

An Appraisal of Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy and Its Impact in the Nigerian Education System

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Abstract

It is believed that enlightenment and learning should ordinarily better the fortunes of individuals and the society at large. Thinkers and educationist have over the years shown a consistent belief in similar assumption. On this, Paulo Freire, while condemning the traditional education system, proposes what he calls a critical pedagogy. This model of learning, according to him, awakens in learners and the oppressed class, a critical and political consciousness for their emancipation and ultimate humanization. Employing the tools of philosophical analysis, this article looks at the trajectories and philosophical possibilities of Freire's critical pedagogy and the prospects this revolutionary model of learning portends in the Nigerian setting. It further argues that Freire's elevation of even new learners to the cognitive level of experienced teachers appears to be an over stretched assumption; whose application could only be possible at an andragogical level; and only at this level can it find an effective space in the Nigeria setting.

Keywords: Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy, Nigerian Education, Andragogy

Introduction

The perception of traditional education as an instrument of oppression was a very provocative thought, championed by Paulo Freire. While faulting this perceived inappropriate pedagogy, Freire prefers a critical pedagogy; which, according to him, bequeaths learners or the oppressed with species of inquisitive freedom rooted in emancipation. This, however, is beyond a physical freedom; but an indispensable humane space, for a legitimate quest for human completion.

Freire's main concern centers on how to educate people to get themselves emancipated from the culture of silence and to meet the needs of humanity for the development of a more just society. Of course, this emancipatory education method is conscientious; the goal is to use a critical method as the basis for helping individuals to awaken their own critical consciousness, and then take a more critical view of social reality to obtain liberation. Therefore, Freire's critical pedagogy can change people's perception of external reality. For, if people's interpretation of the living situation is based solely on the supernatural, or on their own incompetence, they are likely to rely on such realities in the face of existential challenges. In that case, their actions may not be able to transform them externally.

Pedagogy of the Banking System

Paulo Freire describes the existing system of education of his time as an ineffective banking system. He argues that "in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting others as absolutely ignorant, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, it negates education and knowledge as primarily processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposites; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence.¹ Consequently, Freire creates a list of questions that show how schools and classrooms could be evaluated; and any school or

¹ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 72

classroom that conforms to the category represents the banking system of education. In this system, the teacher is the one who prepares lessons and presents them to the students as secondary knowledge. The students do not find out anything for themselves. Consequently, knowledge has now become an official product instead of a result of inquiry.²

According to Freire, in this approach, the student is viewed as empty account to be filled by the teacher or the educator; making ‘deposits’ in the learner. This concept is a strong support of the transmission of mere ‘facts’ as the goal of education.³ In banking system of education, according to him, the teacher talks about reality or fact as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable. The teacher’s task is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his narration.⁴ Expanding Freire’s view, Sunil Kumar explains that “in it, teachers make deposits of information which students are to receive, memorize, and repeat.”⁵

Evident in Freire’s revolutionary thesis is that the banking system minimizes the learners’ ability to think critically. It suffices to hold that individuals will not be liberated if they are exposed to learning based on a system that engineers domination. The method of teaching and learning should therefore be based on the learner’s experience. It should emphasize problem-solving than mere imposition or indoctrination. Giroux, quoting Freire, stresses that education is the practice of freedom. Liberal education often challenges domination by exposing the irrationality of life’s reality.⁶ This banking education, which emphasizes the teacher’s role as the active one and student’s role as passive and the teacher-student relationship as anti-dialogical, is worthless and anti-democratic. It inhibits creativity and resists dialogue; and it is laid-back in nature.⁷ In reality, education either domesticates or liberates. Strictly speaking, the banking education appears to fall within the side of domestication. It deprives us of our ontological vocation of being fully human beings by denying us the chance of communicating through which life holds meaning. This assumption treats persons as in the world, not with the world or others. It treats people as spectators and not as re-creators. It deprives one the opportunity of becoming a conscious being by making them mere possessors of consciousness.⁸ This system, as it were, seems to contradict the nature of the human person who is, at once, rational and critical. Little wonder then, why Freire employs the concept – critical pedagogy to describe what he believes is most suitable for scholarship.

