

Liberation, Imagination, and Emancipation within the Diverse Realm of Education: A Critical Analysis of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage

Philip Ray Jones, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English

Texas Southern University Department of English

3100 Cleburne Street, Houston, TX 77004

United States

Abstract

*This critical analysis essay highlights the primary ideas that educational philosopher Paulo Freire presents in his text *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. One of Freire’s primary visions and ideas regarding community development in education is for people to exercise the art of individualized, creative learning in a manner that is compatible to their own unique culture and thinking process free from “oppressive” forces that ultimately smother educational imagination. Moreover, this essay illuminates Freire’s strong opposition to the “Banking Concept,” which is a suppressive system practiced by many educators in which they simply “fill” students with information, rather than encouraging them to be independent, creative, and individualized learners. Ultimately, this essay highlights Freire’s assertion of how we as educators must begin to exercise “collaborative dialogue” regarding the vast realm of education, as well as general worldly views as a whole with students, rather than practicing a “totalitarian” persona.*

Keywords: Banking, Emancipation, Freedom, Imagination, Liberation, filling, Suppression, Community

1. Introduction

Within the multifaceted realm of the field of education, Paulo Freire is recognized as a “beacon of light” in regard to his strong advocacy for the liberation, imagination, and emancipation of the individual’s learning experiences. Many students within both the secondary and postsecondary education setting are consistently dominated by a dark, suppressive cloud of educational totalitarianism in which scientific data is regarded as the ideal holder of knowledge and means to significant learning. Moreover, many teachers within higher education institutions frequently suppress all levels of individual creativity and insight, ultimately illuminating themselves as the ultimate vessels of knowledge whose purpose is to “fill” student’s intellect with information that educational experts have previously deemed as “appropriate.” In Freire’s well-known book entitled *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, he presents his firm charge against the Positivists approach to learning and strongly establishes his view that the innermost passion of the “individual” is the ultimate path to authentic learning

2. Freire’s Key Ideas on Liberation and Emancipation for Community Development in a Social Context

The chief ideas that Freire presents in his text are the ideas of educational liberation, and emancipation for all ages. One of Freire’s primary visions and ideas regarding community development in education is for people to exercise the art of individualized, creative learning in a manner that is compatible to their own unique culture and thinking process. For example, in terms of positioning this vision into a contemporary social context, the controversial suppression of the intellectual growth and development of children by the public school system is a primary concern of the community and society, and is an issue that illuminates Freire’s view of the need for liberated learning. Students are prevented from progressing from one grade to the other, and ultimately prevented from graduating from high school unless a given score is achieved on various standardized tests. This controversial situation illuminates Freire’s chief ideas and arguments on liberation and emancipation very well.

Currently, many public school teachers have become nothing more than “depositors” of testing strategies forcing students to accept their deposits as ideal academic knowledge that will ultimately label them as “Exemplary Students.” The suppressive power of standardized testing has transformed teachers into status seeking, robotic entities who are suppressing imagination and individualized thinking at the highest level: 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 student. 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. (Freire, 2007, p. 68)

In this passage, Freire’s ideas and views on liberation and emancipation are presented very clearly. He is highlighting the suppression of intellectual growth, imagination, and diversity of thinking that dominates the classroom and the teacher-student relationship. In this sense, teachers transform students into followers within the education system, rather than individualized creative thinkers free to expose their intellect on a diverse, open-minded level of thinking and interpretation.

Freire firmly feels that students should not be forced to continuously sit in classrooms and mindlessly accept learning strategies and information dispensed by the teacher as ideal pieces of knowledge, but rather, should have the freedom and confidence to challenge and interpret it through their own lens. As Freire (1998) states, I cannot deny or hide my posture, but I also cannot deny others the right to reject it. In the name of the respect I should have toward my students, I do not see why I should omit or hide my political stance by proclaiming a neutral position that does not exist. On the contrary, my role as a teacher is to assent the student’s right to compare, to choose, to rupture, to decide. (p. 68)

Freire is suggesting how although teachers possess their own beliefs and ideas, this should not prevent them from fostering the intellectual independence and creative thinking of students. The teacher’s duty is to inspire students to challenge knowledge and decide what information best aligns with not only their intellectual development, but also the independent, social, cultural, and educational perspectives that they define themselves with. Students should be the primary “meaning makers” of the knowledge they receive, rather than mere “robotic sponges” mechanically absorbing the preconceived ideas and rhetoric of others:

Education is suffering from a narration sickness [. . .] Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into “containers,” into “receptacles” to be filled by the teacher. (Freire, 2007, p. 68)

Freire is asserting how teachers have characterized themselves as the embodiment of ultimate knowledge for students to idealize. The field of education on many levels has suppressed imagination and individuality on the highest level, which has ultimately transformed students into a dehumanized state of being. Allowing students to interpret knowledge through their own lenses enables the most significant levels of emancipation, liberation, and creativity to be born.

