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SOURCEBOOK OF EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

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N - ARISTOTLE
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KEY THINKERS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

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Preface
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6 Martin Luther King Jr.
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Critical Praxis and Experiential Education

Mary Breunig

In the preface of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire (1921–1997) writes about a factory worker responding to a specific situation of injustice that was being discussed during one of the training courses that Freire conducted. Freire (1970, p. iv) writes that the factory worker said, “I can’t say that I’ve understood everything you’ve said just now, but I can say one thing—when I began this course I was naive, and when I found out how naive I was, I started to get critical.”

I had a somewhat similar awakening when I first read Freire. I was introduced to Paulo Freire’s work by Jasper Hunt while I was working toward a master’s degree in experiential education at Minnesota State University in Mankato. What has developed into revelations and insights about Freire’s work and its intersection with the field of experiential education began with reflective skepticism about why it was that we were reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in the first place. I naively believed that the coursework for my master’s degree would involve rock-climbing adventures and canoe expeditions. I was naive about the field of experiential education, believing that all experiential education happened outdoors and involved some form of hands-on learning. I have since become critically awakened about the ways in which Freire’s educational ideals intersect with and influence the field of experiential education.

Alongside John Dewey and Kurt Hahn, Paulo Freire is frequently cited as the third person whose educational ideals had a strong influence on the field of experiential education. All three were concerned with the active involvement of students in real experience and liberation. All three saw education as needing the experience of the students to be a central part of the educational process (Experiential Education, n.d.; Itin, 1999). For all three the ultimate aim of education was about developing and enhancing people’s capacities to participate in active citizenship. While Dewey and Freire largely overlap in their theories of experiential learning, they depart on the larger ideological purposes of education, with Freire focusing more on critical reflection on race, class, and power (Deans, 1999). “For Freire, education is about the content to be taught, the process by which it is taught, and the resulting consequences for the person within their social context” (Itin, 1999, p. 93).

This chapter provides an overview of the life and work of Paulo Freire. His educational ideals will be discussed, experiential education will be briefly defined, and that will be followed by a section on the ways in which Freire’s liberatory pedagogy intersects with the field of experiential education in theory and in practice.

Biography

The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, is among the most influential educational thinkers of the late 20th century. He was born in Recife, a port city of northeastern Brazil on September 19, 1921. Freire attests that his parents taught him at an early age to prize dialogue and to respect the choices of others—both key elements in his understanding of adult education (Collins, 1977). His parents were middle class but suffered financial reverses so severe during the Great Depres-

sion that Freire learned what it was to go hungry. It was during his childhood and as a result of that hardship that Freire determined to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger (Collins, 1977).

After the family finances improved a bit, Freire was able to enter the University of Recife where he enrolled in the Faculty of Law and also studied philosophy and the psychology of language while working part-time as an instructor of Portuguese in a secondary school. During this same period, he was reading the works of Marx and also Catholic intellectuals (Collins, 1977). In 1944, Freire married Elza Maia Costa Oliveira. They had three daughters and two sons. As a parent, Paulo's interest in theories of education began to grow, leading him to do more extensive reading in education, philosophy, and the sociology of education than in law.

His early work experiences in public service as a welfare official and later as director of the Department of Education and Culture of the Social Service in the State of Pernambuco brought him into direct contact with the urban poor (Collins, 1977). The educational and organizational assignments he undertook there led him to begin to formulate a means of communicating with the dispossessed that would later develop into his dialogical method for education. His involvement in education also included directing seminars and teaching courses in the history and philosophy of education at the University of Recife, where he was awarded a doctoral degree in 1959 (Collins, 1977).

In the early 1960s, numerous reform movements flourished simultaneously in Brazil as socialists, communists, students, labor leaders, populists, and Christian militants all sought their own socio-political goals. It was during this time that Freire became the first director of the University of Recife's Cultural Extension Service which brought literacy programs to thousands of peasants in the northeast. Later, from June 1963 up to March 1964, Freire's literacy teams worked throughout the entire nation. They claimed success in interesting adult illiterates to read and write in as short a time as 30 hours (Collins, 1977).

The secret of this success is found in the resistance of Freire and his co-workers to merely teaching the decontextualized skills of reading and writing. Instead, they presented the idea of participation in the political process through knowledge of reading and writing as a desirable and attainable goal for all Brazilians. Freire's liberatory methods were incontestably political and when the Brazilian military suppressed all progressive movements, Freire was thrown into jail for his so-called "subversive" activities (Collins, 1977). In prison he began his first major educational work, *Education as the Practice of Freedom*. This book, an analysis of Paulo's failure to effect change in Brazil, had to be completed in Chile, because Freire was sent into exile in 1964 (Collins, 1977).