Critical Pedagogy and the Emancipation Role of Dialogue

Freire’s critical pedagogy appears to focus primarily on the struggle for the liberation of the poor; which he calls “education for liberation”. According to him, for apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention; through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world with the world, and with each other.⁹ Freire argues that this education for freedom from alienation is impossible without dialogical relations between the student and the teacher.¹⁰ It is only dialogue that ensures student-teacher relationship in which “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one

²Ibid . p. 53

³ Sunil Kumar and SankaranarayananPoleeri, “Paulo Freire: Democratic Frame work in Socio-Educational, Philisophy”, *Teacher Education for Developing Countries*, July 2014, Vol.4, no. 7 p.147

⁴ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 72

⁵ Sunil Kumar and SankaranarayananPoleeri, p. 148

⁶ Ibid., p. 38

⁷ Sunil Kumar and SankaranarayananPoleeri, p.148

⁸ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p.56

⁹ P. Fieire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. 1st American ed. (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 56

¹⁰ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 80

who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach; they become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”¹¹

Dialogue or problem – posing system of learning, becomes then a possible way out of most existential woes. Talking of problem-posing method, Freire says that since the teacher is not the absolute authority, there is a mutual respect between the teacher and the students. Again he says that this makes it possible for students to be able to make valid contributions towards education; and thus, the humanity of students is considered. Freire stresses that problem-posing education is dialogical in character. It involves dialogue between the student-teacher and the teacher-students. The critical or problem-posing method, he believes, would help learners to think critically and challenge the world.¹² This is contrary to the banking system which progresses by issuing series of communiqués. For examples, some committees seat and prepare curriculum which is later imposed on students. This kind of educational process is one way in nature. However, it must be understood that a teacher who can empathize with the students is needed for the critical method to be possible. The teacher should be able to enter into the activity of inquiry alongside the students. Freire notes:

*Then through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the-student-of –the-teacher cease to exist, and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teacher. 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 teaches.*¹³

As interesting as it sounds, we shall later look into the possibility of this learning condition. For, it stands to be proven that, unlike the teacher, that a new learner can be preoccupied with the content of a specific dialogue and engage meaningfully in an idea he or she has practically no knowledge about. This is where Friere’s idea seems to need more clarifications. But Freire seems to suggest that the teacher’s prior preparation before the actual dialogue engenders the feasibility of the exercise.

Sunil *et al*, would consider this dialogue to be essential for the restoration of our incompleteness which invariably suffices for emancipation. Dialogue becomes a way to overcome problems in the society; to liberate human beings; for there is no individual without limitations. Understanding of these limitations and incompleteness is essential for dialogue with others.¹⁴ Our incompleteness tends to find hope and solace in our interlocution. We easily give up and for that matter without hope things can be very difficult. Hope becomes very necessary for it keeps people striving for liberation without giving up. When people enter into dialogue they should have hope that it will bring about positive results. Lastly, dialogue needs critical thinking. A kind of thinking that admits that reality is in process; not something static. Dialogue needs a kind of thinking which is not separate from action but which provokes involvement.¹⁵

Another obvious precondition for dialogue is the need for, humility, hope, faith and love in the dialogic process. Almost sounding evangelical, Freire believes that a meaningful dialogue requires some virtues for its effectiveness. “For the naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility.”¹⁶ A practical consciousness to these facts is important, and could strengthen one’s will and belief in dialogic engagements.

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

¹² H.A. Giroux, “Lessons from Paulo Freire”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol.3, no.2, (2010), 31-41, p. 35

¹³ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴ Sunil Kumar and Sankaranarayanan Poleeri, p.148

¹⁵ J.P. Singh, “Paulo Freire: Possibilities for Dialogic Communication in a Market-Driven Information Age”, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol.11, no.5, 2008, p. 73

¹⁶ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 90

The Role of Critical Consciousness

‘Conscientização’(critical consciousness), as coined by Freire, entails both consciousness and praxis; taking practical action to deal with (oppressive) realities in life. He suggests that only when dialogue succeeds, “these adults [can] begin to change society.”¹⁷ Therefore, Freire believes that the problem-posing method along with ‘conscientização’ and praxis lead to “education at the practice of freedom.”¹⁸

Freire goes on to note that ‘conscientizacao’ does not stop at the level of their subjective perception of the situation, but through action prepares men (and women) for the struggle against the obstacles to their humanization.¹⁹ Therefore, to be an active participant in the community, one needs to be in constant dialogue in order to attain conscientização or critical consciousness.²⁰ Conscientização does not only include apprehending the inequalities in one’s life but also taking action in order to change them.²¹ Conscientization means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness, in particular, awareness of oppression, of 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.²²

He observes that people tend to lose their cultural, political and social stability and identity through the “culture of silence”. According to Freire, this culture of Silence is a process that makes dominated individuals lose the means needed to critically respond to the culture that is enforced on them by a domineering culture. Some human beings are submerged in the culture of silence. Some are ignorant of different social matters. Every human being, no matter how ‘ignorant’ he or she may be, is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. It is not a traditional way of teaching and learning.

