

READING FREIRE FOR FIRST WORLD LIBRARIANS

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A note on my slides. As you'll see, the slides are entirely block quotes. I wanted to use Freire's own words, from both *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and from his other works. But I wanted to put them in context, and provide citations, and I certainly didn't want to only read block quotes to you today. So my solution was to create slides with those elements, and to talk myself about the issues they raise, to string them into a narrative. ...So, to give you a brief outline, I'm going to start by talking, about Freire himself, and about *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* — more particularly, how librarians have read and interpreted *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Then I'm going to spend the majority of the time looking at other work Freire wrote, work that was intended to be in dialogue with First World teachers, work that focused on the issues in his pedagogy that Freire believed most relevant for those teachers. My key topic today is authority, because Freire felt that was the specific area in which his pedagogy had been misinterpreted.

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Brazil and died in 1997. He's most well-known for his work teaching adult literacy to Brazilian peasants in the 1950s and 1960s. He was exiled by Brazil's military junta in 1964 and lived in Chile for several years, working for NGOs. The English-language publication of his earliest works brought him fame as well as invitations to

work in North America and Europe. He spent a year teaching at Harvard, then in the 1970s lived in Geneva and worked with the World Council of Churches. Though he returned to Brazil in 1980 and eventually became secretary of education for the city of São Paulo, he continued to travel to the US and Canada. During this time he continued writing, often in the form of “spoken books” — a series of dialogues with other educators, recorded, transcribed, and cleaned up.

Freire’s most famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was first published in English in 1970. But *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* didn’t make a significant impact on our profession, despite the late 1960s and early 1970s being an era in which librarianship was politicized and radicalized — for example, this was when the ALA’s Social Responsibilities Round Table was founded. The reason, I think, that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* didn’t find its way into library literature is that during this period radical librarianship was focused on other areas of the field: cataloguing, collection development, and issues of intellectual freedom. Unlike those areas, “bibliographic instruction,” as it was called then, had not yet been radicalized.¹

It hasn’t been until the past 10-15 years that librarians have discovered Paulo Freire’s work. Now it was instruction librarians, discontent with traditional models of teaching information literacy, who looked for alternative approaches. They found those approaches in the work of rhetoric and composition faculty, who had written about the potential of Freireian pedagogy for their own fields. Librarians have taken that work as a starting point for their own interpretation of Freire.

1. Toni Samek, *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001).

Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system.

Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), 72

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Librarians who have cited Freire in the past decade generally lay out his pedagogy along recognizable lines. The consensus interpretation goes something like this:³

Traditional models of teaching and learning are no more than the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. Freire described this as the “banking concept” of education — knowledge is deposited in the student’s head like money is deposited into a bank. Banking education is authoritarian; it’s to be rejected. The alternative is a “problem-posing education,” in

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970; New York: Continuum, 1993), 72.

3. This “consensus interpretation” is derived from several of the most-cited articles discussing Freire in the context of information literacy from the past fifteen years. These include, from oldest to newest, Troy A. Swanson, “A Radical Step: Implementing A Critical Information Literacy Model,” *Portal : Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 2 (April 2004): 259–73; James Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 2 (March 2006): 192–99; Heidi L. M. Jacobs, “Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (May 2008): 256–62; and Maria T. Accardi, *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* (Sacramento, Calif.: Library Juice Press, 2013). To confirm that this consensus still holds I examined the essays in two important, recent books on critical information literacy: Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, eds., *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Duluth, Minn.: Library Juice Press, 2010); and Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins, eds., *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis* (Sacramento, Calif.: Library Juice Press, 2013).

which “students identify and engage significant problems in the world.”⁴ Students do so in ways that emphasize “dialogue, creativity, reflection and action, inquiry, and creative transformation.” “Problem-posing education” is connected to constructivist theories of learning.⁵

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. **The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.**

Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), 80

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To become problem-posing educators, teachers must cede authority in the classroom. The teacher stops merely lecturing on information for the students to learn, and instead helps the student to apprehend knowledge via a process of dialogue, in which the teacher and student cease to exist as such. In Freire’s terms, the teacher must become a teacher-student, and students become students-teachers. I’ll quote a recent article by William Badke, because it serves as the quintessential summary of librarians’ take on Freireian pedagogy: “Freire’s strong critique of knowledge oppression has been highly influential in helping to move instruction from ‘sage on

4. Elmborg, “Critical Information Literacy,” 193-194.

5. Jacobs, “Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis,” 259.

6. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80.

the stage' to 'guide on the side.' But it has also rendered suspect the idea that anyone should claim to be a knowledge authority. Authority, to Freire, results in oppression.”⁷

This interpretation by librarians of Freireian pedagogy is derived exclusively from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It is almost the only work of Freire’s that is quoted in the library literature.