Later, Freire worked under the auspices of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In 1969, he taught at Harvard University and 10 years later returned to his own country under a political amnesty. In 1988 he was also appointed Minister of Education for the City of Sao Paulo—a position which made him responsible for guiding school reform within two-thirds of the nation's schools. Freire died of heart failure in Sao Paulo, Brazil, on May 2, 1997 (Collins, 1977).

Freire and Education

Freire's most well known work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Throughout this and subsequent books (*Pedagogy of the City*, 1993; *Pedagogy of Hope*, 1994; *Pedagogy of Freedom*, 2001), he argues for a system of education that emphasizes learning as a political act—as a means for all people to be liberated.

Freire was not only one of the key figures in the Latin American liberation movement that attempted to alleviate the oppression of those in poverty, and he was also regarded as the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2000). His work with the poor in Brazil introduced him to the lives of impoverished peasants. His experiences compelled him to develop

educational ideals and practices that would serve to improve the lives of these marginalized people and to lessen their oppression. Freire began to explore an approach to teaching and learning that would in essence dismantle the "banking model" of education, which supported the dominant ideological perspective that students were open repositories to whatever knowledge the teacher deemed important and noteworthy to deposit on any particular day (Freire, 1970). Freire's (1970) definition of the banking model of education closely parallels other forms of "traditional pedagogy" whereby the teacher teaches and the students are taught.

the teacher is the "knower" and the student is the "open repository" into which the teacher pours knowledge.

the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.

the teacher (or institution) chooses the curricular content, and the students adapt to it.

the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the students are mere objects.

knowledge is assessed through standardized exams.

the act of knowing is assessed through a student's ability to recite and memorize the information that is transmitted.

In contrast, Freire's problem-posing model of education valued the importance of student experience and a dialogical method of teaching and learning whereby the student and the teacher were mutually engaged in the production of knowledge and the process of teaching and learning. In this sense, Freire was advocating for a social justice-oriented, experiential education. His own life experiences helped him understand the ways that schooling was often used by dominant interests to validate their own privilege and to maintain the marginalization of others' interests. As Joe Kincheloe (2004) suggests, Freire understood schools to be impediments for the education of the poor, and thus sought to find strategies for students to intervene in what he considered to be a dehumanizing process. Freire (1970) referred to this educative process as liberatory action or praxis. Praxis starts with an abstract idea (theory) or an experience and incorporates reflection upon that idea or experience that then translates into purposeful action. "Praxis in education aims to bridge the gap between theory and transformational action that effectively transforms human existence" (Gur-Ze'ev, 1998, p. 467).

Freire argued that people need to engage in a praxis that incorporates theory, action, and reflection as a means to work toward social change and justice. For Freire, liberatory or problem-posing education was intentionally oriented to issues of social justice as described above. One of the key applications of this form of pedagogy was in adult literacy programs.

He devised a literacy program that was based on the ideal of problem-posing pedagogy as well as the practical needs of his students. Reading materials were directly related to the world of work his students knew firsthand. He encouraged his students to use their newly acquired literacy skills as a means to understanding the conditions of their labor and the interests being served by their work. Freire developed the notion of reading the word and the world as a means to the possibility of "rewriting" a less oppressive world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

One of the key elements of this educative process was that people develop conscientization (Freire, 1970). Conscientization is an ongoing process by which a learner moves toward critical consciousness. This process is the heart of liberatory education. It differs from "consciousness raising" in that the latter frequently involves "banking" education—the transmission of pre-selected knowledge. Conscientization means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness—in particular, awareness of oppression, being an "object" in a world where only "subjects" have power. The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming a "subject" with other oppressed subjects—that is, becoming part of the process of changing the world (Freire, 1970).

Freire's problem-posing or liberatory pedagogy was thus intentionally directed toward developing a critical consciousness in an individual as a mean to bring about a more socially just world.

Defining Experiential Education

There are numerous published definitions of experiential education (Joplin, 1981; Luckmann, 1996; Itin, 1999). The Association for Experiential Education (AEE; 2004) defines experiential education as both a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values.

Central to the definition of experiential education is the distinction between experiential education as methodology and experiential education as philosophy. This distinction suggests that there is a difference between experiential learning and experiential education.

Knapp (1992) explains that experiential learning consists of four distinct segments: "(a) active student involvement in a meaningful and challenging experience, (b) reflection upon the experience individually and in a group, (c) the development of new knowledge about the world, and (d) application of this knowledge to a new situation" (pp. 36-37).

