

Freire and Whitehead: Any Difference?

Robert E. Roemer
Loyola University Chicago

Absurd as it may at first seem to question whether Paulo Freire and Alfred North Whitehead differ as educational theorists, the argument presented here is that they are surprisingly similar in their discussions of education. Freire and Whitehead certainly pursue very different programs in their educational theories. The former, working with the oppressed and economically deprived, advocates radical social change; while the latter, an intellectual mandarin from the privileged confines of Oxford and Harvard, proposes ways to keep upper-class education vital. Associating Freire with Whitehead is also unexpected given that critical theorists inspired by Freire appear never to acknowledge the work of Whitehead, even though they sometimes compare Freire with John Dewey.¹

The question may also be called a mistake because it implies that Freire, like Whitehead, focuses on educational method. For critical theorists inspired by Freire, looking to him for good pedagogy falsifies the fundamentally political nature of Freire's program. For example, Stanley Aronowitz complains that "Freire's work has suffered the misreadings of well-meaning educators who have interpreted his work as a 'brilliant methodology,' a kind of manual for teachers who would bring out the best in their otherwise indifferent students."² In this regard, the title of Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is programmatic: good pedagogy, yes, but for the purpose of revolutionary change in society. Freire signaled this by warning readers that "this admittedly tentative work is for radicals."³

And yet, to impose a rule that Freire can only be read as a political activist may be unduly restrictive since Freire does elaborate an educational theory and explains pedagogical techniques at great length. Freire's work with Ira Shor, for example, in the self-described "talking book," *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, gives close attention to the details of instructional practice in the "liberating" classroom.⁴ Besides, some who collaborated with Freire do not hesitate to praise him as an educator, as Donald Macedo and Ana Maria Araújo Freire do in describing him as "the most significant educator in the world during the last half of this century."⁵ Looking at Freire's pedagogy, then, for its methodological power and assessing its place in the history of educational thought hardly seems factitious. But, as will be seen, even when taking Freire as a revolutionary, he and Whitehead have something in common.

Finally, the question posed here may seem impertinent, at least to some, because no one could possibly compare with Freire. The praise bestowed on Freire is sometimes breathtaking: Cornell West states, "It is safe to say that his classic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was a world-historical event for counter-hegemonic theorists and activists in search of new ways of linking social theory to narratives of human freedom"⁶; and Ronald David Glass claims, "Freire's ideas have entered educational discourse from the most cosmopolitan centers to the most remote corners of the earth, and not since John Dewey have the thoughts of a philosopher

of education impacted such a broad sphere of public life in the U.S.”⁷ Such testimonials make comparing Freire and Whitehead an exercise in temerity, but the ways they might be similar make more significant their differences.

THE PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEM

Freire and Whitehead start with remarkably similar descriptions of bad pedagogical practice. Freire uses the metaphor of banking to portray what happens when the teacher fails to engage students in active learning: “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (*PO*, 58). Whitehead’s corresponding concept is that of inert ideas, “ideas that are merely received into the mind without being utilized, or tested, or thrown into fresh combinations.”⁸ The similarity between inert ideas and banking education is apparent, but Whitehead draws even closer to Freire’s image with his own metaphor of depositing: “It must never be forgotten that education is not a process of packing articles in a trunk” (*AE*, 33).

Since they start with similar descriptions of poor pedagogy, do Freire and Whitehead likewise discover that such pedagogy produces similar kinds of harm? For both theorists, the outcome of bad pedagogy is loss of creativity. Freire notes the “capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students’ creative powers” (*PO*, 60), while Whitehead finds that with the passive reception of disconnected ideas “at best you get inert knowledge without initiative, and at the worst you get contempt of ideas... without knowledge” (*AE*, 33). Either way, poor pedagogy dulls the mental capacities of students so that they do not engage what is learned in any vital way or expand its significance.

Both Freire and Whitehead envision a better pedagogical outcome in which students use what they have learned to develop new knowledge, transform their experience, and increase their agency in the world. For Freire an overriding goal of pedagogy is liberation leading to self-agency: “The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for men to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (*PO*, 118). Whitehead has a similar vision, although focused on the individual and without Freire’s reference to dialog with others: “Education is the guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life; and by the art of life I mean the most complete achievement of varied activity expressing the potentialities of that living creature in the face of its actual environment” (*AE*, 39). For both thinkers, good pedagogy enables students to reach an understanding of their existence adequate to managing their life circumstances. Mechanistic pedagogy, instead, renders students passive by giving them mere scraps of information and never asking them for creative responses to their particular situations.

