalized participants realize the extent of their own agency, of their own ability to change society for the better and create "a world in which it will be easier to love" (Freire, 1970a, p. 40).

The purpose of this essay is to use my own personal experiences to explore the ways in which Freirean pedagogy and the personal pursuit of critical consciousness can be used to ameliorate the difficulties inherent in teaching in marginalized settings in stratified societies. I display through my own experiences how an essential part of this educative process is for teachers to pursue what Freire (1970a, 1970b, 1973) has called *critical consciousness*. This refers to the process of continually reflecting upon one's teaching practice. This reflection is aimed at identifying ways in which one can more fully realize democratic, humanizing, and emancipatory ideals in the classroom, and then take concrete action. In addition to helping refine classroom practice, this pursuit of critical consciousness also helps educators achieve a deeper awareness of reality,[2] which is essential to promoting the type of humanizing education that all children deserve.

Methodology

Autobiographical narratives such as this one have become an increasingly popular methodology within the education literature,[3] particularly due to the accessibility of first-person narratives that detail personal experiences. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) state, the purpose of autobiographical qualitative inquiry is

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[2] This combination of reflection and action is also often referred to in the critical literature as *praxis*, a term that will be used later in this essay.
[3] The Special Interest Group (SIG) for self study of teacher education practices (commonly known as S-STEP) is one of the more robust and thriving SIGs within the American Educational Research Association, with its own dedicated journal, *Studying Teacher Education*.

to encourage compassion and promote dialogue. The stories we write put us into conversations with ourselves as well as with our readers. In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values. We take measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions, and the multiple layers of our experience. Often our accounts are unflattering and imperfect, but human and believable. In conversation with our readers, we use storytelling as a method for inviting them to put themselves in our place. (p. 748)

Other scholars have dubbed this methodological approach "self-study" (Berry & Russell, 2012; Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The term self-study is typically associated in the literature with the use of various potential sources of data, including journals, ethnographic fieldnotes, correspondence, and other personal writings (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Fretz, Shaw & Emerson, 1995; Graham, 1989). For the purpose of this essay, I use personal journals from the three time periods cited,[4] all of which have extensive daily entries. From the time period associated with my work in Mozambique, I also use as source material 12 months of ethnographic fieldnotes (written following the model of Fretz, Shaw & Emerson, 1995) documenting my daily participant observations in various rural Mozambican communities. However, rather than citing these texts directly, this essay follows the model outlined by Graham (1989) in which *nodal moments*[5] of insight and personal change documented in such source materials are used as the basis for autobiographical storytelling.

This self-study method is limited in that it is subject to critique on the basis of its subjectivity and the inability to generalize findings beyond the personal experiences of the author. Given the contextual and subjective nature of autobiographical writing, self-study has been criticized as not meeting the systematic levels of rigor expected by education scholars trained in the social sciences (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). However, self-study researchers do not presume that personal experiences provide sufficient data to make universal assertions that apply beyond the contexts in which they occur. Instead, such exploration and sharing of personal experience is intended to promote dialogue, so that readers can ''imagine their own uses and applications'' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). It is towards this purpose that I write this essay.

In truth, the purpose of this essay is not to provide empirical proof of the presence of social reproduction, hegemony, and oppression in schools, as there are already volumes of empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative) that

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[4] Specifically, three months of journal entries represent my work in adult education in northeastern Brazil, twelve months of journal entries represent my work in Mozambique, and twenty-two months of journal entries represent my work in elementary school settings in New York City and New Mexico.

[5] Graham (1989) defines a *nodal moment* as a critical point in one's experience, a turning point or "point of crisis" (p. 98) which the writer must reflect upon and work through in order to make meaning of it.

have documented educational inequality among low-income and racially marginalized communities in settings like those I describe here.[6] Instead, this essay is intended to build upon this empirical corpus by giving it a human face. As Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) state, "for public theory to influence educational practice it must be translated through the personal" (p. 15). In sharing the accounts that I do here, I am "[using] storytelling as a method for inviting [readers] to put themselves in [my] place" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748) as a means for provoking further reflection and discussion on our role as educators in addressing the inequities present in many of the contemporary settings in which we teach.

Within this autobiographical essay, I share experiences from seemingly quite disparate situations: in particular, I will describe my time as an elementary school teacher in New York City and rural New Mexico, as well as my time as an adult educator working with a neighborhood organization in northeastern Brazil and an international nonprofit in central Mozambique. These settings may seem to have very little in common, and it is true that my efforts to incorporate Freirean pedagogy and promote social justice were by necessity very different in, say, a nonprofit-led adult literacy program in rural Mozambique than they were in a third grade classroom on the Navajo reservation. However, what these settings do have in common is me. The fact is that in each of these settings I was working through my own recognition of social reproduction, hegemony, and oppression and growing in my commitment to principles of social justice in the classroom. Of particular significance will be the way in which, through each of these settings, I personally worked towards developing my own sense of critical consciousness.