3. A Look at Freire’s ideas on Unfinishedness, Liberation, and Emancipation from the Context of Adult Education

An analysis of Freire’s ideas on the concepts of unfinishedness, liberation, and emancipation is most relevant to my practice as an adult educator. In regard to the element of unfinishedness, it asserts that as educators and learners there is no point in which we reach the ultimate level of knowledge and learning. As Freire (1998) discusses in the text, there should never be a “stop sign” in the learning process because there is consistently new, imaginative ideas developed in the education field that can greatly contribute to the growth of knowledge among both students and teachers: As a teacher with critical acumen, I do not cease to be a responsible “adventurer” disposed to accept change and difference. Nothing of what I experienced as a teacher needs to be repeated. However, I hold that my own unity and identity, in regard to others and to the world, constitutes my essential and irrepitable way of experiencing myself as a cultural, historical, and unfinished being in the world, simultaneously conscious of my unfinishedness. (p. 51)

In this passage, Freire is highlighting his concept of unfinishedness, which asserts that the learning process should never reach the point of completeness in the eyes of the teacher. When viewed from the context of my own practice as an adult educator within the community college setting, I must consistently acknowledge how although my students are in the adult stages of their learning and life experiences, they too are unfinished in regard to learning, transforming, and transcending to a higher level of intellect and imaginative thinking:

Our intentions for our adult learners go beyond mastering behavioral skills or informational content. We focus on what we consider meta-objectives of adult higher education, such as “the understanding that knowledge is neither given nor gotten, but constructed; the ability to take perspective on one’s own beliefs; and the realization that learning and development are worthy life-long goals” (Taylor and Marienau, 1997, p. 233). (Taylor & Lamoreaux, 2008, p. 52)

Taylor and Lamoreaux cohesively echo Friere here in the sense that they assert how learning surpasses the robotic act of merely absorbing knowledge and information provided by another entity. Freire’s idea of liberation is also illuminated in this passage in the sense that when one constructs knowledge they are also the “meaning makers” of this newly constructed knowledge. From the context of my own practice as an adult educator, I must work to insure that adult learners continuously acknowledge the fact that knowledge is not static, but constantly changing and emerging within an array of contexts. It is created independently and imaginatively up until the point of death. Ultimately as an adult educator or teacher in general, my primary duty is to instill an atmosphere of acceptance, diversity, and equality on all levels in the classroom in an effort to facilitate the most creative, authentic level of independent learning possible. Freire (1998) presents a very captivating monologue within the text that dramatically embodies the spirit and attitude of how a true teacher is one who fiercely fights against all levels of suppression and narrow-minded thinking within the classroom: I am a teacher who stands up for what is right against what is indecent, who is in favor of freedom against authoritarianism, who is a supporter of authority against freedom with no limits, and who is a defender of democracy against the dictatorship of right or left. I am a teacher who favors the permanent struggle against every form of bigotry and against the economic domination of individuals and social classes. (p. 94)

This passage very dramatically exhibits the electrifying essence of liberation and emancipation that Freire so passionately advocates for. Here, Freire presents a unique “commandments of liberation and emancipation” for teachers across the broad spectrum of the field of education. As educators in the field, we must prioritize the democratic elements of equality and compromise in an effort to create a strong sense of openness, connectedness, and flexibility among all ethnicities, cultures, and intellects, in the classroom. In regard to compromise and open-minded thinking, Alinsky (1971) mirrors many of Freire’s ideas on freedom, dignity, and justice: A free and open society is an ongoing conflict, interrupted periodically by compromises – which then become the start for the continuation of conflict, compromise, and on ad infinitum. Control of power is based on compromise in our congress and among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. A society devoid of compromise is totalitarian. If I had to define a free and open society in one word, the word would be “compromise.” (p. 59)

Alinsky aligns well with Freire in regard to presenting the ideas and importance of liberation and emancipation. He asserts that although continuous conflict and turmoil is a natural phenomenon of life and the society in which we live, the element of compromise exercised by enlightened individuals is the primary ingredient, which yields the utmost level of emancipation, passion, and liberated thinking. Alinsky cleverly utilizes the branches of congress to make his argument in compromise to illustrate how although power and conflict fixed, continuous forces within the government are, the art of compromise is what creates a cohesive, collaborate flow of order among members. Overall, compromise is the origin of freedom and openness, which ultimately leads to a unique form of liberation. Compromise is the key to camaraderie.