The similarity in Freire’s and Whitehead’s analysis of good and bad pedagogy sharpens the differences in their explanations for why bad pedagogy happens. Freire sees a political program in which those who hold power seek to maintain dominance over the oppressed. Banking education does this by adapting students to the world

as presently arranged so they will not disturb the interests of those who currently hold power: “Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in ‘changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them’; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated” (*PO*, 60).⁹ The politics of oppression seem wholly absent from Whitehead’s writings on education. And yet Whitehead’s criticism of educational practice does have something of Freire’s prophetic tone, albeit within a different frame of reference: “In the schools of antiquity philosophers aspired to impart wisdom, in modern colleges our humbler aim is to teach subjects” (*AE*, 29). How to explain this lapse into banality? For Whitehead, an oppressive power is not the culprit, but rather entropy, a lack of energy in commitment to ideals: “My point is that, at the dawn of our European civilization, men started with the full ideals which should inspire education, and that gradually our ideals have sunk to square with our practice” (*AE*, 29). Bad educational practice thus stems from stagnation, a drift into “pedantry and routine” (*AE*, 1), rather than from class conflict. Where Freire explains bad pedagogy as a function of social imposition, Whitehead simply finds the human failing of laziness.

THE PEDAGOGICAL SOLUTION

Freire and Whitehead recommend strikingly similar antidotes for counteracting poor pedagogy, problem posing for Freire and utilizing ideas for Whitehead. The technique of problem posing is simple: “the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world” (*PO*, 66). A bedrock fact is that each person lives at a moment in history; fully recognizing this is a necessary condition for good pedagogy. The “existential, concrete, present situation” provides the starting point for assembling the content of an educational, as well as a political, program (*PO*, 85). The historical moment is the starting point for changing the situation of the oppressed because motivation for action comes from recognition of the present reality. Pedagogy starts, then, with conscientization, a process in which “[i]ndividuals who were *submerged* in reality, merely *feeling* their needs, *emerge* from reality and perceive the *causes* of their needs” (*PO*, 110). Colin Lankshear describes this as “shifting people from naïve to critical consciousness.”¹⁰ This is the first step in liberation and is the basis for becoming an agent in shaping one’s future.

Whitehead is Freire’s equal in emphasizing the student’s present reality. Whitehead insists that “the understanding which we want is an understanding of an insistent present” (*AE*, 2–3). While Whitehead does not use — could not be expected to use — the word “conscientization,” he speaks to the same phenomenon of helping students become aware of what, in fact, is their reality. Education, according to Whitehead, is “merely a preparation for battling with the immediate experiences of life” (*AE*, 37). An idea remains inert if it relates to nothing in the student’s life, if it contributes nothing to understanding that life. The idea must be utilized by “relating it to that stream, compounded of sense perceptions, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life” (*AE*, 3). Curiously, Whitehead and Freire both use water metaphors in describing the student’s present reality, a stream for Whitehead and something in which a person

is submerged for Freire. In both cases, the present historical moment is the touch point for meaningful learning.

For Whitehead, too, there is a move toward action, similar to that involved in Freire's problem posing. Whitehead summarizes education as "the acquisition of the art of utilization of knowledge" (*AE*, 4). This is a pedagogical claim, namely that using an idea promotes appreciation of the idea and sustains interest. But it is also a claim about what it means to function well as an educated human being: "Mental cultivation is nothing else than the satisfactory way in which the mind will function when it is poked up into activity" (*AE*, 27). While it would be an interpretive excess to see a political dimension in Whitehead's educational theory, still his emphasis on the utilization of knowledge comes close to what Freire sees as the power students acquire as a result of problem posing. This is seen, for example, in Whitehead's claim that the "ideal of a University is not so much knowledge, as power" (*AE*, 27). Power, in this case, is not necessarily political and certainly not revolutionary, at least in reference to class conflict, but Whitehead establishes the same finality for knowledge that Freire sees as the endpoint of searching: the capacity to take agency in the world. Freire writes, "This permanent movement of searching creates a capacity for learning not only in order to adapt to the world but especially to intervene, to recreate and to transform it" (*PF*, 66). For Whitehead these activities of intervening, recreating, and transforming are subsumed under the art of life: "the most complete achievement of varied activity expressing the potentialities of the living creature in the face of its actual environment" (*AE*, 39).