Social Reproduction and Cultural Capital

Formal schools and non-formal educational settings can be *socially reproductive* (Bourdieu, 1973; 1974), in that they often reproduce the class structure already inherent in society. In educational settings, not all forms of experience and knowledge are seen as equally valid. Pierre Bourdieu (1973; 1974) has argued that society's dominant group—that which controls the economic, social and political resources—has its culture embodied in educational institutions' formal and non-formal programs. In an American context, that

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[6] For a cursory introduction, see Bailey & Boykin, 2001; Boudon, 1974; Burkam, Ready, Lee & LoGerfo, 2004; Butty, 2001; Chin & Phillips, 2004; Coleman, 1966; Corwin, 2000; Desimone, 1999; Dreeben, 1968; Ferguson, 1991; Fischer, Hout, Sanchez, Lucas, Weidler & Voss, 1996; Ford & Wright, 1998; Gottfredson & Marciniak, 1995; Kingston, Hubbard, Lapp, Schroeder, & Wilson, 2003; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Kozol, 1991; Lareau, 2000; MacLeod, 1995; Mayer, 2002; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Ogbu, 1987; Tyson, 2002, 2003; Wang & Wildman, 1996.

translates into educational settings that embody white middle/upper-class values. Those people that reflect those values are believed to have what Bourdieu termed *cultural capital*. In a Bourdieuian framework, our educational institutions are structured to favor those who possess the cultural capital such institutions represent. Those that head such institutions look at particular forms of cultural capital (i.e., forms associated with being white and affluent) as the only proper forms of capital, ones in which it is assumed all students can access equally. Thus, since not all children can actually access these forms of cultural capital equally, societal inequities are reproduced in educational settings as students with "proper" social capital thrive and others fail (Harker, 1984, p. 118).

Not all forms of experience and knowledge create valuable cultural capital. One's cultural capital is based on the degree to which one's personal dispositions, beliefs, and practices facilitate social mobility. Since this social mobility in a capitalist society is designed to be limited to a few (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), educational structures promote and support those that already occupy the upper classes of society, reproducing existent social structures in each generation.

Self-Study in Social Reproduction: Mozambique

I clearly saw the unequal dynamics of social reproduction operating while I was working for an American-led public health nonprofit, Comunidades de Poder, in central Mozambique. Comunidades de Poder had an explicit mission to lessen social inequalities in Mozambique through the democratization of knowledge and public health resources. Ironically, Mozambique's social stratification was perfectly personified among the organization's staff; all staff members were from upper social classes, at least relative to the organization's rural target communities. Those communities were primarily comprised of made up of low-income subsistence farmers, only half of whom had any experience in formal schools and the majority of whom were illiterate. Comunidades de Poder's staff consisted of White North Americans; elite and educated expatriates from other countries of the global South; and relatively affluent Mozambicans who tended to be educated and literate.

This differentiation in social class between teachers and learners in a particular setting does not inherently imply that social reproduction is inevitable. Indeed, Comunidades de Poder's curriculum and classes were organized around Freirean principles with the intent that they would lead participants to actively engage with and push back against the inequality that typified the social world around them. As someone with a background in both Freirean pedagogy and ethnographic research methods, I had been hired by Comunidades de Poder specifically to design a curriculum based around local knowledge that would push participants to create their own solutions to community problems. Even though I

had previously worked in adult education in Brazil, I never before had the opportunity to implement Freirean pedagogy on such a large scale.[7] I was excited to see for myself the kind of social change that such a program might make possible. However, in the classes I observed during my time with Comunidades de Poder, I was saddened to see that even when the stated curriculum encouraged lots of participation and the solicitation of community members' opinions, classroom dynamics often reflected and reinforced pre-existing social inequalities, with educated teachers telling rural community members what they should do and those community members quietly nodding in agreement (for a more detailed exploration of this dynamic, see Straubhaar, in press). The same class structure existent outside of Comunidades de Poder classrooms was being reproduced within them, despite our best efforts to the contrary.

Self-Study in Cultural Capital: New York City

I witnessed some poignant discrimination against a student without the proper cultural capital while teaching fourth grade in Washington Heights, a largely Dominican neighborhood in Upper Manhattan in New York. Xavier, an extremely bright but easily distractible African-American boy, was one of the first names on my school counselor's warning list due to the negative reputation he had from his previous teachers. Though his interruptions in my class seemed genuinely driven by his lack of attention span rather than any form of malicious intent, he was written up repeatedly by various pull-out and elective teachers,[8] often for little more than opening his mouth out of turn. His behavior, which included frequently speaking in class without raising his hand when he had an answer or got excited, did not match up with that which teachers and administrators in that school associated with good students (i.e. raising one's hand in order to be given license to speak). When teachers (including myself) would chastise him for speaking out of turn,[9] he would often get frustrated and angry, leading teachers to give him punishments typically associated with bad behavior, like spending time out in a corner of the class, losing class privileges, staying in during lunch, and so forth. Despite this trend, though, he continued to try to participate in class, even when he didn't remember to try to do so in the way

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[7] At the time I worked for them, Comunidades de Poder was operating in four different villages with around 250 participants in each.