In specific terms, Freire’s educational philosophy holds praxis and dialogue as closely related. In sum, the central theme of Freire’s pedagogy is ‘conscientização’ and praxis; the act of becoming aware of inequalities and taking action to change them. He explains that, those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead, a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posting “of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world.”²³ In this context, Nigeria is the world under focus; and the possible impact of critical pedagogy in her education system is our immediate preoccupation.

The Foundation of Western Education in Nigeria

It is a common knowledge that the foundation of western education in Nigeria was a project which seems to have started without a well-structured framework; instead it was structured together with the evangelization and Christianization of the people. The 19th century evangelical movement to, what is today known as Nigeria,²⁴ was pioneered by the Wesleyan Methodist in 1842. This movement which first settled at Badagry was initiated by a Yoruba liberated slave called Ferguson. The Methodist was not alone in the early race; for in 1843, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) under the leadership of

¹⁷ Antonia Darder, “Teaching as an Act of Love: In Memory of Paulo Freire”, Speech given at American Educational Research Association, Claremont; Graduation University, 1998, p.9

¹⁸ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. p. 81

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119 (emphases, mine).

²⁰ P. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*. p. 115.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115

²² Sunil Kumar and Sankaranarayanan Poleeri. p.148

²³ *Ibid.*, p.79

²⁴ This is because as at the time of this movement, the geographical contraption now called Nigeria has not been amalgamated into a nation-state.

Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Mr. Henry Townsend, and Mr. G.A. Collman also landed in Badagry.²⁵ In 1846, however, the Church of Scotland landed in Calabar under the leadership of Hope Masterton Waddel. The African mission of Southern Baptist Convention emerged in 1853 under the able headship of T.J Bown. The Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) which occupied mainly the Eastern Zone of the country became established in 1860. Here the role of Father Joseph Shanaham, the then Catholic Bishop of Onitsha was very outstanding.²⁶ Unarguably, the establishment of these evangelical missions came concomitantly with the establishment of schools.

Some Challenges of Education in Nigeria

Following the above narrative, it is deductively tenable to hold that education in Nigeria was initially a vehicle and means of Christianization. Amaele captures this well in these words: “Although, so many other factors may have informed the establishment of these schools, the most outstanding was to facilitate the spread of Christianity.”²⁷ This primary motive was so dominant such that the schools were used as the main means of evangelization. In fact, the School and the Church were inseparably united to such an extent that whoever was a student was also a convert.

This primary intention, undoubtedly, had an impact on the curriculum of studies. In other words, the curriculum contents, the methods and techniques of teaching were, therefore, tailored towards the primary objective. Over and above this perceived early pitfall, the Nigerian education sector have over the years, struggled to overcome wrong and outdated educational policies. The formulation of her educational goals doesn't seem to have ever given sufficient attention to reflective thinking. The quality of teachers who should ordinarily moderate mutual epistemological journey with students is not assured. Amaele would argue that the methods applied then in the teaching or inculcating knowledge to the pupils did not give them enough opportunity to be rational and autonomous citizens. The reliance on mere acquisition of facts and the introduction of examination consciousness in the learners by the school gave birth to examination malpractice.²⁸ Consequently, all academic endeavors of students in Nigeria seem geared towards examinations.²⁹

Describing this lamentable anomaly, Okeke observes that this uncritical purpose resulted in some deficiencies in the system. “The education system in vogue at the time was described to be inadequate because it neglected the social and cultural background of Nigerian Society. And it failed to lay the foundation of economic freedom because it made no provisions for the means of acquiring manual skills and expertise necessary for successful industrial and agricultural development.”³⁰ In other words, the system does not seem committed to training in creativity and in emancipatory consciousness. This negligence suggests that rational and critical orientation are invariably relegated or outrightly abandoned. Hence, a critical approach to scholarship could be of relevance to the Nigerian system.

The Possible Impact of Freire's Critical Pedagogy in the Nigerian Context

One of the constant and frustrating experiences of an average and objectively minded Nigerian is the observation that the dominant learning approach seems to be characterized by a sort of repetitive recycling of knowledge; which inescapably vitiates creativity in learning. The scenario reveals a methodology of learning in search of proper direction for critical orientation and ingenious creativity. Therefore, there seems to be a heightened optimism that the introduction of Freire's critical thinking into our curriculum could see us out of most of our educational pitfalls.

