

The Paulo Freire Survival Guide

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is an influential (and often intimidating) text. Freire's ideas have inspired and challenged educators for almost 50 years, and these ideas shape the sequence of assignments in the course.

This handout is intended to help you navigate your way through a complex text, understand several of his major concepts, and apply those concepts to your own experiences in your essays.

Part I: Passages (and Explanations).

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness.

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration -- contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity (Freire 57).

The passage above describes the hierarchical nature of the relationship between teachers, who occupy a position of authority over students, and learners, who are viewed as oppressed in both society and in education. "Narration sickness" is the act of asserting authority through lecture, an act that deprives students of agency.

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated account. Worse yet, it turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teachers. The more completely she fills the receptacles, the better a teacher she is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teachers existence—but unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher (58-59).

These paragraphs build on the introduction, emphasizing the student's passive nature. As teachers occupy roles of absolved authority, students are never allowed to grow as learners by interrogating their instructors.

This relationship also restricts the teachers, as they will never benefit from the experiences and knowledge of their students.

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them (60).

By adapting to the world, students passively accept things as they are rather than examining and changing the world through their own ideas.

Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them," (1) for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. To achieve this the oppressors use the banking concept of education in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus, within which the oppressed receive the euphemistic title of "welfare recipients." They are treated as individual cases, as marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a "good, organized and just" society. The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society which must therefore adjust these "incompetent and lazy" folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be "integrated," "incorporated" into the healthy society that they have "forsaken."

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not "marginals," are not living "outside" society. They have always been "inside" the structure which made them "beings for others." The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves." Such transformation, of course, would undermine the oppressors' purposes; hence their utilization of the banking concept of education to avoid the threat of student conscientization (60-61).

Consciousness raising is a crucial component of Freire's work; through dialogue, problem solving, and critical thinking, students learn to actively examine their experiences and the forces that shape those experiences.

But the humanist revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them.

The banking concept does not admit to such partnership -- and necessarily so. To resolve the teacher-student contradiction, to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and serve the cause of liberation (62).

Freire believes in the power of dialogue between teachers and students. Such a model involves undermining and ultimately eliminating the hierarchical nature of the traditional model of education.

Memorization would give way to critical thinking, a process in which students engage and interrogate reality on their own terms.

Yet only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible (63-64).

The paragraph above expands on the earlier quote; students must be allowed to think for themselves.

Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. "Problem-posing" education, responding to the essence of consciousness --intentionality -- rejects communiques and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian split" --consciousness as consciousness of consciousness.

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors -- teacher on the one hand and students on the other. Accordingly, the practice of problem-posing education entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction to be resolved. Dialogical relations -- indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to cooperate in perceiving the same cognizable object --are otherwise impossible.

Indeed problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on "authority" are no longer valid; in order to function authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are "owned" by the teacher (66-67).

In problem-posing education, teachers communicate directly to students through dialogue rather than one-sided narrative. The model is reciprocal, with teachers learning from their students through the act of sharing information, stories, and prospectives.

The problem-posing method does not dichotomize the activity of teacher-student: she is not "cognitive" at one point and "narrative" at another. She is always "cognitive," whether preparing a project or engaging in dialogue with the students. He does not regard objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and his students. In this way, the problem-posing

educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students -- no longer docile listeners -- are now--critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the doxa is superseded by true knowledge at the level of the logos. Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality.

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed (68-69).

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. Although the dialectical relations of women and men with the world exist independently of how these relations are perceived (or whether or not they are perceived at all), it is also true that the form of action they adopt is to a large extent a function of how they perceive themselves in the world. Hence, the teacher-student and the students-teachers reflect simultaneously on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action, and thus establish an authentic form of thought and action (72).

Problem-posing involves the process of reflecting on issues and connecting those issues to relevant experiences. Rather than presenting facts devoid of context or meaning, teachers encourage students a chance to see the meaning behind the material, to find a context based on their experiences, and to examine issues and ideas with the aim of considering solutions.