[8] In U.S. elementary school settings, the terms "pull out" teacher typically refers to teachers that take small groups of students out of their traditional classroom. Students are "pulled out" to be taught core subjects like reading, writing, math, science and social studies by a single teacher or for supplemental instruction (as in the case of gifted students or students with special needs). The term "elective" teacher is used in U.S. elementary schools to refer to teachers that teach non-core subjects like music or physical education.

[9] This was a common occurrence noted in my journals from this time period. One specific instance will be explored in more detail later in this essay.

teachers expected.

In my journals from this period, there is an interesting transition in how I describe Xavier. Early on in my year as his teacher, I describe him as extremely precocious and full of potential. I knew that he had experienced trouble with previous teachers, but I was very hopeful, and determined that his experience in my classroom would be different. I tried to encourage his creativity and redirect his anger and frustration when correcting him for speaking out of turn. However, as the year progressed and I struggled to engage all of my students, my patience with Xavier started to wane. I began to chastise Xavier more publicly in class to shame him into docility, as I had seen other teachers in my school do in response to his behavior. Despite such treatment going against my principles, I increasingly shamed him out of expedience, seeing it as a necessary evil so that I could dedicate my energy to lesson planning, test preparation and the individual needs of my other students. Over time, Xavier eventually seemed to recognize that being a "bad boy" was a role that many (including myself) had already cast him to play, and he began to give in. During the spring, he engaged in increasingly destructive behavior and eventually was suspended for tagging the bathroom with gang-related graffiti. My school's staff and I had already dictated to Xavier his fate through our treatment of him—we were in many ways just waiting for him to accept it and play along.

Hegemony and a Culture of Domination in Schooling

Educational institutions are often structurally *hegemonic*. The theoretical construct of *hegemony*, coined by Antonio Gramsci (1957/1971), refers to how the lower classes that are marginalized by capitalist society allow their oppression to continue through their consent to and acceptance of the capitalist system as it currently functions. This is despite how it dictates inequality. In other words, hegemony suggests that even when educational institutions provide unequal opportunities to students of different social classes (see Willis, 1981), and even though students of different social classes with the same level of education tend to have unequal outcomes (see Bowles & Gintis, 1976), most economically disadvantaged students consent to that unequal educational system, either by continuing to participate in it or by refusing to challenge it. This acceptance of and consent to an inherently unequal social structure is what Gramsci (1957/1971) referred to as *hegemony*. This occurs in educational settings primarily due to the influence of teachers, who can reinforce a "culture of domination" (hooks, 1994, p. 27) in their own classrooms. Such a culture of domination is one in which teachers, particularly white teachers of privilege working with marginalized students of color, assert their own authority through instruction that is not engaging and treatment of students that is demeaning. The end result of such a

culture of domination is that students are led to accept domination as "natural" and "right" (hooks, 1994, p. 28), because it is reinforced by their daily reality in educational settings.

Self-Study in Hegemony: Brazil

Such hegemony was visible soon after I started working as an adult literacy instructor with an Afro-Brazilian neighborhood organization founded and run by local women in an urban center in northeastern Brazil. When I first began working for this organization, I lived with its president and her family for several months, talking about the day's activities over rice and beans at her table by night. As I acquainted myself with this neighborhood's history, the impressive level of community mobilization a handful of women had achieved in this small piece of cityscape piqued my interest as they brought resources, community classes, and youth activities into their neighborhood. This organization developed over the fifteen years before I arrived, during which time the women who founded it had turned an empty soccer field into a bustling community of several thousand people with running water, electricity, and health clinics a short walk away. In many respects, this organization felt like the coveted brass ring of sustainable development: an empowered and self-driven community that flourished without much outside support.

On the other hand, this community was still a low-income settlement in an economically stratified city, and neighborhood residents experienced high employment and limited opportunities for education. Despite the inroads made by the neighborhood association for which I worked, community residents often expressed acceptance of unequal opportunities as an unchangeable reality. I will never forget several melancholy conversations with the president's grown sons and their friends who—despite participation in numerous successful community music and theater groups—never finished secondary school and felt no compelling reason to do so. When I asked why, all of them explained that the local secondary school was pitifully under-resourced, with frequently truant teachers and precious learning time squandered in busy work. They explained that the schools available in poor black neighborhoods such as theirs simply felt like a waste of their time. Despite the incredible wealth of opportunities that members brought to this impoverished Afro-Brazilian community, local schools still left students alarmingly uninterested in formal learning and unprepared for adult life. Returning to the concept of hegemony, these men had accepted an unequal system; a life without access to education had become "normal," or just "the way things were."