²⁵ Samuel Amele, *Moral values in Nigeria Education: Issues, problems and prospects*; (Ibadan : BountyPress, 2007), p.49

²⁶ Ibid., p.50

²⁷ Ibid.,

²⁸ Ibid., p.51

²⁹ M. A. Mkpka, *Curriculum Development and Implementaion*, (Tortan Publishers, 1987), p. 70

³⁰ G.C. Okeke, *Philosophy of Education: Concepts, Analysis, and Applications*, (Owerri: Totan Publ., 1989), p.

Critical pedagogy, which is a form of training in rationality, could come in the form of a course in critical thinking. It could also be taught as general studies (GS) in all the faculties and departments in all Nigerian universities; and this could see us out of most of our credulous conjectures and intellectual stagnation. Following the tenets of critical pedagogy, some of the Nigerian teachers who hardly accept students' contributions and critical questions in the classrooms, could realize that they are living in the remote past. They would, most probably, come to terms with the fact that even learners have something to offer. Hence, could encourage and instill such confidence in their students; for a sense of confidence ultimately motivates and empowers.

More still, the conscientization consciousness that Freire advocates, is praise worthy; and if incorporated into the Nigerian curriculum of studies, could engender an emancipatory consciousness against indoctrination, superstitious world views and other uncritical approaches to realities. Freire's critical pedagogy appears strongly committed to the importance of deepening democracy in all social interactions, through dialogue. The democracy he was keen about was not the laissez-faire democracy that proclaims an abstract equality and freedom and blames the victims for their own failure: but a radical one which aims at helping the dominated groups to develop political determination, that is, to organize and mobilize in order to achieve their own objectives. This aspect of political consciousness appears most needed in the Nigerian society; where political apathy has been identified as a major deficiency and consequently a sustaining factor to most of our wails and woes. It is then hoped that the introduction of Freirean species of political consciousness, as against the 'culture of silence', into the curriculum of our education system, signals some positive prospects in the immediate future.

A Critical Critique of Freire's Pedagogy

Freire's critical pedagogy, with all its promising trajectories and emancipatory nuances, appears to be punctuated with some un-pragmatic rhetorics; and if the above assumption has any merit in objective verity, then the prospects and feasibility of the theory in any concrete setting would be, at best, an edifying hypothesis. Where the contrary is the case, then the prospects would be largely categorical. Freire's critical pedagogy advocates for an even 'playing ground' for both the teacher and the learner. This radical departure from former thinkers does not seem very feasible with a new or inexperienced learner. For a new learner to engage meaningfully in a dialogue with a teacher, seems like a departure from Plato whose concept of knowledge takes the form of epistemological progression; from doxa to episteme.³¹ It doesn't also seem to compliment Karl Popper's evolutionary epistemology.³² It seems most appropriate for a new learner to pass through some preliminary orientations before he or she can engage in a meaningful dialogue. Therefore, the real critical pedagogy may not be very effective in Nigerian nursery and pre-nursery stages of learning.

This leads to another problematic area, which is how to reconcile this directive-ness of dialogue with a genuine respect for the ideas and opinions of the learner. Freire stresses that teachers should not impose their views on students, but he also says that they are not and should not be neutral agents. But some tensions arise: Can we have both directive-ness and a truly genuine dialogue?³³ From yet similar perspective, "how can the task of validating certain forms of 'correct' thinking be reconciled with the pedagogical task of helping students to avoid following authoritarian dictates, regardless of how radical they are?"³⁴ Indeed, while adults or experienced learners could possibly engage meaningfully in such a liberating critical dialogue with a teacher, this may not be the case with young learners because learning, at least, at the preliminary levels, seem to require a degree of guidance or mentorship. Hence, critical pedagogy may likely be most effective in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

A related concern has to do with Freire's views on popular knowledge. Cultural anthropologists contend that his portrayal of the oppressed as immersed in a naive consciousness assumes that they are a-critical

³¹ See F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, (New York:Continuum, 2010), p. 152

³² Karl Popper, *Objective knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, (London:Oxford University Press, 1972), p.

³³ Daniel Schugurensky, 1998, vol.31, p. 7

³⁴ Giroux, H. (1988) *Teachers as Intellectuals*. Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey p.541

and unable to establish causal relations, which is contrary to empirical evidence."³⁵ Implicit in the existentialism of Satre, is the understanding of critical consciousness as a peculiar property of the human species. His distinction between conscious beings and the objects of conscious subjects, seems to conflict with Freires notion of conscientization as a critical stage to be attained.³⁶ Critics also claim that in his descriptions of banking education and extension, Freire seems to assume that oppressors can forcibly impose their ideologies and values on vulnerable 'recipients' who are incapable of discernment and hence cannot choose between adopting the new consciousness. It is also suggested that in order to establish a more dialogical relationship between teachers and learners, teachers should accept that they do not know everything, and learners should recognize that they are not ignorant of everything³⁷. Undoubtedly, this sounds like an overstretched extreme. Obviously, it rather sounds more convincing to hold that teachers do not know everything. Therefore, the Nigerian education system will receive a facelift if Nigerian teachers can be convinced of this aspect of critical pedagogy.