In Summary, Freire believes the following:

- Teachers replicate the prevailing power structure by acting as oppressors while students occupy the role of the oppressed.
- Teaching is too heavily reliant on the transmission of facts that are often irrelevant to the lives of students.
- Ideally, teaching should consist of a dialogical relationship between teachers and students.
- Teachers should encourage critical thinking by presenting material that poses problems for students to solve.
- Students learning is best accomplished through a series of stages involving reflection, discussion, and application.

Part II: What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking plays a significant role in Freire's concept of education. Though he wasn't the first to develop the concept, his work helped to popularize critical thinking which is now pervasive in contemporary educational theory.

In Freire's view, critical thinking isn't neutral. He envisioned his pedagogy as a means of enabling students' voices in service of social change.

Setting this controversial aim aside, Freire's view often dovetail with those of other thinkers who stress the need for more active, engaged thinking.

These are some of the common traits of critical thinking:

Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally about what to do or what to believe. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. Someone with critical thinking skills is able to do the following :

- understand the logical connections between ideas
- identify, construct and evaluate arguments
- detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning
- solve problems systematically
- identify the relevance and importance of ideas
- reflect on the justification of one's own beliefs and values

Critical thinking is not a matter of accumulating information. A person with a good memory and who knows a lot of facts is not necessarily good at critical thinking. A critical thinker is able to deduce consequences from what he knows, and he knows how to make use of information to solve problems, and to seek relevant sources of information to inform himself.

Critical thinking should not be confused with being argumentative or being critical of other people. Although critical thinking skills can be used in exposing fallacies and bad reasoning, critical thinking can also play an

important role in cooperative reasoning and constructive tasks. Critical thinking can help us acquire knowledge, improve our theories, and strengthen arguments. We can use critical thinking to enhance work processes and improve social institutions.

Some people believe that critical thinking hinders creativity because it requires following the rules of logic and rationality, but creativity might require breaking rules. This is a misconception. Critical thinking is quite compatible with thinking "out-of-the-box", challenging consensus and pursuing less popular approaches. If anything, critical thinking is an essential part of creativity because we need critical thinking to evaluate and improve our creative ideas.

Source: <http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/ct.php>

Part III: Educational Controversies

Education is perhaps unavoidably political, as competing interests and ideologies vie for dominance in the classroom. If Freire's oppressor/oppressed model is simplistic in its characterization of the relationship between teachers and students, he was right to view schools as powerful forces in the shaping of facts and ideologies, and this is especially true for primary and secondary schools.

Historically, there have been a number of controversies that continue to foment heated debates about curriculums, pedagogy, and politics.

Here's a list of some, but by no means all, of these controversies:

- Whole language
- Thanksgiving
- Columbus Day
- The presence or absence of groups or figures
- The causes of the Civil War
- The Textbook War of 1974
- Evolution
- Climate Change
- Texas Textbook Standards
- Self-esteem
- The new math
- Skills-based education

Note that although you might not have encountered many teaching "clerks," you may have had teachers who chose not to encourage independent and critical thinking when they had the option to do so.

Alternately, your teachers might be guilty of teaching popular myths. Either of these could be the basis for your experience in essay 2 and the problem you could propose to solve in Essay 4.

Part IV: Rubrics

Applying Freire's ideas to your own educational experience
Essay 2 asks you to analyze one of your own educational experiences using Freire's ideas and language. What would Freire say about your experience? Focus on a rich and illustrative incident from your own educational experience and read it (that is, interpret it) as Freire would. Provide as much detail as you can: things that were said and done, perhaps the exact wording of an assignment, a textbook, or a teacher's comments. And you will need to turn to the language of Freire's argument, to take key phrases and passages and see how they might be used to investigate your case.

Do not simply tell the story of you and your teacher. Be sure to analyze the experience. Freire is not writing about individual personalities (an innocent student and a mean teacher, a rude teacher, or a thoughtless teacher) but about the roles we are cast in, whether we choose to be or not, by our culture and its institutions.

