Reading Freire for First World Librarians

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A note on my slides. As you’ll see, the slides are entirely block quotes. I wanted to use Freire’s own words, from both *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and from his other works. But I wanted to put them in context, and provide citations, and I certainly didn’t want to only read block quotes to you today. So my solution was to create slides with those elements, and to talk myself about the issues they raise, to string them into a narrative. …So, to give you a brief outline, I’m going to start by talking, about Freire himself, and about *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* — more particularly, how librarians have read and interpreted *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Then I’m going to spend the majority of the time looking at other work Freire wrote, work that was intended to be in dialogue with First World teachers, work that focused on the issues in his pedagogy that Freire believed most relevant for those teachers. My key topic today is authority, because Freire felt that was the specific area in which his pedagogy had been misinterpreted.

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Brazil and died in 1997. He’s most well-known for his work teaching adult literacy to Brazilian peasants in the 1950s and 1960s. He was exiled by Brazil’s military junta in 1964 and lived in Chile for several years, working for NGOs. The English-language publication of his earliest works brought him fame as well as invitations to
work in North America and Europe. He spent a year teaching at Harvard, then in the 1970s lived in Geneva and worked with the World Council of Churches. Though he returned to Brazil in 1980 and eventually became secretary of education for the city of São Paulo, he continued to travel to the US and Canada. During this time he continued writing, often in the form of “spoken books” — a series of dialogues with other educators, recorded, transcribed, and cleaned up.

Freire’s most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was first published in English in 1970. But *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* didn’t make a significant impact on our profession, despite the late 1960s and early 1970s being an era in which librarianship was politicized and radicalized — for example, this was when the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Round Table was founded. The reason, I think, that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* didn’t find its way into library literature is that during this period radical librarianship was focused on other areas of the field: cataloguing, collection development, and issues of intellectual freedom. Unlike those areas, “bibliographic instruction,” as it was called then, had not yet been radicalized.\(^1\)

It hasn’t been until the past 10-15 years that librarians have discovered Paulo Freire’s work. Now it was instruction librarians, discontent with traditional models of teaching information literacy, who looked for alternative approaches. They found those approaches in the work of rhetoric and composition faculty, who had written about the potential of Freireian pedagogy for their own fields. Librarians have taken that work as a starting point for their own interpretation of Freire.

Librarians who have cited Freire in the past decade generally lay out his pedagogy along recognizable lines. The consensus interpretation goes something like this:³

Traditional models of teaching and learning are no more than the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. Freire described this as the “banking concept” of education — knowledge is deposited in the student’s head like money is deposited into a bank. Banking education is authoritarian; it’s to be rejected. The alternative is a “problem-posing education,” in


which “students identify and engage significant problems in the world.”4 Students do so in ways that emphasize “dialogue, creativity, reflection and action, inquiry, and creative transformation.” “Problem-posing education” is connected to constructivist theories of learning.5

To become problem-posing educators, teachers must cede authority in the classroom. The teacher stops merely lecturing on information for the students to learn, and instead helps the student to apprehend knowledge via a process of dialogue, in which the teacher and student cease to exist as such. In Freire’s terms, the teacher must become a teacher-student, and students become students-teachers. I’ll quote a recent article by William Badke, because it serves as the quintessential summary of librarians’ take on Freireian pedagogy: “Freire’s strong critique of knowledge oppression has been highly influential in helping to move instruction from ‘sage on

6. Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 80.
the stage’ to ‘guide on the side.’ But it has also rendered suspect the idea that anyone should claim to be a knowledge authority. Authority, to Freire, results in oppression.”

This interpretation by librarians of Freirean pedagogy is derived exclusively from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It is almost the only work of Freire’s that is quoted in the library literature.

To be sure, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a powerful book, and one that is essential both for understanding Freire’s work and for engaging in dialogue with other radical educators. It has become a touchstone for us. But even in his lifetime, Freire saw educators relying on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to the exclusion of his other works. Freire believed that his most famous book was often misinterpreted, when it had been read at all. First World readers forgot that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* had been written in, and about, a specific time and place. The students he had been working with were adults. They were peasants — illiterate, and not enrolled in traditional schools. Learning to read and write meant that they could regain the right to vote.

Freire was of course happy with the success of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. But he believed that, if it had wide appeal, that appeal was derived from the book’s deep roots in local conditions. Educators in the First World were mistaken if they took the methods therein to be universally applicable. To combat these misreadings, Freire in the late 1980s onward published a series of books and articles intended to clarify his pedagogy for a First World audience.

