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Reading the World and Reading the Word: An Interview with Paulo Freire

Teaching and Educating

Language Arts: Paulo, you are known for your work in what people call liberation education—education to help learners overcome oppression and achieve various kinds of freedom—and the special role which dialogue and literacy play in that process. The teacher's role in this experience is key. Would you describe what being a teacher means to you?

Paulo Freire: I love being a teacher. To me, being a teacher does *not* mean being a missionary, or having received a certain command from heaven. Rather, a teacher is a professional, one who must constantly seek to improve and to develop certain qualities or virtues, which are not received but must be created. The capacity to renew ourselves everyday is very important. It prevents us from falling into what I call "bureaucratization of mind." I am a teacher.

Language Arts: What are some of these virtues or qualities you see as important for the professional teacher?

Paulo Freire: Virtues are qualities which you re-create through action and through practice, qualities which make us consistent and coherent concerning our dreams—a consistency which teachers try to achieve within what they are doing.

Humility is an important virtue for a teacher, the quality of recognizing—without any kind of suffering—our limits of knowledge concerning what we can and cannot do through education. Humility accepts the need we have to learn and relearn again and again, the humility to know *with* those whom we help to know. You must be humble because you don't have any reason not to be humble. But being humble does not mean that you accept being humiliated. Humility implies understanding the pain of others, the feelings of others. We should respect the expectations that students have and the knowledge students have. Our tendency as teachers is to start from the point at which we are and not from the point at which the students are. The teacher has to be *free* to say to students "You convinced me." Dialogue is not an empty instructional tactic, but a natural part of the process of knowing.

Another important virtue for the teacher is patience and its opposite, impatience. We teachers must learn how to make a life together with our students who may be different from us. This kind of learning implies patience and

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impatience. We must always be impatient about achieving our dream and helping students achieve theirs. Yet if we and our students push too hard and too fast for our dreams, we may destroy them. Thus, we must be patiently impatient.

Tolerance is another virtue which is very important. It involves both humility and patience. Tolerance means learning how to confront the antagonist. For instance, a classroom of students is not a social class as such, but is made up of individual students who bring to class with them various social class backgrounds. As a teacher my relationship with them is not a class relationship. My values may be different from the students', but I cannot for that reason take them as my enemies. I must be tolerant.

The story is told about Chairman Mao's niece complaining to him about "Viva Chiang Kai-Shek!" found scrawled on a blackboard at her university. In response to Mao's questions, she told him there were only about two reactionaries among the five thousand students at her university that would have written it. Mao replied that it was too bad there were only two, that it would be better for the Communist side if there were more reactionaries around. He pointed out that people had the right to say what they thought, but that the Communist side also had the right to try to convince them they are wrong.

All these virtues connect. For instance being tolerant implies respect, and being tolerant implies assuming the naivety of the student. A teacher must accept the naivety of the student for practical reasons. You cannot overcome a student's naivety by decree. We must start at the point where the students are. If we start from the point where we are, we must make connections with the position in which the students are. In order for students to go beyond their naivety, it is necessary for them to grasp their naivety into their own hands and then they will try to make the important leap, but they will leap with you. Assuming the naivety of the student doesn't mean becoming naive or staying at the naive level of the students. To assume the naivety of the student is to understand the naivety and not to refuse it dogmatically, but to say yes to the naivety and mediate to challenge the naive student, so they can go beyond their naive understanding of reality.

The final virtue, if possible, is the ability to love students, in spite of everything. I don't mean a kind of soft or sweet love, but on the contrary a very affirmative love, a love which accepts, a love for students which pushes us to go beyond, which makes us more and more responsible for our task.

Language Arts: You have often used the phrase "teacher learner" in reference to the teacher in the classroom. In a teaching situation how do you see the teacher as a learner?

Paulo Freire: I consider it an important quality or virtue to understand the impossible separation of teaching and learning. Teachers should be conscious every day that they are coming to school to learn and not just to teach. This way we are not just teachers but teacher learners. It is really impossible to teach without learning as well as learning without teaching. We cannot separate one

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from the other; we create a violence when we try. Over a period of time we no longer perceive it as violence when we continually separate teaching from learning. Then we conclude that the teacher teaches and the student learns. That unfortunately is when students are convinced that they come to school to be taught and that being taught often means transference of knowledge.

Knowing the concept of an object implies apprehending the object. I first apprehend the object, in apprehending the object I know it, and because I know it, I then memorize it. Apprehending precedes memorization. Learning does not exist without knowing. Teaching for me then is challenging the students to know, to apprehend the object.

As teachers, we learn from the process of teaching and we learn with the students for whom we make possible the conditions to learn. We also learn from the processes that the students are also teaching us.

Language Arts: What is your vision of education? What do you hope education would do for the growth of young children?