4. Irrelevancy, Inappropriateness, and Unsuitability of Freire’s Ideas

Upon thoroughly reading and analyzing Freire’s text, I found that his ideas, on educational liberation and emancipation are irrelevant, inappropriate and unsuitable on many levels when viewed from the context of my practice as an adult educator. For example, Freire’s strong advocacy for educational freedom in regard to complete diversity of learning, teaching, and imagination seem to best be applied to community settings such as independently or privately funded GED programs, continuing education programs, and adult learning centers. In these settings, the instructor has a broader level of choice in regard to teaching materials, academic content, learning objectives etc. than an instructor like myself who is bound by the rules and regulations of the academy such as accreditation standards, department pre-constructed syllabi, mandated textbooks to teach from and many other areas where the elements of “choice” and “liberation” are severely limited. The primary ideas of Freire are utilizing the imagination in education, becoming liberated and emancipated, becoming the “meaning maker” of acquired knowledge, and continuously acknowledging our state of unfinishedness as human learners.

From the context of my practice as an adult educator, each one of these ideas is only relevant, appropriate, and suitable to the extent of institutional approval, and the deemed “appropriateness” of specific authoritative entities such as administrative officials and educational boards. Is this a true level of liberation and emancipation for all as Freire advocates so passionately for in his book? Indeed not! This is nothing more than an illusion of educational liberation in which teachers are trained to believe they are emancipating students by filling them with the preconceived knowledge and teaching techniques of others. Unfortunately within the walls of the institution, it is the instructor, administration officials, and governing boards who are the ultimate meaning makers of knowledge rather than the students: Giving answers is not as good a way of education as asking questions and making people face up and think through things for themselves. When you can get people to think about the process that they are going through, this is the beginning of their education. They don’t have to have a classroom, a teacher, or a book of instructions to do that. They just do it wherever they are. When you get people to value their own experience and learn from and do thinking for themselves, they can practice in the toilet, in their walking, in the car, or anywhere [. . .] It is a process. That is what education is about. (Jacobs, 2003, p. 53)

This passage from *The Myles Horton Reader* interestingly aligns very well with Freire’s ideas on educational independence and emancipation. Jacobs is suggesting how challenging one’s intellect by asking thought provoking questions and allowing them to think freely and interpret their own answers to these questions is ultimately the vehicle that transports one toward an authentic level of knowledge. Within the walls of the institution and from the context of my practice as an adult educator, often times this level of freedom is simply not allowed or appropriate due to the conventional mandates of the academy. Learning takes place at the pace and chosen setting of the learner and is not restricted within the realm of certain classrooms or dictated by teachers. Unrestricted education in which people are able to make sense of knowledge through their own lenses and interpretations is where the most substantial, imaginative level of learning lies. Green (1995) states in her book entitled *Releasing the Imagination* that, We have to hold in mind that the modern world is an administered world structured by all sorts of official languages. More often than not, they are the languages of domination, entitlement, and power; and there are terrible silences where ordinary human speech ought to be audible, silences our pedagogies ought somehow to repair. (p. 47)

Maxine Green is challenging us to realize how the world around us is nothing more than an environment of rigid regulations that powerfully suppresses the imagination and innermost creativity of the soul. This idea mirrors the notion of dictated and restricted education that Jacobs discusses in *The Miles Horton Reader*, and also Freire’s discussion of the “filling” process which is in reference to the suppressive act of the “banking system” in education. On many levels, our freedom to think and learn in the education system detached from the darkness of suppression has been stripped from us by an authoritative, “administered world” As I have experienced within my own practice. As educators in the field and as students, we must reclaim our place in the education system as independent, imaginative thinkers who are confident meaning makers of all knowledge placed before us. Only then will we experience a true sense of emancipation, liberation, and identity of the self.

5. Hidden and Explicit Premises of Community and Organizational Development

Freire presents a very significant hidden example in his text that illuminates strong undertones of effective community organization and development in his discussion on freedom and authority: Freedom without limits is as impossible as freedom that is suffocated or contracted. If it were without limit, it would take me outside of the sphere of human action, intervention, or struggle. Limitless freedom is a negation of the human condition of unfinishedness. (Freire, 1998, p. 96)

This passage interestingly presents ideas related to community organization and development in the sense that for a community or an organization to be ethical, productive, and professional some limits, guidelines, and regulations must be set in place in order to maintain a humane level of civility. For a community or an organization to grow and succeed in various goals, limits must indeed be in place so that a humane level of actions can remain on the forefront. What Freire is asserting in his book is that it is possible to experience free, imaginative thinking and action with rational limits as a foundation. Ultimately, an existence without limits detaches us from reality and exiles us from the realm of humanity. To experience an abundance of freedom and imagination, we must remain competent beings in our ability to acknowledge that a society completely void of limits is ultimately a “barbaric” society.