To be sure, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a powerful book, and one that is essential both for understanding Freire’s work and for engaging in dialogue with other radical educators. It has become a touchstone for us. But even in his lifetime, Freire saw educators relying on *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to the exclusion of his other works. Freire believed that his most famous book was often misinterpreted, when it had been read at all. First World readers forgot that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* had been written in, and about, a specific time and place. The students he had been working with were adults. They were peasants — illiterate, and not enrolled in traditional schools. Learning to read and write meant that they could regain the right to vote.

Freire was of course happy with the success of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. But he believed that, if it had wide appeal, that appeal was derived from the book’s deep roots in local conditions. Educators in the First World were mistaken if they took the methods therein to be universally applicable. To combat these misreadings, Freire in the late 1980s onward published a series of books and articles intended to clarify his pedagogy for a First World audience.

As Freire believed in dialogue as the heart of a problem-posing education, it seems appropriate that these later works took on that form. Freire addressed himself to a specific

7. William B. Badke, “Expertise and Authority in an Age of Crowdsourcing,” in *Not Just Where to Click: Teaching Students How to Think about Information*, ed. Troy A. Swanson and Heather Jagman (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2015), 193.

audience. Often this audience was present and could respond: he engaged in these give-and-take dialogues with several, radical American teachers, such as Ira Shor, Donaldo Macedo, and Myles Horton. In other cases the audience was specific but imagined: for example, his “Letter to North-American Teachers” or ...*Letters to Those who Dare Teach*.

I think what creates this need to be a facilitator is the confusion between authoritarianism and authority. What one cannot do in trying to divest of authoritarianism is relinquish one's authority as teacher. In fact, this does not really happen. Teachers maintain a certain level of authority through the depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject matter that they teach. The teacher who claims to be a facilitator and not a teacher is renouncing, for reasons unbeknownst to us, the task of teaching and, hence, the task of dialogue.

Freire and Macedo, “A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race” (1995), 378

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In these works Freire identified, over and over, one particular mistake that he believed North American teachers had made in interpreting his pedagogy. Freire believed that North American teachers had conflated the concept of authority with the concept of authoritarianism. For Freire, the difference was essential. Authoritarianism was opposed to the existence of freedom, and is illegitimate. Authority, in contrast, was not opposed to freedom, but necessary to it. Legitimate authority lives in a creative tension with freedom. Whereas authoritarianism was derived from structures of power beyond the classroom, the teacher's authority was derived from an intimate knowledge of their subject matter.

8. Paulo Freire and Donaldo P. Macedo, “A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race,” *Harvard Educational Review* 65, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 378. <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/xmlui/handle/7891/2469>.

I want to stop here and repeat that, because I've come to understand this as a keystone of Freire's pedagogy. This is an article of faith for him. To repeat: the teacher has authority in the classroom because they have achieved a mastery of their particular subject. And this authority manifests itself as the right and the responsibility to limit the student's freedom.

[W]e have not yet resolved the problem of tension between authority and freedom. Because we were dedicated to overcoming the legacy of authoritarianism so prevalent among us, **we fell into the opposite error of limitless freedom**, accusing the legitimate exercise of authority of being an abuse of authority.

Freire, *A Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), 95

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Remember, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire had laid out a binary opposition between banking education and problem-posing education. He had seen the difference as between a pedagogy that embraced authoritarianism and one that rejected authoritarianism. But in writing specifically for and about Latin America in the 1960s, in which the problem was to overthrow the political and educational systems of military juntas, he had not considered how this might be taken by First World teachers. He hadn't considered the possibility that, in our haste to reject authoritarianism, we might also reject the teacher's authority.

9. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 95.

[T]he liberating educator can never manipulate the students and cannot leave the students alone, either. **The opposite of manipulation is not laissez-faire, not denying the teacher's directive responsibility for education.** The liberating teacher does not manipulate and does not wash his or her hands of the students. He or she assumes a directive role necessary for educating. That directiveness is not a commanding position of 'you must do this, or that,' but is a posture of directing a serious study of some object in which students reflect on the intimacy of how an object exists.

Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1985), 171

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So in his later works, Freire introduced a third category of educational practices, to describe a pedagogy that had rejected authority along with authoritarianism. He used several phrases for this — none, unfortunately, with the visceral appeal of “banking education.” The two most common are a “modernizing” education, or a “laissez-faire” education. Near the end of his life, he would connect a “laissez-faire” education to the neoliberal project.