Paulo Freire: For me education is simultaneously an act of knowing, a political act, and an artistic event. Thus, I no longer speak about a political dimension of education. I no longer speak about a knowing dimension of education. As well, I don't speak about education through art. On the contrary I say education *is* politics, art, and knowing. Education is a certain theory of knowledge put into practice every day, but it is clothed in a certain aesthetic dress. Our very preoccupation with helping kids shape themselves as beings is an artistic aspect of education. While being a teacher demands that we be simultaneously a politician, an epistomologist, and an artist, I recognize that it is not easy to be these three things together.

Thus, to the extent that we are responsible, we must become prepared, competent, capable. We should not frustrate those students who come to us hoping for answers to their expectations, to their doubts, to their desire to know. We must have some knowledge, of course, about our subject, but we must also know how to help them to know. This dimension of *how* is also an artistic one and not just a methodological one.

Many issues and questions arise from this understanding of the act of education. For example, it suggests that we teachers should be constantly asking questions of ourselves and of our students, to create a spirit in which we are certain by not being certain of our certainties. To the extent that we are not quite sure about our certainties, we begin to "walk toward" certainties.

Another example is that education has politicity, the quality of being political. As well, politics has educability, the quality of being educational. Political events are educational and vice versa. Because education *is* politicity, it is never neutral. When we try to be neutral, like Pilate, we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domesticating. (Yet I also recognize that we probably never experience it as purely one or the other but rather a mixture of both.) Thus, we have to recognize ourselves as politicians. It

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does not mean that we have the right to *impose* on students our political choice. But we do have the duty not to hide our choice. Students have the right to know what our political dream is. They are then free to accept it, reject it, or modify it. Our task is not to impose our dreams on them, but to challenge them to have their own dreams, to define their choices, not just to uncritically assume them.

Many teachers unfortunately have been destroyed by the dominant ideology of a society and they tend to impose that way of seeing the world and behaving on kids. They usually view it as "saving" kids, as a missionary would. This tendency stems from a superiority complex. When we fall into this way of thinking, we are touching kids with surgical masks and gloves. The dominant ideology, which serves the interests of the socially powerful, makes the world opaque to us. We often believe the ideological words that are told to us—and which we repeat—rather than believing what we're living. The only way to escape that ideological trap, to unveil reality, is to create a counter-ideology to help us break the dominant ideology. This is accomplished by reflecting critically on our concrete experiences, to consider the raison d'etre of the facts we reflect on. Teachers must be able to play with children, to dream with them. They must wet their bodies in the waters of children's culture first. Then they will see how to teach reading and writing.

Once teachers see the contradiction between their words and their actions, they have two choices. They can become shrewdly clear and aware of their need to be reactionary, or they can accept a critical position to engage in action to transform reality. I call it "making Easter" every day, to die as the dominator and be born again as the dominated, fighting to overcome oppression.

The Role of Language and Reading

Language Arts: How does language, especially reading, fit in with your vision of education? How can it help develop critical consciousness to know our dreams in order to be free and move toward those dreams?

Paulo Freire: If we think of education as an act of knowing, then reading has to do with knowing. The act of reading cannot be explained as merely reading words since every act of reading words implies a previous reading of the world and a subsequent rereading of the world. There is a permanent movement back and forth between "reading" reality and reading words—the spoken word too is our reading of the world. We can go further, however, and say that reading the word is not only preceded by reading the world, but also by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it. In other words, of transforming it by means of conscious practical action. For me, this dynamic movement is central to literacy.

Thus, we see how reading is a matter of studying reality that is alive, reality that we are living inside of, reality as history being made and also making us. We can also see how it is impossible to read texts without reading the context of the text, without establishing the relationships between the discourse and the reality

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which shapes the discourse. This emphasizes, I believe, the responsibility which reading a text implies. We must try to read the context of a text and also relate it to the context in which we are reading the text. And so reading is not so simple. Reading mediates knowing and is also knowing, because language is knowledge and not just mediation of knowledge.

Perhaps I can illustrate by referring to the title of a book written by my daughter, Madalena. She teaches young children in Brazil and helps them learn to read and write, but above all she helps them know the world. Her book describes her work with the children and the nature of their learning. It is entitled *The Passion to Know the World,* not *How to Teach Kids to Read and Write.* No matter the level or the age of the students we teach, from preschool to graduate school, reading critically is absolutely important and fundamental. Reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and "rewriting" what is read. Its task is to unveil what is hidden in the text. I always say to the students with whom I work, "Reading is not walking on the words; it's grasping the soul of them."

Language Arts: It seems that when children come to school, they already know how to "read" in the sense that they already know how to come to know the world, how to transform it. Yet as we try to work within an uncritical, reproductive educational system, it seems that can get in the way and that reading can become "walking on words"—an empty, technical process. How do we prevent that from happening? How is Madalena with the kids; how does she fan the flames of their passion to know the world?