McKnight and Block (2010) states, “A competent community, one that takes advantage of its abundance, admits the realities of the human condition and the truth of the decay, restoration, and growth processes that are a part of every living system” (p. 65). McKnight and Block align very cohesively with Freire’s ideas on keeping reality as the nucleus of our existence. They suggest for a community to be competent in its life endeavors, it must remain grounded in reality and acknowledge the constant changes, periodic episodes of darkness, and revitalization that consistently dominate the realm of human existence. Without this acknowledgement, the humane level of freedom as Freire suggests becomes obsolete.

An explicit example in the text that illustrates undertones related to a very dark, tainted side of community organization and development is Freire’s discussion on the misuse of authority, arrogance, and selfishness that plagues the field of education. Freire (1998) states, There is also a certain kind of greed; an almost unbridled lust for giving orders that creates negative reactions and a totally incompatible climate for the exercise of true authority. This kind of rigid giving orders elicits no creativity at all from the student. It does not consider the student as having a taste for adventure. (p. 86)

This passage is symbolic of how many communities and organizations are corrupt by dominating, very self-consumed members who diminish the overall self-esteem of the organization or the community as a whole. Just as many teachers frequently utilize their position to demean, suppress, and often times dehumanize their students by means of restricting imagination and silencing voices, many leaders of organizations are also driven by this same controlling and totalitarian method of leadership. For a community organization to progress and develop successfully there must be an atmosphere of “servant leadership” in effect which includes equality, consideration, and camaraderie, rather than an atmosphere of constriction and domination which ultimately only suffocates the imagination and educational development on all levels: Where community doesn’t exist, trust, respect, and ethical behavior are difficult for the young to learn and for the old to maintain. Living in community as one’s basic involvement will generate an exportable surplus of love that we may carry into our many involvements with institutions that are usually not communities: businesses, churches, governments, schools. (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 52)

Greenleaf presents highly insightful points regarding the importance of collaboration, respect, and unity within a community. He suggests how an organizational atmosphere void of community oriented camaraderie, integrity, and acceptance of diversity is ultimately a dark abyss in which healthy, innovative growth and development become extinct.

6. Ethical Questions Arising in the Text

The majority of Freire’s ideas were very ethical and elaborative throughout the book, however, his discussion in chapter four highlighted questions and concerns of ethics and boundaries in terms of his assertion on appropriate parental involvement with their children. In Freire’s discussion on freedom and authority, he suggests that parents should merely play the minimal role of advisor in their child’s life as apposed to a strong authoritarian. I do not feel this is an ethical or appropriate suggestion in the sense that many parents would highly disagree with playing such a minimal, passive role in their child’s life depending upon the tenderness in age and life experience level of their children: One of the pedagogical tasks for parents is to make it clear to their children that parental participation in the decision-making process is not an intrusion but a duty, so long as the parents have no intention of deciding on behalf of their children [. . .] The position of the mother or father is that of someone who, without any risk to her or his authority, is able to accept, humbly, the extremely important role of advisor to a son or daughter. And as an advisor, will never impose a decision or become angry because the parental point of view was not accepted.

(Freire, 1998, pp. 97-98)

The ethical question that stands out here in this passage is: What gives Freire the authority to suggest parenting methods regarding children? Advocating for the freedom and emancipation of adults, and children’s freedom of interpretation is one account, but progressing to the point of issuing parental advice regarding the level of activeness parents should exhibit in their child’s actions or choices seems to in many ways “overstep” into the intimate private realm of parent-child relationships. Freire states that parents should indeed be involved in the decision-making process of their child’s life, but places a condition on this involvement stating that parents should not “decide on behalf of their children.”

I feel that this is a highly unethical request for Freire to present in his book due to the fact that any given dynamic of a parent's relationship and level of authority can vary greatly from parent to parent and child to child. It is inappropriate to dictate to parents the level of authoritarianism that they should be exhibiting with their children.