10. Ira Shor and Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1987), 171.

[E]ven though they speak of liberating education, [modernizing churches] are conditioned by their vision of liberation as an individual activity that should take place through a change of consciousness and not through the social and historical praxis of human beings. So they end up by putting the accent on methods that can be considered neutral. Liberating education for the modernizing church is finally reduced to liberating the students from blackboards, static classes, and textbook curricula, and offering them projectors and other audio-visual accessories, more dynamic classes, and a new technico-professional teaching.

Freire, "Education, Liberation, and the Church" (1973)

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I'll talk about three characteristics of the laissez-faire or modernizing education. In the first place, the laissez-faire education places great emphasis on neutrality and on universality. Social, political, and cultural differences shouldn't enter into educational practices. The ideal teacher for modernizing education would today be, I think, a robot or a computer. As you can see, Freire had the modern ed-tech industry figured out forty years ago.

And that ties into a second aspect of laissez-faire education: it's individual in nature. Learning is an individual activity. There's a focus on personal improvement, on meeting goals and outcomes, rather than on critical consciousness or community learning.

These two aspects of laissez-faire or modernizing education, by the way, are ones that the critlib movement has been steadfast in resisting. We've emphasized the necessity for the teacher to be engaged with the students, and we've focused on affect and emotion as essential elements

11. Paulo Freire, "Education, Liberation, and the Church," chap. 10 in *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, trans. Donald Macedo (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), 137; originally published in *Study Encounter* 9, no. 1 (1973): 1-15. <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/xmlui/handle/7891/1138>.

of education. Our continued work in this vein is essential to countering the effects of the laissez-faire educational system.

When teachers call themselves facilitators and not teachers, they become involved in a distortion of reality. To begin with, in de-emphasizing the teacher's power by claiming to be a facilitator, one is being less than truthful to the extent that **the teacher turned facilitator maintains the power institutionally created in the position.** That is, while facilitators may veil their power, at any moment they can exercise power as they wish.

Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race" (1995), 378

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There's a third characteristic, though, that neither critlib nor the larger critical pedagogy movement have resisted in quite the same way. And it returns, again, to that question of authority versus authoritarianism. This third characteristic of laissez-faire education is that it regards the teacher as merely a facilitator. A facilitative teacher, according to Freire, denies having their own authority, preferring instead to insist on a democratic classroom, in which the students are equal partners. But this is a false equivalence, because the teacher-turned-facilitator is backed by the power of the institution. By veiling their rightful authority — that authority that derives from their subject knowledge — the facilitator inadvertently allows their classroom to be governed by the authoritarian power of the educational system.

12. Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," 378.

Ira: As I understand it, in a liberating classroom, the teacher seeks to gradually withdraw as the director of the learning, as the directive force. ...

Paulo: But, look, Ira, for me the question is not for the teacher to have less and less authority. The issue is that the democratic teacher never, never transforms authority into authoritarianism. He or she can never stop being an authority or having authority. **Without authority it is very difficult for the liberties of the students to be shaped. Freedom needs authority to become free.** (Laughs) It is a paradox but it is true.

Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1985), 90-91

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I said earlier that the teacher's authority gave them the right and the responsibility to limit the students' freedom. As Freire says, "Freedom needs authority to become free. It is a paradox but it is true!" Since the facilitator denies that they have authority in the classroom, they are also rejecting their right and responsibility to limit the students' freedom in the service of education. Freire's conclusion, then, is that facilitative teaching actually hampers student learning.

13. Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 90-91.

A Mexican professor who thought like us (most of them were in the same perspective) said something very interesting. He said that a dialogical experience which is not based in seriousness, in competency, is much worse than a 'banking' experience where the teacher merely transfers knowledge. I am *absolutely* in agreement with him. From the point of view of the students, **a dialogical teacher who is incompetent and not serious provokes worse consequences than a serious and well-informed 'banking' educator.**

Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1985), 80

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To be clear, Freire understood that facilitators meant well; they're concerned with avoiding banking education. And they believe that they're engaging in problem-posing dialogue with their students. But facilitative teaching, he argued, lacked the rigor of true dialogical teaching. A facilitative education, Freire believed, was actually worse than a rigorous traditional education.

Now, rigor is today a word of which we're all rightfully wary. When "rigor" appears in educational discourse today it's almost always racist, sexist, and/or classist. "Rigor" is used to attack teachers and teachers' unions, students who lack "grit" (itself a code word), and pedagogies that go beyond standardized testing and the STEM subjects. But, for all that, rigor is a concept Freire considered an essential part of his pedagogy. So it's worth looking at Freire's understanding of rigor and, maybe, reclaiming the idea.

14. Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, 80.

Rigor for Freire was simply intellectual discipline. But Freire considered this intellectual discipline to be an essential part of dialogical teaching. Dialogue was not just a conversation, or a sharing of ideas, it was conversation and sharing about a particular content object, whether that be a text, an idea, or a situation.