Paulo Freire: Reading words, and writing them, must come from the dynamic movement of reading the world. The question is how to create a fluid continuity between on the one hand reading the world, of speaking about experience, of talking freely with spontaneity and on the other hand the moment of writing and then learning how to read, so that the words which become the starting point for learning to read and write come from the kids' ideas and not from the teacher's reading book.

In the last analysis, the kids should come full of spontaneity—with their feelings, with their questions, with their creativity, with their risk to create, getting their own words "into their own hands" in order to do beautiful things with them. The basis for critical reading in young children is their curiosity.

Once again, teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, into something without emotions, without invention, without creativity—but with *repetition.* Many teachers work bureaucratically when they should work artistically. Teaching kids how to read words in the world is something which cannot really be put inside of a program. Normally, kids live imaginatively vis-a-vis reality, but they can feel guilty if they read this way within a technical, bureaucratic reading program and eventually can give up their imaginative, critical reading for a behavioristic process.

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Reading is more than a technical event for me. It's something that takes my conscious body into action. I must be the subject, with the teacher, of my act of reading and writing and not a mere object of the teaching of how to read and write. I must know! I must get into my hands the process of reading and writing.

Madalena introduces the kids, without any kind of violence, to a serious understanding of the world, of the dimensions of their reality by talking with them, by bringing into the class a text or articles from the newspapers, by reading for them and to them, inviting parents to come and talk about their experiences in life, encouraging the kids to bring in texts, objects, and experiences, constantly putting in print generative words from the kids which express their expectations. The kids begin to reflect on their own language, getting the language "into their hands." Little by little they learn to read and write critically. And this can be done without turning them into arrogant academics.

The teacher must be one with young children—by being curious with them—without being one of them, since children need adults. They need to know that we know more than they do, but also that we are *knowing*. One of Madalena's pupils was shocked one day to learn that Madalena did not know a certain thing, but saw in the next few days how she went about learning it. Such an experience has ideological dimensions for schooling and learning. By making the teacher vulnerable, it demystifies her and makes her more lovable. This demystification of adults is the only way for kids to grow up.

The basic question in school is how not to separate reading the word and reading the world, reading the text and reading the context.

Language Arts: It seems that we've come full circle in this conversation. As I look back, I'm afraid I was dichotomizing as I listened to you by focusing at one time on what the teacher does and at another time on what the child does. Actually it seems to be all one question—and one answer. It seems that the kind of reader and writer we want young children to be, we have to be. We have to know it—and teach it—by living it.

Paulo Freire: Yes, that's right!

Language Arts: If teachers have a passion to know the world, if they are curious and wondering, it seems that reading and writing will be treated that way in the clasroom, indeed, could be treated in no other way.

Paulo Freire: Yes, I agree. For example, it would have been impossible for Madalena to have done what she did if she had a bureaucratic understanding of reading and of education. (I mention Madalena only because we talked about her book. There are many teachers in Brazil who do simliar things.) If a teacher has a bureaucraticized understanding of education, of reality, of existence, then necessarily that teacher's understanding of reading will also be a bureaucratized one. The challenge for teachers is to re-know for themselves the objects the kids are trying to learn, to find meanings in them hidden to them before. If they don't,

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there is the danger that they may uncritically transmit their knowledge to students. Whether or not a child reads critically depends on whom the child reads with and for.

Let's say that a teacher has me in a course and encounters a new way of thinking—about existence, about education, about reality. If the teacher does not have enough time to reshape his or her understandings, if she or he accepts my ideas just intellectually but not emotionally, not politically, not existentially, what can happen is that she or he returns to working with kids and transforms all the dynamism I suggested for reading the world and reading words into a formula. Once again, the teacher will turn reading into a bureaucracy and maybe will become frustrated because she or he cannot do it the way they thought and will say that Paulo Freire is absolutely mistaken. Rather the teacher was not able to die as a bureaucratized mind in order to be born again as an open mind, a creative mind.

In knowing as teachers, we must have a humble conviction. When we are too convinced, we often can't accept change. Of course we need to be convinced, but with humility, always waiting to overcome our "convincement." If you are not convinced in a humble way, not only of the principles but also of the concrete experience, you risk transforming these ideas into a bandage and they will not work.

Language Arts: Thank you very much. Is there any final comment you'd like to add?

Paulo Freire: I just want to thank the readers for reading this conversation. I also ask them not just to accept what we said, but to think critically of what we said.

Paulo Freire, whose books in English include Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Education for Critical Consciousness *and* Pedagogy in Process, *is currently professor of educational philosophy at the Catholic University of Saõ Paulo and adjunct professor at Campinas University near Saõ Paulo, Brazil.*

When I heard the learned astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wandered off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and from time to time,
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars.

Walt Whitman

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