Self-Study in a Culture of Domination: New Mexico

While teaching third grade on the New Mexico side of the Navajo Reservation, one student of mine similarly personified this acceptance of domination and lack of agency; his name was Terrence. A very intelligent boy who could narrate and give details from any story I could read aloud to him, Terrence was repeating the third grade because he was dyslexic and had trouble with his own reading fluency. At this point in my career, I had taught elementary school long enough that I felt comfortable in my daily instruction and wanted to focus on more individualized activities. So I began to invite Terrence to spend lunches with me to give him more time to practice and feel a sense of self-efficacy. For several months, though, he ended every session with, "Mr. Straubhaar, let's just stop—I can't do this." When I spoke with his previous teachers, it became evident that he had never received personal attention before. His teachers had identified him as slow with reading, and he had been given Special Education status, which in part meant that his performance on tests no longer influenced his teachers' job evaluations. As a result, his previous teachers had prioritized other students' learning needs before his, effectively isolating him and leaving him to entertain himself. In truth, I often felt tempted to do the same, especially when standardized test preparation became a priority later in the year, and it became easier to justify cutting this additional study as my free time could justifiably be otherwise occupied. Eventually, these individual sessions did end, and while Terrence did make larger reading gains that year than in previous years, I was haunted by the feeling that I could and should have done more. On some level, I gave up, just like his previous teachers whom I had precipitously judged.

While every educational system will have students that struggle, what sets this example apart is not Terrence's struggles with literacy, but the way in which he and his teachers (including myself) had come to identify those struggles as simply "the way things are," rather than a setback to be challenged. Through the way in which his struggles had been normalized by his teachers, he saw no benefit in our extracurricular efforts to improve his fluency; we both had come to accept an inferior and powerless view of Terrence as "natural" and "right."

Schooling as Oppression and "Banking Education"

Educational institutions can also be oppressive, in the Freirean sense of the word. Freire talks at length about those who hold power in capitalist societies. They are people who are the beneficiaries of the hegemonic class structure described by Gramsci (1957/1971), and they maintain their power in part through educational structures that dehumanize those who hold less power, whom Freire (1970a) calls "the oppressed".[10] This dehumanization of students is most clearly

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[10] As noted by hooks (1994), this class-based theory of oppression that typified Freire's early work was later modified to address the intersectional nature of oppression on the basis of race, gender,

illustrated in Freire's (1970a) description of *banking education,* a school model in which students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge rather than engaged actors, or empty receptacles just waiting to be "filled" with knowledge by teachers (p. 71-72). In this type of banking education setting, students are seen as "good" if they passively and meekly receive what they are given (p. 73), without questioning it or engaging it for themselves. In other words, students are dehumanized by being made into objects rather than Subjects:[11] rather than being recognized as agents unto themselves with the power to not only understand, but produce knowledge, banking education sees students as agency-less objects to be acted upon by teachers. In a banking education classroom, it is the teacher who holds all the power, the single agentic Subject who "transforms students into receiving objects" (Freire, 1970a, p. 58). It is the teacher's role to shape, create, and present knowledge; it is the student's role to ingest and regurgitate that same knowledge when called upon to do so.

Self-Study in Banking Education: New York City

This oppressive banking education model was clearly visible in the Washington Heights elementary school where I taught. In that school, all teachers were required to keep spreadsheets to track which students were able to answer rote questions that fit state performance standards and which students needed further practice. Attempts to teach true understanding of basic principles were replaced with an almost obsessive concern with students' ability to answer particular formulations of specific questions that had been used on previous years' tests. Though my colleagues and I hated it, and often spent our lunch breaks commiserating over how boring our teaching had become, we nonetheless acquiesced to being banking educators to the extreme. We spent eight hours a day doling out rote answers to preconfigured question types and lavishing praise on those students who most accurately and quickly regurgitated these preconditioned responses. Our students were not engaged, as there was no true substance with which they could engage. My relationship with my students suffered, as I began to see the effects of this banking education model not only on my practice, but my thinking. I engaged with my students less and less as Subjects with whom I had a relationship, and more and more as Objects to be trained correctly. My journal entries from this period tell few personal anecdotes, but rather describe how many multiple-choice questions we were able to review, or how well students performed on a sample essay question. I was dehumanizing my students without realizing it.

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sexual orientation, and so on.

[11] This capitalization of the term Subject in opposition to the lower-case term object is Freire's, not my own— it is meant to emphasize that "the term Subjects denotes those who know and act, in contrast to objects, which are known and acted upon" (Freire, 1970a, p. 38).