7. Poorly Expressed Ideas, Conceptual Ambiguities and Contradictions in Freire's Ideas

For the most part, Freire's ideas were expressed very thoroughly and clearly throughout the book, however, his discussion in chapter four entitled *Knowing how to listen* presents some ideas that I feel are poorly expressed and very contradicting to his previous advocacy of liberated openness, and acceptance of difference. For example, Freire discusses in this chapter how if one is prejudice in regard to one's ethnicity, financial status, or social status, it is impossible for one to effectively listen or speak to them in a humane manner: If I am prejudice against a child who is poor, or black or Indian, or rich, or against a woman who is a peasant or from the working class, it is obvious that I cannot listen to them and I cannot speak *with* them, only *to* or *at* them, from the top down. (Freire, 1998, p. 108)

In this passage, Freire suggests that as a result of personal prejudices one is prevented from embracing various forms of diversity. From the standpoint of a professional adult educator, I strongly oppose this assertion and feel that it is poorly expressed because as professional educators, we "must" place our personal prejudices and disapprovals "aside" and embrace all student's diverse lifestyles and views in the name of professionalism, and education as a whole. Our personal beliefs should not interfere with our ability to respect and acknowledge our students and colleagues as insightful, valuable individuals capable of producing imaginative and intellectual levels of knowledge. Overall, I felt that this portion of his argument in chapter four was very contradictory to his previous assertion of how listening to others and allowing individuals to become the "meaning makers" of knowledge was the ultimate path to knowledge and liberated learning. Freire has discredited his own ideas in this chapter, which tends result in the reader questioning the validity and authenticity of his overall chief ideas regarding liberated education.

8. Major Shifts over Time in Freire's Ideas: a Look at the Art of Listening

As an adult educator, the concept of effective listening tends to be one of the major shifts that that I feel have been emerging for decades that seem to be progressing as one of the cornerstones of not only the education field, but also various aspects of community and organizational leadership. Freire (1998) states, The importance of silence in the context of communication is fundamental. On the one hand, it affords me space while listening to the verbal communication of another person and allows me to enter into the internal rhythm of the speaker's thoughts and experience that rhythm as language. On the other hand, silence makes it possible for the speaker who is really committed to the experience of communication rather than to the simple transmission of information to hear the question, the doubt, the creativity of the person who is listening. Without this, communication withers. (p. 104)

Freire is highlighting his support for effectively listening during the act of communication. Listening is a skill that enables one to become enlightened to diverse levels of knowledge, insight, and creative perspectives. As Freire expresses in this passage, listening allows one to psychologically and aesthetically enter into the speaker's story or perspective, which ultimately enables a unique intimacy to be born between the listener and the speaker. Listening also allows the speaker to absorb the particular response of the listener, which is important in maintaining a unique "openness" with communication. Wheatley (2002) states, "Listening moves us closer, it helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy" (p. 90). Wheatley is suggesting here how listening is an art that unites us aesthetically, socially, and spiritually ultimately enabling us to view various perspectives of others through diverse lenses. Freire (1998) states, It is in knowing how to listen well that I better prepare myself to speak or to situate myself vis-à-vis the ideas being discussed as a subject capable of presence, of listening "connectedly" and without prejudices to what the other is saying. In their turn, good listeners can speak engagedly and passionately about their own ideas and conditions precisely because they are able to listen. Whatever they say in disagreement is never authoritarian. It is, in fact, a form of affirmation. It is not hard to imagine the many qualities that genuine listening demands of us. Qualities that build up the practice of listening democratically. (p. 107)

Here, Freire suggests that through listening, we become better, more intelligent speakers and responders to the individuals who are speaking to us. We are able to connect to others and embrace ideas without bias or prejudices, which only result in limited growth and development of intellect.

When individuals are able to speak and listen to each other openly and freely regardless of the rhetoric being exchanges, this is when the ultimate level of respect, collaboration, and connectedness lies.

9. Conclusion

Freire presents very challenging, inspirational, and thought provoking, ideas and perspectives regarding pedagogy and pedagogy within the diverse realm of education. His signature perspective on education is liberation of the individual and openness of the instructor in an effort to abolish the suppressive acts of the “banking system” within the field of education. Freire’s ultimate goal is for educator’s to allow students to expand their intellect independently and become the “meaning makers” of knowledge that is presented before them and refrain from becoming robotic containers of preconceived knowledge. Although Freire presents various ideas in his text that cohesively relate to diverse levels of community and organizational development, ethical concerns, and also present various explicit and hidden examples within the text which interestingly illuminate the nature of community organizational development both within and beyond the school setting, his primary overarching idea that he wishes for his readers to grasp is that the detachment from preconceived knowledge created by selected authoritative figures within society and embracing the ideas and perspectives of the self is the ultimate learning experience. As Freire discusses throughout the book, assimilating students into the oppressive system is not the answer to liberation. We as professionals in the field of education must train our students to become independent “beings for themselves” rather than “beings for others.” Only then will students become intellectually, imaginatively, and aesthetically free from the oppressive standards of not only the school system, but also the dark dictatorship which plagues modern day society.

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