Freire has also been faulted for his inclination to present a dualistic view of reality through pairs of opposites in which one is the preferred option, like banking education and problem posing education, oppressor and oppressed, culture of silence and dialogue, alienation and solidarity. If each proposition presupposes its opposite, it is then asked whether, ontologically, the preferred polarities actually exist.³⁸ Moreover, it has been claimed that an opposition between education for domestication and education for liberation is unproductive because education involves both subjection and autonomy, and because it leads practitioners to paralyzing oscillations, between utopianism and despair.³⁹ In the Nigerian context, a consciousness to this observation could engender an objective epistemological growth.

Recommendation

Freire's presentation of critical pedagogy without a specified horizon appears a bit unrealistic. Although it is plausible to hold that a form of critical learning should be encouraged at all levels of learning, the dialogical form advocated by Freire's critical pedagogy seems more appropriate at the level of adult education; technically called *andragogy*. Therefore, following the aforementioned pitfall, a *Critical andragogy* is recommended as an appropriate alternative to a critical pedagogy.

In the interest of clarity, the word *andragogy* stands for the science and practice of adult education. This contrasts pedagogy which stands for the science and practice of children's learning. M.S. Knowles defines '*Andragogy*' as "the art and science of helping adults learn, in contrast to pedagogy as the art of science of teaching children".⁴⁰ *Andragogy*, contrasted as the self-directed education model, from a teacher-directed model of pedagogy, has as one of its corner stone assumptions, the voluntary nature of adult involvement in the learning activities.⁴¹ The learner and the educator, together create a structure or system, or simply a model where the whole process works towards the realization of the following assertions. The method or this model, allows room for the learner to come to a state of being ready and

³⁵Reuben Aguilar and Barquera .H, *Freire: Unasintesis de lo que propone y unaperspectiva. Cuadernos del centroo de EstudiosAgrarios*1, Mexico, cited in Daniel Schugurensky.

³⁶J.P.Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, H.E Barnes, trans, (New York: Washington, Square Press, 1994), p.2

³⁷ Peter Mayo, " Transformative Adult Education in an Age of Globalization: A Gramscian-Freiran Synthesis and Beyond," *The Alberta Journal of Education Research*, Vol 4. No. 2,(1996), 148-160

³⁸ Diana Coben, "Paulo Freire: Unanswered Questions," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, Vol.II.

³⁹R. Gilbert, "Citizenship, Education and Post Modernity," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* Vol.13, No.1, 51-69,(1992), p. 29

⁴⁰ Knowles, M.S. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy (revised and updated)* p. 43

⁴¹ HOLMES Geraldine,(1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy (revised and updated)*, p. 54

motivated to learn something from the situation and the learning activity.⁴² Clearly, andragogy is saturated with the ideals of individualism and entrepreneurial democracy. Societal change may be a by-product of individual change but it is not a primary goal of andragogy.⁴³ Interestingly, the dialogic engagements and other creative motivations that issues from the critical pedagogy model complements the cognitive development of adults; which naturally arouses curiosity and critical inquiries.

Conclusion

The possible impact of critical pedagogy as postulated by Freire in the Nigerian education system has been the central focus of this article. This model of pedagogy, aims at awakening among the oppressed and learners, a critical consciousness and a political sensitivity for their emancipation out of the culture of silence; to a free space of enlightenment and authentic humanization. On its part, the Nigerian education system appears to have toed a part bereft of creatively and critical orientation. Although relatively contestable, effective educational goals don't seem to have been a major prioritization at the foundational stage of Nigerian education. It is then axiomatic and philosophically tenable to hold that the prospects of Freirean model of critical pedagogy in Nigeria could be huge; if its effectiveness can be established concretely in an appropriate manner.

⁴² PEW Stephen, "Andragogy and Pedagogy as Foundational Theory for Student Motivation in Higher Education", in *Insight: A Collection of Faculty Scholarship*, Vol. 2 (2007), p. 17

⁴³ Pratt, Daniel Darwin, "Andragogy as a Relational Construct," *Adult Education Quarterly*, 1988, 38(3), pp. 15-25