Self-Study in Oppression and Education: Mozambique

Ironically, given the attempts of the organization to purposefully utilize Freirean teaching methods, I also saw this type of banking education model in action while working for Comunidades de Poder in Mozambique. I remember one particular class led by a program coordinator, Anastacia, who was responsible for the organization's sanitation program. Anastacia was teaching a lesson on the importance of building and using a sturdy latrine that doesn't contaminate one's water supply. Following Comunidade de Poder's Freirean model, she used a "code"[12] to generate conversation on the topic; specifically, she had just finished telling a story of a man she had known that had built a latrine so flimsy it had collapsed beneath him while he was using it. To begin the conversation she asked participants what they could do to avoid a similar situation. One man said that they could build sturdier latrines, but that they lacked the resources. Unfortunately, Anastacia's use of Freirean pedagogy in this instance did not extend beyond her use of a Freirean code and initial open-ended question, and rather than facilitate the conversation in the direction participants were heading,[13] Anastacia kept asking what else they could do and dismissing the answers participants gave. She seemed to have a particular answer she was hoping to hear. Eventually, one man raised his hand and asked, "We don't seem to know the right answer, could you tell us?"

Anastacia was only too happy to provide the "right" answer when prompted, a trend I noticed in other classes taught by employees of Comunidades de Poder. Despite excellent intentions, Anastacia and her co-workers were banking educators just as my teaching colleagues and I had been in our United States classrooms. Comunidades de Poder had a curriculum with particular learning goals to be taught, and it was Anastacia's job to make sure those "right" answers were learned properly. The program flowed most smoothly when participants accepted and implemented what they were taught, rather than when they thought for themselves and pushed back. Without meaning to do so, this program had fallen into a rhythm in which it functioned best when its participants engaged actively with it the least. While such a routine could be an efficient means of passing on information in other contexts, the fact that teachers within an organization committed to Freirean education could easily fall into such patterns indicates the extent to which banking education all too often represents the status

[12] To Freire (1970a), conversations intended to promote social change start most productively on the basis of a "code," or a symbol (like a picture, word, skit, or other form of media) that represents an aspect of the daily lived reality of the community in which one is working. Participants can relate this code to something that could be improved in their community, and thus begin a dialogue about how to address the issue represented by the code.

[13] This trend was relatively common among Comunidades de Poder's facilitators. For a longer exploration of this trend, see Straubhaar (in press).

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The Bigger Picture: How We Can Respond to Social Reproduction, Hegemony and Oppression

As a teacher in elementary schools in the US and as an adult educator and teacher trainer in Brazil and Mozambique, I often found myself questioning the efficacy of my own small-scale efforts to challenge these realities of social reproduction, hegemony, and oppression. Students internalized their acceptance of social inequality, and at times, administrators in all three settings (myself included) focused on repetition of facts divorced from content.

The Possibility for Truly Transformational Resistance

In response to such an unequal and seemingly meaningless system, a fatalistic attitude would be quite understandable. Resistance at times really does seem futile. However, several theorists have pointed to how transformative resistance to such structures is not only possible, but is the only truly human response in such a situation. As Freire (2000) has said, "I like being human because I am involved with others in making history out of possibility, not simply resigned to fatalistic stagnation" (p. 33). Within communities of color in the United States, scholars such as Danny Solórzano, Dolores Delgado Bernal, and Tara Yosso have pointed to how students of color already make such history out of possibility, consciously resisting and finding ways to reach their own ends within structurally unfair systems (see Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006; Yosso & Solorzano, 2005).

Curricular and Pedagogical Steps Educators Can Take Towards Change

Given the reality of transformational resistance, what could educators working in communities of color do to build upon this existent momentum? In her theoretical construction of *community cultural wealth*, Yosso (2006) refers to "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (p. 175) in U.S. schools. A celebration of and conscious utilization of such strengths and indigenous knowledges in American schools would be one very strong step forward towards a more equitable society.

Freire (1970a) discusses how the need for humanizing education arises out of the dehumanization and objectification of the oppressed, their reduction to the status of things rather than people. Education "[forms] the human person" (Freire, 2000, p. 18), and as a result good education must form people in ways that promote their own humanity rather than denigrate it. hooks (1994) identifies good

teachers as those who interact with their students as "unique beings" (p. 13), recognizing and promoting their full humanity. As a teacher, I often felt that though such an approach seemed ideal, I did not have the time or means to pursue such a course within the accountability-heavy school contexts in which I worked. If all teachers were encouraged and trained to truly recognize and work with their students as whole persons, another large step would be taken towards equity in education.