THE TEACHER

How does the teacher implement the desired pedagogy? Freire points out that central to banking education is the assumption that the teacher has knowledge and the students are ignorant. For liberatary education that assumption has to be put aside: "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students" (*PO*, 59). Of course, the teacher has knowledge important to the student; but that knowledge is not privileged simply because it is the teacher's. Rather the teaching encounter is a dynamic interchange: "As object of cognition, content must be delivered up to the cognitive curiosity of teachers and pupils. The former teach, and in so doing, learn. The latter learn, and in so doing, teach."¹¹ In this exchange the teacher is self-aware of the existential situation shared with the students: "The teacher is conscious of being unfinished" (*PF*, 51).

Compared with Freire, Whitehead writes little about what the teacher should do when teaching. But in one comment he suggests a mode of encounter between teacher and student that resolves the teacher-student contradiction described by Freire: "It should be the chief aim of a university professor to exhibit himself in his own true character — that is, as an ignorant man thinking, actively utilizing his small share of knowledge" (*AE*, 37). This attitude would make the teacher a person who wants to learn, if not exactly *from* the students, at least in company *with* them. Key here, aside from the salutary humility that comes from recognizing ignorance, is that

the teacher utilizes knowledge in front of others to address the problem at hand. Freire, in reflecting on himself as a teacher, speaks of “experiencing myself as a cultural, historical, and unfinished being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my unfinishedness” (*PF*, 51). Whitehead’s description of the professor and this self description by Freire could be parsed in the same way: the teacher is conscious of being an ignorant person or an unfinished being and, because of this, is one with students even while teaching.

Freire, however, moves the teacher-student encounter a step further, namely towards democracy in that what is studied is negotiated by students and teacher. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire stipulates that a pedagogy “must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed...” (*PO*, 33). More than twenty years after writing that, Freire insists on it again, presenting the democratic process as instrumental to the reform of society: “there is nothing the progressive educator can do in the face of the question of content but join battle for good and all in favor of democratization of society, which necessarily implies the democratization of the school in terms, on the one hand, of the democratization of the programming of content, and on the other, of the democratization of the teaching of that content” (*PH*, 112–3). Freire makes it clear that democratic pedagogy applies not only to working with adults, who can be expected to have an agenda for reflection, but to all levels of schooling.

The concept of democracy is not one that Whitehead uses as a model for teaching. But Whitehead joins Freire’s thought here in two ways. First, Whitehead insists on the usefulness of what is taught for the student. That the teacher possesses knowledge is important, but the pedagogical value of that knowledge is measured in its importance for the student in the present moment: “Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever powers you are strengthening in the pupil must be exercised here and now, whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now” (*AE*, 6). Though Whitehead does not speak here of democracy, the immediate relevance sought for subject matter depends on recognition of, and perhaps negotiation with, the student.

A second way to connect Whitehead with a democratic ethos is through the relation of the classroom environment to the larger educational system. Freire asks that the classroom and the school be democratic, even before the larger society is. Whitehead, again with different words, says much the same when criticizing the uniform external examination frequently used by centralized educational systems: “no educational system is possible unless every question directly asked of a pupil at any examination is either framed or codified by the actual teacher of that pupil in that subject” (*AE*, 5). In light of current practices, Whitehead seems every bit as radical here as Freire is taken to be. Whitehead insists on the particularity of each classroom, constituted as it is by “the genius of the teacher, the intellectual type of the pupils, their prospects in life, the opportunities offered by the immediate surroundings of the school, and allied factors of this sort” (*AE*, 5). In effect, this is a checklist of how to make a classroom democratic.

PEDAGOGY FOR WHAT?