If you find yourself at a loss, you might start with one of the following as provisional thesis:

- My experience in (insert class name) (supports/challenges/complicates) Paulo Freire's argument about education because...
- Because my (insert class) teacher taught in a (problem posing/banking) style, I... (make a claim about how that class's pedagogy affected your education)

Your essay should:

- Revolve around a clear thesis that makes a single arguable claim about your own educational experience
- Explain and connect quotations from Freire
- Revolve around a detailed description of a single moment in a single class
- Provide, explain, and connect concrete evidence to support your thesis

Nuts and Bolts:

- 4-5 pages (1200-1500 words), 1" margins, 12 pt. readable font, double spaced
- Proofread for sentence and word level clarity and adherence to MLA conventions
- Follow MLA conventions for in-text citations (we will go over these in class)
- Placed in the appropriate Blackboard dropbox as a .doc, .docx, .rtf, or .pdf file

Banking on fear: Freire and Cox on education

Rebecca Cox argues that while “students sincerely hoped to learn something important and meaningful in college,” they often find their courses pointless and thus have difficulty being successful (67). In lieu of a successful learning experience, students resort to “getting it over” (Cox 74). Paulo Freire believes that student difficulty and apathy can be tied to an educational structure that privileges teacher-focused narration over dialogue. These different understandings of education can be put into conversation with each other. For this essay, you will explore how. The goal of Essay 3 is to show how these two writers can be put into conversation with each other. How does one writer’s argument speak to, complicate or place pressure on the other? Another way to think about it is to ask how do they overlap, agree, or disagree?

Be sure to support your arguments with direct quotations from the readings. Be sure to explain explicitly how the author shows what you claim he or she shows. Also, be careful to explain how the two readings connect to each other. A brief essay on Freire followed by a brief essay on Cox will not meet the goals of this assignment. As both readings are complex, you may find it helpful to focus on a specific aspect of each author’s larger argument. Should it be useful for you, you can use a personal experience in school or a pop cultural text to clarify the way the two readings relate.

Your essay should:

- Revolve around a clear thesis that makes a single arguable claim about a connection between Paolo Freire and Rebecca Cox's argument.
- Explain and connect quotations from the Rebecca Cox reading and the Paolo Freire reading
- Connect Paolo Freire and Rebecca Cox's argument to each other

Nuts and Bolts:

- 5-6 pages (1200-1500 words), 1" margins, 12 pt. readable font, double spaced
- Proofread for sentence and word level clarity and adherence to MLA conventions
- Follow MLA conventions for in-text citations AND a works cited list
- Placed in the appropriate Blackboard dropbox as a .doc, .docx, .rtf, or .pdf file

Essay 4: Now What? Proposing a Solution

Rebecca Cox and Paolo Freire each provide significant critiques of obstacles to education along different lines. Over the course of this semester we have also discussed and written about your own personal experience in a variety of classrooms and educational environments. By this point we are all well aware of the many of the issues facing education in America today.

Write an essay in which you identify and analyze or solve a significant issue facing education today. You will have to quote from Cox at least once and from Freire at least once. Remember, this should be an important issue that is not specific to you. The issue you explore in your essay ought to be generalizable to many students if not all. Some potential topics to get you started are: student debt and the cost of college, family support (or the lack thereof), being a first generation college student, academic preparation for college, student motivation, the

pressure to attend college, college as vocational training, and stereotypes around community colleges.

Your essay should:

- Revolve around a clear thesis that makes a single arguable claim about a possible solution to a specific problem facing education today
- Support this claim with concrete examples that are fully explained and connected
- Explain and connect quotations from the Freire and Cox readings

Nuts and Bolts:

- 4-6 pages (1200-1800 words), 1" margins, 12 pt. readable font, double spaced
- Proofread for sentence and word level clarity and adherence to MLA conventions
- Follow MLA conventions for in-text citations and include an MLA works cited list
- Have a title
- Placed in the appropriate Blackboard dropbox as a .doc, .docx, .rtf, or .pdf file