Recognizing the humanity of one's students cannot be limited to a superficial engagement that addresses only specific student interests. True educational reform must engage those who are most marginalized by the present system as full co-participants in pedagogical practice. This is especially true for those students that are most oppressed and marginalized, as no-one better understands the negative influence and power of oppressive social structures than those whose lives personify the injustice of such structures (Freire, 1970a). This implies that teachers, especially given their inherent position of power, must take special care to embody their recognition of their students' humanity and personal worth—such a position is a radical political position in many of today's schools, but teachers' lives can and should be "a living example" of such radical politics (hooks, 1994, p. 48).

Speaking more specifically and practically, teachers must consciously remember to treat their students as co-creators of knowledge and educational practice, rather than as "subjects of investigation" (Freire, 1970a, p. 107). To accomplish such, students should take an active part in curricular design, from identifying the basic themes of instruction to the construction of the actual pedagogical practices used to address and explore these themes (see Freire, 1970a, p. 108-115). This will not be easy, especially in our contemporary U.S. context typified by time constraints and accountability measures that prioritize standardized test preparation. During my own time in the classroom in the U.S., I tried to involve my students in curricular design and pursue their interests as central instructional themes whenever possible, but often found it feasible only in subjects that were not tested as heavily, like science or social studies, and during times in the year when pressure was not as strong (i.e., at the beginning and end of the school year, when standardized tests were either over for the year or still far in the future).

Roadblocks Along the Way: Trying to Implement Freirean Pedagogy

Reflections on Roadblocks: Mozambique

Co-creation of curricula with teachers and students was one of the professed goals of Comunidades de Poder, for whom I was the director of literacy

instruction. Our adult literacy program was essentially Freirean in its orientation, focusing on using literacy as a vehicle for community-based social change. I was hired to conduct ethnographic research in communities receiving adult literacy programs as a means to assess the effectiveness of those programs and to solicit community input into the restructuring of the organization's curriculum, engaging community members as "co-creators" of curricular structure and content. However, as I continued in my work I found that Comunidades de Poder's board had a somewhat different aim for my ethnographic research: rather than asking people, "What do you want us to help you do or learn?" I found my role was to ask, "How can you best learn these principles which we have chosen for you? What do you do that we could further encourage to best reach a pre-set aim we've set in place?"

This experience revealed to me that implementation of Freirean pedagogy is much more complex than I had previously thought. I realized that ostensibly Freirean programs can be used as instruments of further oppression and social reproduction by promoting practices that reinforce, rather than challenge, the hegemonic status quo, in ways that I did not know how to ameliorate.

Reflections on Roadblocks: New York City

A similar insight came later in my life while teaching fourth grade in Washington Heights. Despite my training and experience facilitating Freirean pedagogy in Brazil and Mozambique, I often felt overwhelmed with the responsibility to prepare my students for the New York state standardized tests in English language arts, math, and science. As much as I knew the perils of banking education, I also knew that my job depended to an extent on my ability to be a good banking educator. My school's principal had made it clear that younger teachers whose students did not meet certain performance levels would not be welcome back the following year. More and more I incorporated test preparation and memorization techniques into my teaching practice, justifying this necessary evil in order to keep my job and continue the work I was doing as a Freirean educator in a public school. After all, if I lost my position I could no longer take advantage of the small opportunities I did have to push critical thinking and my students' development of critical consciousness.

One experience in particular helped me realize the impossible line I was trying to straddle. One morning I was reading aloud to my class from a fourth grade level picture book that taught students about the life cycle of a butterfly. I had carefully organized this lesson in preparation for the state science exam, which was set to take place the following week, as I had been told by my school's test preparation coach that life cycles and insects had featured prominently on recent years' tests. Xavier, the thoughtful and energetic boy I have discussed previously, was very engaged and asking all kinds of questions: "What about

grasshoppers, do they go in cocoons, too? What about ladybugs? Spiders don't because they're arachnids, right? How about beetles?" At first, I tried to answer his questions thoughtfully, while reminding him each time about the importance of raising his hand and waiting his turn. As the questions continued, though, I became more and more worried about the other students getting this necessary content for the test in the few minutes that remained before gym class. As my anxiety built, so did my temper, until I called out Xavier loudly in front of the whole class, telling him to be quiet until the end of class so that everyone could hear.

The second I did that, Xavier's face changed completely. Whereas before his eyes were lit up and he was engaged, the second my tone was raised to a level Xavier was all too familiar with, his eyes glazed over, he looked at the floor, and he effectively shut down. The second I saw that, I regretted it, as I knew what I had done. I had let my anger show in a way that had prioritized my authority as the teacher over my relationship with a student. While I could not let Xavier dominate the conversation at the expense of his peers, I had gone beyond managing Xavier's behavior to shaming him as a person, dehumanizing him, and effectively communicating that he should not be an engaged, thoughtful Subject, but instead a passive, receiving Object. I realized that not only Freirean organizations like Comunidades de Poder but also individual Freirean educators like me could unreflectively reinforce the status quo.