Is this claim that Freire and Whitehead start with more or less the same pedagogical problem to which they offer more or less the same solution undermined by Freire's larger programmatic intent? To what extent is Freire's technique of problem posing more than just a pedagogical move? Freire explains bad pedagogy by relating it to the "capitalist system that created these schools" (*PL*, 35). The point, then, for changing pedagogical practice through problem solving is to transform society. Power, for Freire, is fundamentally political: "liberatory education must be understood as a moment or process or practice where we challenge the people to mobilize or organize themselves to get power" (*PL*, 34). This involves more than just becoming effective agents in the world who have mastered the "art of life." Freire insists that education "is much more than a question of training a student to be dexterous or competent" (*PF*, 22). A pedagogy of the oppressed makes no sense unless it removes the status of being oppressed. Because Freire wrote so much about pedagogical practice and the ways of implementing problem-posing education, he can easily be read simply as an educational methodologist. But Freire seems never to have forgotten his starting point, and certainly critical theorists inspired by his work never have, that his was a pedagogy for social change. After a passage of more than twenty years, Freire revisited his foundation work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and repeated again his political intent: "It is our task as progressive educators to take advantage of this tradition of struggle, of resistance, and 'work it'" (*PH*, 108).

On the other hand, critical theorists do not look to Whitehead for inspiration in political struggle. Rather than a pedagogy of the oppressed, Whitehead seems to fashion a pedagogy of the bored. But elements of his theory, if not revolutionary in the sense of arguing for changes in power structures, do aim at improving society and fomenting social change. For example, in explaining the destructive effect of inert ideas, Whitehead observes that "uneducated clever women, who have seen much of the world, are in middle life the most cultured part of the community" (*AE*, 2). This suggests that in a society with bad schools intellectual vitality is found in those who were denied schooling and that the uneducated have a clearer vision about the current state of affairs than those who were schooled. Whitehead's sentiment here is at least congenial with Freire's "trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason" (*PO*, 53). Elsewhere, in his discussion of technical education, that is, education given to those who will be workers, Whitehead presents as ideal a situation in which work is play and play is life. He admits that this may sound "mystical" when confronted with the life experiences of "the toiling millions, tired, discontented, mentally indifferent, and then the employers," whose situation if not equally dreary is without joy in work (*AE*, 44). Reflecting back on the early monks, Whitehead argues that, as long as human beings have to toil, "work should be transfused with intellectual and moral vision and thereby turned into a joy, triumphing over its weariness and its pain" (*AE*, 44). The struggle in this case is not a matter of rearranging power since, as Whitehead notes, scientists and employers also need to enjoy their work for it to be done well and for inventive genius to blossom. This need shared by employer and employee to find joy in work displays the same

commonality evidenced in Freire's hope for the new man, "neither oppressor nor oppressed, but man in the process of liberation" (*PO*, 42).

It could be objected that these similarities are specious since Whitehead accepts the social class division attendant upon capitalism, while Freire seeks human solidarity. Two comments about this are in order. First, exactly what kind of world Freire envisions is hard to determine; a lot depends on how the vague concepts of humanization and "the new man in process of liberation" are specified. Would either of these be attained in an enterprise in which workers, technicians, and employers have different social status, but where all experience work as play?

The second comment is that Whitehead argues, as does Freire, for the liberation of the oppressor, although not in those terms. Whitehead notes that because employers are already rich they can feel removed from their enterprises as places of engagement and look for diversion in other aspects of their lives. In that case, "Desire for money will produce hard-fistedness and not enterprise" (*AE*, 45). Employers, too, have to find joy in their work. This seems little different from Freire's observation that "[t]he place upon which a new rebellion should be built is not the ethics of the marketplace with its crass insensitivity to the voice of genuine humanity but the ethics of universal human aspiration" (*PF*, 116). For Freire, everyone should be liberated; for Whitehead, everyone should experience the joy of pleasurable intellectual curiosity.