The teacher's job, in dialogue, is to "place an object as a mediator between him or her and the students."¹⁵ But to place the right object, and to place it just so, requires a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the teacher. This is where the teacher's authority, which derives from their subject mastery, comes into play. But the facilitator rejects the possibility of choosing and placing that object.

This indicates another important difference between our normal constructivist pedagogy and Freire's. Freire's pedagogy is not student-centered. Neither is it teacher-centered, or even content-centered. Rather, Freire's pedagogy finds its meaning in the relationships created among teacher, student, and object of study. It's not centered, rather it's dialogical.

Certainly Freire's pedagogy *is* constructivist, in that he sees knowledge as created or constructed in the student's mind. But it's very definitely not a relativist pedagogy. Freire insists on the existence of a real world, and the object of dialogue is always to better ascertain that reality. Yet though Freire was not a relativist, he was a historicist — he accepted that knowledge changes over time, and thus what counted as a rigorous and true education today might not tomorrow.

When we stop thinking of our pedagogy as student-centered, and stop considering ourselves as primarily allies and helpers — as facilitators rather than authorities — it's liberating

15. Freire and Macedo, "A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race," 379.

both for us, and, paradoxically, for the students themselves. As authorities in the classroom, we are open to challenge on the ground of our authority — our subject matter knowledge.

Also, from the progressive teacher's perspective, teaching students how to learn can never be reduced to some operation where the goal is merely how to learn. Teaching someone how to learn is only valid in a progressive class when the learners learn how to learn as they learn the inner meaning (the *raison d'être*) of an object or subject of study. **It is by teaching biology or economics that the teacher teaches students how to learn.**

Freire, "Letter to North-American Teachers" (1987)

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There's a corollary to Freire's assertion that it's from our subject knowledge that we derive our authority as teachers. The corollary is that subject matter is essential to learning. Learning how to learn is impossible without that "content object" located in dialogue with student and teacher.

So this raises the question: what is it that the librarian teaches? The stock answer is "information literacy." Well, the current consensus in the field is that information literacy is interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary, or part of a larger metaliteracy. But, in and of itself, it's not a discipline. And I agree — it's not a discipline.

16. Paulo Freire, "Letter to North-American Teachers," in *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*, ed. Ira Shor (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1987), 212. Typescript available at <http://www.acervo.paulofreire.org/xmlui/handle/7891/2356>.

A Freireian understanding of authority and subject matter, as I've laid it out here, would suggest then that we can't be effective progressive teachers on our own. Instead, we're going to have to work with our colleges' teaching faculty. If information literacy can be learned, it will be via the subject matter that are taught in those classes.

Now, allying with teaching faculty is good. It is after all their subject expertise that's under assault in a laissez-faire or modernizing educational system. Yet for librarians, working with teaching faculty is fraught with difficulty. Librarians burn out, and they are silenced, when they're treated as junior partners in education.¹⁷

We might consider an alternate, or complementary, path forward. There's a great deal for us to teach beyond information literacy. A single example: Alison Macrina's Library Freedom Project, which, to quote Macrina, "teach[es] librarians and their local communities about the surveillance state, privacy rights and law, and technology that can be used to prevent surveillance and protect intellectual freedom."¹⁸ This is just right: theory and practice together. It's time we stop merely asking to be let into someone else's class and curriculum, and it's time that as a profession we develop our own subject knowledge, our own theory and practice, so that we can truly become liberatory educators.

17. "Burnout" and "silenced" reference, respectively, Maria T. Accardi, *Academic Library Instruction Burnout*, accessed June 6, 2015, <https://libraryinstructionburnout.wordpress.com>, and Lauren Wallis, "Smash All the Gates, Part 2: Professional Silenc*," *Do-It-Yourself Library Instruction*, May 12, 2015, <https://laurenwallis.wordpress.com/2015/05/12/smash-all-the-gates-part-2-professional-silenc>.

18. *Library Freedom Project*, accessed June 6, 2015, <https://libraryfreedomproject.org>; Dylan Burns, "Interview with Alison Macrina (@flexlibris)," *Hack Library School*, accessed May 30, 2015, <http://hacklibraryschool.com/2015/05/27/interview-with-alison-macrina-flexlibris>.

Thank you for your time and attention; I will leave the last words to Paulo Freire and his friend Myles Horton.

MYLES: Well, you feel contented that we've done all we can do?

PAULO: Oh yes. Maybe I'm totally wrong, but I think that it will be a beautiful book.

MYLES: Let's have a drink.

PAULO: Yes.

Horton & Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990), 248

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19. Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Marshall Peters (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 248.