Working from Within: Pursuing My Critical Consciousness as an Educator

My own potential as a Freirean educator to reinforce situations of oppression distressed me and caused me to reconsider my commitment to Freirean pedagogy. Yet, I found the solution to this dilemma in both of these situations by applying Freire's philosophical principles more personally. To Freire (1970a), education in its purest form is praxis, or reflection combined with action, with a conscious aim to do so for the purpose of social transformation. Only through a consistent process of reflection and action can individuals reach full humanity because divorced from application knowledge returns to its previous banal and flavorless state, becoming a meaningless collection of dates and trivia that have no use beyond memorization and regurgitation. Knowledge, when seen through a lens that recognizes its transformative potential, is the root of all meaningful social action. When knowledge is truly created, through a pedagogical process that involves meaningful interaction with and reflection upon one's circumstances, then education truly becomes liberating. As Freire (1970a) states, "liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (p. 79).

Self-Study in Critical Consciousness: Mozambique and New York City

As an employee of Comunidades de Poder, I used ethnography as a means of acquainting myself with the cultural norms of the communities in which my organization offered educational programs. My aim was to use this research to prepare the most culturally appropriate program curricula possible. I drew heavily from Freire's (1970a) work to guide my efforts as Freire advocates that educators systematically acquaint themselves with local culture before engaging with communities as teachers. More specifically, Freire (1970a) suggests that such research be done with local community members as a means of "co-creating" curricula. Yet, my fieldnotes from that period describe a process that is hardly participatory. For the first several months I was in Mozambique, I spent many weeks in each community, conducting fieldwork to familiarize myself with local habits related to diet, sanitation, household work and so forth. After conducting my research in four communities, I carefully depicted in my fieldnotes a process of brainstorming potential lesson topics and prioritizing them according to my perceptions of local community needs and the organizational priorities of Comunidades de Poder. I notably did so without any solicitation of community input.

Reading over my journals and fieldnotes and reflecting upon them months later, I had a liberating moment when I recognized the wrong-headedness of my approach to curriculum writing and the need for reappraisal and reform. Unfortunately, by this point I was involved in a Master's program and no longer in a position to enact meaningful change in the curriculum or lessons used by Comunidades de Poder. I, nevertheless, had identified a large potential pitfall to avoid in my future endeavors.

A number of experiences in New York City like my read-aloud with Xavier triggered comparable moments of reflection. Despite my training and background in Freirean pedagogy, I could still unfairly take advantage of my position of authority in the classroom in order to silence or shame a student. Even after that afternoon with Xavier, the same power dynamic played out other times with other students, and every time I was reminded of my privileged and powerful position as a teacher.

Each of these moments represent times when I took the first action that must be taken to achieve Freirean social transformation, an act that is deeply personal—that is, learning to "name the world" (Freire, 1970a, p. 88). In these instances, *naming the world* is being able to identify elements of structural oppression in my personal and professional experience. It is from that point of naming that we can move forward and pursue social change. hooks (1994) calls this point of naming the moment in which we become able to "[name] our pain" (p. 74). This process of learning to name one's experience with oppression and

pain is a necessary first step towards seeking social change—indeed, "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (Freire, 1970a, p. 87).

In each of these moments, I effectively reinvigorated my process of personal wrestling with recognition of social structural inequality that leads to critical consciousness. Through this process, one gains an increased sense of self-efficacy that makes social change seem not only possible, but plausible. This process of reflection makes up the crucial first part of praxis. That reflection brings forth not only concrete recognition of structural inequalities, but also promotes critical thinking that stimulates creative and innovative potential responses to such inequality, and thus leads to action towards concrete goals. My concrete goal moving forward was to act as a voice within Freirean programs to promote continuous reflection upon our practice. I wanted to combat both the co-option of Freire that I had perpetrated during my time with Comunidades de Poder and the thoughtless abuse of authority I later exercised in my elementary classroom so that the negative consequences of such well-meaning efforts could be avoided in the future. In each of these specific instances, I had reached a point of recognition in which "the thematics which have come from [myself as an educator] return to [me]—not as contents to be deposited, but as problems to be solved" (Freire, 1970a, p. 123).

My experience in Mozambique is a clear example of one of the most difficult aspects of Freirean pedagogical theory, which is imagining how such theory would work implemented on a large scale when the reflection necessary to make it successful is so deeply personal. Freire himself encountered numerous difficulties when he tried to put his pedagogical theories into practice throughout the municipal school system in the Brazilian city of São Paulo (O'Cadiz, Wong & Torres, 1998). There is no clean or neat solution to this dilemma other than to say that in order for Freirean education to work at a structural level, it necessitates a teacher corps that is both intimately trained in and ideologically committed to Freirean practice. In an ideal world this would be possible, and pushing for such a reality is a noble goal.