Kolb (1984) described the experiential learning cycle as a four step process: (a) Concrete Experience, (b) Observation and Reflection, (c) Forming New Knowledge, and (d) Application and Testing Concepts in New Situations. This cycle helps illustrate how experience, reflection, new knowledge, and application can be employed as a way of teaching experientially. Many experiential educational initiatives are based on this learning cycle, but do not prescribe an intended learning outcome or aim. In essence, employing the experiential learning cycle without an intended educational aim represents experiential learning as methodology, implying that there is a certain way of teaching that makes the learning experiential (Breunig, 2005a). Experiential learning thus informs a number of educational methodologies (e.g., adventure education, service learning, cooperative learning, active learning, and place-based learning).

Experiential education as philosophy employs both methodology (experiential way of teaching) and philosophy as part of the educative process. Experiential education as philosophy implies that there is an intended aim toward which the experiential learning process is directed. In essence, recent research on experiential education (Breunig, 2005a; Itin, 1999), the recent focus of many experiential education conferences, and experiential education curriculum suggests that one intended aim of experiential education for the 21st century should be focused on its potential as a vehicle for social change.

Liberatory Pedagogical Praxis and Experiential Education

In light of some of the above information, there is something to be learned from the intersection of the justice-oriented intention of Freire's liberatory pedagogical praxis and its potential implications on the field of experiential education.

Praxis and the Experiential Learning Cycle

There is resonance between Freire's notion of praxis and the experiential learning cycle. As previously mentioned, praxis starts with an abstract idea (theory) or an experience and incorporates reflection upon that idea or experience that then translates into purposeful action (Freire, 1970). Both Freire and Kolb additionally emphasize the importance of starting with the student's experience and previous preparation.

For experiential education practitioners, understanding praxis and the experiential learning cycle can aid in lesson-planning. Designing lessons for an outdoor or an indoor environment can begin with either an experience or with theoretical knowledge. If a student starts with an experience, the experience can be enhanced by reflection and by encouraging the student to form concepts and generalizations (theory). The student can then be encouraged to refine her initial experience, hopefully making that particular experience more educative as a result. If a student were to start with an abstract concept or with theory, then that student is encouraged to apply that theory experientially and to reflect upon both the theoretical knowledge and the experiential knowledge that she has gained in order to learn from that experience.

An experiential educator could choose to apply Freire's notion of praxis and/or the experiential learning cycle when teaching a lesson on paddling a canoe. The educator could hand the student a paddle and put her in a boat on calm water and encourage her to experience what happens when she attempts to steer the boat. The educator would then ask the student to come back onto land and introduce the student to some of the "paddling theory," including the physics of paddling a boat. The student can then apply both the experiential and theoretical knowledge to her paddling praxis. In contrast, the educator could choose to start with the paddling theory before encouraging the student to experience it. In either case, the experiential educator can apply both praxis (experience, action, and reflection) and the experiential learning cycle in her teaching.

Problem-posing Education (Liberatory Pedagogy)

Freire (1970) argues that the central purpose of a reflective and action-oriented praxis must be directed toward transformation and liberation. He believes that one of the greatest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality acts to submerge human beings' consciousness, arguing for conscientization which will be discussed in more detail later in this section. Freire believes that a problem-posing method of education that values the importance of student experience and a dialogical method of teaching and learning whereby the student and the teacher are mutually engaged in the production of knowledge and the process of teaching and learning can aid in a person's liberation.

Similar to Dewey, Freire's problem-posing or liberatory method of education begins with the experiences of the students. Freire asserts that through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the student-of-the-teacher cease to exist. A new term thus emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. There is resonance with this in Steven Simpson's (2003) book entitled, *The Leader Who is Hardly Known: Self-less Teaching from the Chinese Tradition*. Simpson advocates for experiential educators to reflect upon the dilemma of what it means to be a "leader" or a "facilitator." He argues that, an educator is not just a leader or just a facilitator, but is a leader-facilitator, reminding us that providing some vision while allowing students some freedom should be done with such subtlety that the students feel as though the educator was hardly involved.

Freire (1970) asserts that "By imposing their [the leaders] word on others, they falsify that word and establish a contradiction between their methods and their objectives. If they are truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others" (p. 107). Freire argues that it is insufficient for students to master content without applying it toward the purpose of liberation and transformation.

Both Freire and Simpson are advocating for many of the same ideals that Dewey and the progressivists argued for, including experience, teacher as guide, genuine reflection, and the importance of purpose, to name a few. Freire goes on to assert that manipulation (e.g., bribing students with marks or grades) and prescription (e.g., essentially "spoon feeding" students a narrow view of knowledge and truth) cannot be components of a liberatory praxis.