As Freire believed in dialogue as the heart of a problem-posing education, it seems appropriate that these later works took on that form. Freire addressed himself to a specific

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audience. Often this audience was present and could respond: he engaged in these give-and-take dialogues with several, radical American teachers, such as Ira Shor, Donaldo Macedo, and Myles Horton. In other cases the audience was specific but imagined: for example, his “Letter to North-American Teachers” or ...Letters to Those who Dare Teach.

In these works Freire identified, over and over, one particular mistake that he believed North American teachers had made in interpreting his pedagogy. Freire believed that North American teachers had conflated the concept of authority with the concept of authoritarianism. For Freire, the difference was essential. Authoritarianism was opposed to the existence of freedom, and is illegitimate. Authority, in contrast, was not opposed to freedom, but necessary to it. Legitimate authority lives in a creative tension with freedom. Whereas authoritarianism was derived from structures of power beyond the classroom, the teacher’s authority was derived from an intimate knowledge of their subject matter.

I want to stop here and repeat that, because I’ve come to understand this as a keystone of Freire’s pedagogy. This is an article of faith for him. To repeat: the teacher has authority in the classroom because they have achieved a mastery of their particular subject. And this authority manifests itself as the right and the responsibility to limit the student’s freedom.

Remember, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire had laid out a binary opposition between banking education and problem-posing education. He had seen the difference as between a pedagogy that embraced authoritarianism and one that rejected authoritarianism. But in writing specifically for and about Latin America in the 1960s, in which the problem was to overthrow the political and educational systems of military juntas, he had not considered how this might be taken by First World teachers. He hadn’t considered the possibility that, in our haste to reject authoritarianism, we might also reject the teacher’s authority.

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The liberating educator can never manipulate the students and cannot leave the students alone, either. The opposite of manipulation is not laissez-faire, not denying the teacher's directive responsibility for education. The liberating teacher does not manipulate and does not wash his or her hands of the students. He or she assumes a directive role necessary for educating. That directiveness is not a commanding position of ‘you must do this, or that,’ but is a posture of directing a serious study of some object in which students reflect on the intimacy of how an object exists.


So in his later works, Freire introduced a third category of educational practices, to describe a pedagogy that had rejected authority along with authoritarianism. He used several phrases for this — none, unfortunately, with the visceral appeal of “banking education.” The two most common are a “modernizing” education, or a “laissez-faire” education. Near the end of his life, he would connect a “laissez-faire” education to the neoliberal project.

I’ll talk about three characteristics of the laissez-faire or modernizing education. In the first place, the laissez-faire education places great emphasis on neutrality and on universality. Social, political, and cultural differences shouldn’t enter into educational practices. The ideal teacher for modernizing education would today be, I think, a robot or a computer. As you can see, Freire had the modern ed-tech industry figured out forty years ago.

And that ties into a second aspect of laissez-faire education: it’s individual in nature. Learning is an individual activity. There’s a focus on personal improvement, on meeting goals and outcomes, rather than on critical consciousness or community learning.

These two aspects of laissez-faire or modernizing education, by the way, are ones that the critlib movement has been steadfast in resisting. We’ve emphasized the necessity for the teacher to be engaged with the students, and we’ve focused on affect and emotion as essential elements

of education. Our continued work in this vein is essential to countering the effects of the laissez-faire educational system.

There’s a third characteristic, though, that neither critlib nor the larger critical pedagogy movement have resisted in quite the same way. And it returns, again, to that question of authority versus authoritarianism. This third characteristic of laissez-faire education is that it regards the teacher as merely a facilitator. A facilitative teacher, according to Freire, denies having their own authority, preferring instead to insist on a democratic classroom, in which the students are equal partners. But this is a false equivalence, because the teacher-turned-facilitator is backed by the power of the institution. By veiling their rightful authority — that authority that derives from their subject knowledge — the facilitator inadvertently allows their classroom to be governed by the authoritarian power of the educational system.

I said earlier that the teacher’s authority gave them the right and the responsibility to limit the students’ freedom. As Freire says, “Freedom needs authority to become free. It is a paradox but it is true!” Since the facilitator denies that they have authority in the classroom, they are also rejecting their right and responsibility to limit the students’ freedom in the service of education. Freire’s conclusion, then, is that facilitative teaching actually hampers student learning.

Ira: As I understand it, in a liberating classroom, the teacher seeks to gradually withdraw as the director of the learning, as the directive force. ...