Re-imagining the World: Envisioning Freirean Practice on a Global Scale

One caveat is that this reality might not appear to be what it seems in theory—Freireans vary widely in their interpretations of Freire's own thought, and often push back against Freire's own claims, a challenge which Freire himself invited repeatedly (see hooks, 1994). A system of Freirean educators would hardly be a homogeneous system—all would be committed to widespread social change through educational praxis, but beyond that, individual educators' work would likely vary drastically according to contesting personal interpretations. This heterogeneity is not something to fear, but rather represents a diversity of

interpretation that promotes a powerful level of reflexivity that will only make students and teachers stronger.

If anything, what is perhaps most intimidating and frightening about such a utopian dream of the future is that it *is* difficult to envision. Any ideal educational system cannot resemble the many current systems that maintain intimate and intricate connections to oppression (as seen here in urban Brazil, rural Mozambique, and several parts of the U.S.). As a result, there are few concrete and historically-tried models that can be looked to for guidance. Freire (1970a) himself could only say, "the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man [sic]: neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man [sic] in the process of liberation" (p. 56). As contemporary reality is defined by the dialectic of oppressor and oppressed, this "new man" is hard to imagine, as dreams of change for the oppressed typically involve acquiring the lifestyle of the oppressor.

Making the Road by Walking: Applying Freire at the Individual Level

While the unknown and utopian nature of Freire's (1970a) aims should perhaps encourage further reflection as individual educators struggle through the process of liberation, we cannot allow fear to paralyze efforts towards social change, as to do so facilitates falling into the well-worn path of the oppressor. Though the road ahead is relatively unknown and is only made by walking (to paraphrase Antonio Machado [1979]), the bright ray of hope that stems from the possibility of a more equitable and loving world makes perseverance through feelings of intimidation and inadequacy possible.

The first step along that path is the constant personal pursuit of critical consciousness, as education is continuous, never-ending, and life-long. Critical consciousness is not a plateau to be reached, but rather a continuous state of personal reflection and reinvention that is constantly recognizing areas of inequity that need to be addressed. As Freire (1970a) states, "the unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity" (p. 84).

Personally, I am a yet unfinished character—not a blank slate or *tabula rasa,* but a reasonably worn slate that is constantly being written on, erased, reworded, and reexamined. In the six years I have been working with organizations that engage in various forms or interpretations of Freirean pedagogy, I feel my interpretations of Freire himself have been completely inverted and refashioned numerous times. I don't know if I have yet settled finally in my own personal interpretation of how to continue Freire's vision. However, I agree with Freire that it is part of my unfinished nature to continue to ask questions and reformulate my understandings. One of the things for which I most

admire Freire as an individual was his willingness to challenge his own preconceptions and respond positively to criticism, embodying the critical practice his own theory prescribed (see hooks, 1994). In an ideal world, this is what education truly is—not merely a system to pass through in order to get a job that will provide for one's needs and the needs of one's family, but a constant and fulfilling process of reflection and action that makes life a refreshing process of continuous reinvention and improvement.

Final Reflections

The personal stories I have shared, however "unflattering and imperfect," are an invitation for the reader to "put themselves in [my] place" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 748) as I have struggled to engage productively in educational settings that are all too often socially reproductive, hegemonic, and oppressive. These stories are intended as an entry point for conversation on how the status quo in formal and non-formal education is often insufficient to truly reach and enable many of those who society most acutely marginalizes. Those aspects of current educational structures that hegemonically oppress and reproduce current forms of social stratification must be challenged at a structural level. These represent the banking model of education, which fails to recognize students as complex, resilient, and nuanced co-creators of knowledge.

Freire's pedagogical models and theories provide a clear path for how the banking model of education may be most effectively challenged, in a way that further humanizes and emboldens both teachers and students—namely, through an educational process wherein students and teachers work together to build curricula and focus learning upon that which is most immediate and pertinent to the daily oppressive realities of students. In such a model, through teaching students how to name those structures that limit their agency, the critical thinking of those students is enhanced in a way whereby their agency and ability to challenge those structures is likewise strengthened. This leads to praxis, a circular model wherein reflection leads to action that leads to true social change.

While this model has not effectively been implemented on a macro-scale —and many educators have had experiences like mine in which they see Freire's methods changed to fit a vision that differs from his own—thousands of educators the world over have been touched and persuaded to implement some form of Freirean pedagogy in their own classrooms. I consider myself one of those educators, and Freire's most urgent challenge to me is to continue: to push my own critical consciousness and that of those I might teach in the future by continuing to examine my daily reality and see how I might best challenge it through continued praxis. As I seek to name a true word, I can transform the world (Freire, 1970a), and thus fulfill my "ontological vocation"—to become

more fully human.

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