DOMESTICATION AND FREEDOM

Freire's concept of *domestication* provides for a powerful critique of current strategies to reform education by raising standards, often through high-stakes testing, because it reveals the deficiencies of perhaps well-intentioned, but nonetheless dominating, educational improvements. In essence, domesticating education serves to maintain the power structures of society by preparing those without power to take their assigned place in society and serve the interests of the powerful. For example, on this view, the efforts to improve education by providing resources to raise student performance on standardized tests are a form of false generosity towards those who are regarded as unfortunates needing help to function in society. The powerful stand as the model and the assistance given to those without power is to integrate or incorporate them into a society whose contours are shaped by the powerful. By helping those labeled unfortunate to do well in school, the existing power relationships are maintained and the interests of the oppressed are ignored. Reforms motivated by paternalism simply render the oppressed safe and useful, that is, domesticated. For Whitehead, the equivalent to domestication is a mind without vitality produced by an education "consisting in the acquirement of mechanical mental aptitudes, and of formulated statements of useful truths..." (*AE*, 29). This is the mind that disciplined instruction has pumped full of inert knowledge (*AE*, 13).

In place of domestication, both Freire and Whitehead propose a pedagogy that leads to freedom, although Freire favors the term liberation. For Freire, freedom is political and comes with power: "liberatory education must be understood as a moment or process or practice where we challenge the people to mobilize or

organize themselves to get power” (*PL*, 34). For Whitehead, freedom is a quality of mind evidenced by the person who has “active wisdom” (*AE*, 37). In the pursuit of freedom, Freire has the teacher challenge students “to unveil the actual manipulation and myths in society” (*PL*, 172). The point of freedom for Freire is to transform society. For Whitehead the point of freedom is to transform experience through a habit of active thought (*AE*, 32).

The thoughts of Freire and Whitehead intersect repeatedly as they describe what teachers and students do to attain liberation and freedom. Though speaking with different inflections, Freire and Whitehead share similar concerns. For example, Freire proposes solidarity between teacher and student as the antidote to domesticating education: “The liberating educator is different from the domesticating one because he or she moves more and more towards a moment in which an atmosphere of comradeship is established in class” (*PL*, 172). This does not deny the teacher’s special competence, but replaces the authoritarianism of the teacher’s role with the democratic attitude that teacher and student are engaged in learning together. “Comradery” does not easily fit in Whitehead’s description of the mutuality between teacher and student, but “complementarity” does. In discussing the purpose of universities, Whitehead rejects as primary the standard tasks of producing knowledge and transmitting it to students. If not those, then what? “The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest of life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning” (*AE*, 93). The purpose of a university is to generate the excitement that occurs when knowledge is transformed by imaginatively considering what it could mean. Teacher and students contribute differently to this endeavor. The young are imaginative, but with little experience. The experienced, though, have diminished imagination. “The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience” (*AE*, 93). This formulates with greater precision Freire’s hope for comradeship between teacher and student by defining its different bases. The young see a new world; the knowing teacher has ideas on how to create it.

WHAT IS YOUR INTEREST?

Other ways to compare Freire and Whitehead are possible, but this is enough to suggest a common framework in their thoughts about education. Their similarity and difference on the topic of freedom differentiates, perhaps, their use as educational theorists. Critical theorists are right: reading Freire simply as an educational methodologist ignores the finality of his thought which is the political transformation of society. And yet, his pedagogical suggestions are of great worth. For that, Whitehead provides largely the same substance without the political overhead.

1. See for example Ronald David Glass, “On Paulo Freire’s Philosophy of Praxis and the Foundations of Liberation Education,” *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 2 (2001): 15–25. Of the 88 references for this article, three are to works by John Dewey, none to works by Whitehead.

2. Stanley Aronowitz, “Introduction,” in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 8. This book will be cited as *PF* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 21. This book will be cited as *PO* in the text for all subsequent references.

4. Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1987). This book will be cited as *PL* in the text for all subsequent references.
5. Donaldo Macedo and Ana Maria Araújo Freire, "Forward," in Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, trans. Donaldo Macedo, Dale Koike, and Alexandre Oliveira (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), ix.
6. Cornel West, "Preface," in *Paul Freire: A Critical Encounter*, eds. Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard (New York: Routledge, 1993), xiii.
7. Glass, "On Paulo Freire's Philosophy of Practice," 15.
8. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 1. This book will be cited as *AE* in the text for all subsequent references.
9. Freire attributes the quotation to Simone de Beauvoir, *La Pensée de Droite, Aujourd'hui* (Paris).
10. Colin Lankshear, "Functional Literacy from a Freirean Point of View," in *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter*, eds. McLaren and Leonard, 110.
11. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope, Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum, 1994), 111. This book will be cited as *PH* in the text for all subsequent references.