Paulo: But, look, Ira, for me the question is not for the teacher to have less and less authority. The issue is that the democratic teacher never, never transforms authority into authoritarianism. He or she can never stop being an authority or having authority. Without authority it is very difficult for the liberties of the students to be shaped. Freedom needs authority to become free. (Laughs) It is a paradox but it is true.

Shor and Freire, A Pedagogy for Liberation (1985), 90-91

To be clear, Freire understood that facilitators meant well; they’re concerned with avoiding banking education. And they believe that they’re engaging in problem-posing dialogue with their students. But facilitative teaching, he argued, lacked the rigor of true dialogical teaching. A facilitative education, Freire believed, was actually worse than a rigorous traditional education.

Now, rigor is today a word of which we’re all rightfully wary. When “rigor” appears in educational discourse today it’s almost always racist, sexist, and/or classist. “Rigor” is used to attack teachers and teachers’ unions, students who lack “grit” (itself a code word), and pedagogies that go beyond standardized testing and the STEM subjects. But, for all that, rigor is a concept Freire considered an essential part of his pedagogy. So it’s worth looking at Freire’s understanding of rigor and, maybe, reclaiming the idea.

Rigor for Freire was simply intellectual discipline. But Freire considered this intellectual discipline to be an essential part of dialogical teaching. Dialogue was not just a conversation, or a sharing of ideas, it was conversation and sharing about a particular content object, whether that be a text, an idea, or a situation.

The teacher’s job, in dialogue, is to “place an object as a mediator between him or her and the students.” But to place the right object, and to place it just so, requires a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the teacher. This is where the teacher’s authority, which derives from their subject mastery, comes into play. But the facilitator rejects the possibility of choosing and placing that object.

This indicates another important difference between our normal constructivist pedagogy and Freire’s. Freire’s pedagogy is not student-centered. Neither is it teacher-centered, or even content-centered. Rather, Freire’s pedagogy finds its meaning in the relationships created among teacher, student, and object of study. It’s not centered, rather it’s dialogical.

Certainly Freire’s pedagogy is constructivist, in that he sees knowledge as created or constructed in the student’s mind. But it’s very definitely not a relativist pedagogy. Freire insists on the existence of a real world, and the object of dialogue is always to better ascertain that reality. Yet though Freire was not a relativist, he was a historicist — he accepted that knowledge changes over time, and thus what counted as a rigorous and true education today might not tomorrow.

When we stop thinking of our pedagogy as student-centered, and stop considering ourselves as primarily allies and helpers — as facilitators rather than authorities — it’s liberating

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both for us, and, paradoxically, for the students themselves. As authorities in the classroom, we are open to challenge on the ground of our authority — our subject matter knowledge.

There’s a corollary to Freire’s assertion that it’s from our subject knowledge that we derive our authority as teachers. The corollary is that subject matter is essential to learning. Learning how to learn is impossible without that “content object” located in dialogue with student and teacher.

So this raises the question: what is it that the librarian teaches? The stock answer is “information literacy.” Well, the current consensus in the field is that information literacy is interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary, or part of a larger metaliteracy. But, in and of itself, it’s not a discipline. And I agree — it’s not a discipline.

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A Freireian understanding of authority and subject matter, as I’ve laid it out here, would suggest then that we can’t be effective progressive teachers on our own. Instead, we’re going to have to work with our colleges’ teaching faculty. If information literacy can be learned, it will be via the subject matter that are taught in those classes.

Now, allying with teaching faculty is good. It is after all their subject expertise that’s under assault in a laissez-faire or modernizing educational system. Yet for librarians, working with teaching faculty is fraught with difficulty. Librarians burn out, and they are silenced, when they’re treated as junior partners in education.17

We might consider an alternate, or complementary, path forward. There’s a great deal for us to teach beyond information literacy. A single example: Alison Macrina’s Library Freedom Project, which, to quote Macrina, “teach[es] librarians and their local communities about the surveillance state, privacy rights and law, and technology that can be used to prevent surveillance and protect intellectual freedom.”18 This is just right: theory and practice together. It’s time we stop merely asking to be let into someone else’s class and curriculum, and it’s time that as a profession we develop our own subject knowledge, our own theory and practice, so that we can truly become liberatory educators.


Thank you for your time and attention; I will leave the last words to Paulo Freire and his friend Myles Horton.

MYLES: Well, you feel contented that we’ve done all we can do?

PAULO: Oh yes. Maybe I’m totally wrong, but I think that it will be a beautiful book.

MYLES: Let’s have a drink.

PAULO: Yes.

Horton & Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990), 248