In light of the above, it is imperative that experiential practitioners identify and act upon their praxis in purposeful ways. For example, if an outdoor leader is facilitating a group of students

and that group of students has a theoretical understanding and accepting of Leave No Trace camping principles and practices—dispose of waste properly and leave what you find (Leave No Trace, n.d.), but is not applying that knowledge in praxis, then it is the obligation of that leader to point out the incongruence between the group's espoused values and beliefs and their actions.

Both Freire and Simpson would also caution the budding outdoor leader to try to avoid patronizing and/or manipulative behavior. In reference to the above example, the outdoor leader of the trip may consider posing a series of critical queries to point out the lack of congruence between values and beliefs or may consider facilitating an activity that could serve as a metaphor to instruct students about how to act upon their ideals.

Freire also asserts that if leaders are truly committed to liberation, their praxis cannot proceed without the praxis of others (Freire, 1970). The experiential practitioner may have a greater knowledge base and more experience than the students, but that should not be the only experience that is valued. Liberation begins with dialogue and authentic dialogue happens when the experiential practitioners ask themselves what they will dialogue with the participants about, avoiding prescription of that dialogue and ensuring that dialogue begins with the experience of the participants. On an outdoor trip, this may be as simple as avoiding assumptions about participants' previous preparation and asking them what they already know and to demonstrate that, and then facilitating an experience that builds upon that.

Conscientization

According to Freire (1970), the earlier that dialogue begins, the more truly revolutionary an experience will be: "Revolutionary leaders cannot think without the people, nor for the people, but only with the people" (p. 112). The purpose of a dialogical-liberation is to transform an unjust reality. Developing a critical consciousness, or what Freire refers to as conscientization, is an essential component of authentic dialogue. Consider, for example, the story in the opening paragraph of this chapter. The worker in the story reported that his critical consciousness about worker injustices was being awakened as a result of the course that he took with Freire. This is what Freire refers to as conscientization.

Likewise, experiential education theory often focuses on the ways in which outdoor and experiential education can serve to develop people's critical thinking skills (Breunig, 2005b; Brookfield, 1995; Itin, 1999). Taken together, both Freire and experiential education theorists assert that developing a critical consciousness will provide individuals with the opportunity to take action against the oppressive elements of reality and to, in essence, engage in justice-oriented work.

In practice, an experiential educator may wish to probe participants to question the ways in which outdoor pursuits can attend to issues of environmental and social justice. For example, if a young male participant is displaying a great deal of confidence, and perhaps even entitlement, with some of the decision-making processes, a facilitator may wish to subtly attempt to find ways to encourage his voice to be less dominant and to encourage other voices to be heard. Assigning each individual to serve as the "leader of the day" is one means to deliberately attempt to share some of the authority. Having an individual "leader of the day" will also encourage each individual voice, each individual epistemology, and various leadership styles to come to the fore. Those individuals who may feel oppressed or may come from a background where they have been marginalized in the past will then be provided with an opportunity to have their voices heard. Setting ground rules that directly introduce students to a democratic process at the outset of a wilderness trip is another means to frontload the group with information about how to negotiate power and authority while on the trip.

This liberatory effort of providing for equity can be discussed with the group. A facilitator could use an evening debriefing session to encourage people to critically reflect upon their

experiences with being the "leader of the day." The facilitator could use a series of critical queries to discuss the ways in which oppression and marginalization silence certain voices and even prevent people from being asked to serve in a leadership role. The experiential educator could then encourage participants to discuss the ways in which leadership can be used to either oppress or to liberate, encouraging each participant to identify a way in which he or she will directly apply some newfound learning about this to his or her work or home life.

In this way, a facilitator can model liberatory praxis and can encourage participants' conscientization about their own praxis. Ideally, the result would be that participants would continue to develop their critical consciousness and to engage in liberatory actions and praxis.

Implications for EE Philosophy

There is a great deal of resonance between the work of Paulo Freire and some of the forefathers of experiential education, including John Dewey and Kurt Hahn as well as between some of the present day goals of experiential education theory and the theory of Paulo Freire.

Some of the key concepts that can be directly applied in practice include praxis and the experiential learning cycle, the problem-posing method of education, and conscientization. If, indeed, both liberatory pedagogy and experiential education assert that the aim of their educative practices is to bring about a more socially just world, then there is value in developing an understanding of both of these theories and in engaging in a reflective praxis that acts upon the theoretical underpinnings of these pedagogies.

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