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## Refereed articles

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# From the Guest Editor's desk: Education as the practice of freedom

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## Freire's life and work

It is the centenary of Paulo Freire's birth and over fifty years since the publication of his most famous work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English. In this Special Edition of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning (AJAL) we want to mark his extraordinary contribution as an educator, thinker and activist and to celebrate and critically reflect on his work and his legacy.

We imagine many readers will be familiar with Freire and his main ideas but possibly not all. For that reason we want to say something very briefly about the main contours of his life and work before we discuss his impact, his relevance today and describe the contents of this Special Edition.

Born in 1921, in the northeast of Brazil in the city of Recife, Freire trained in law but was drawn into adult education in the late 1940s working for the employers' organisation SESI (Serviço Social da Indústria). Here he was tasked with addressing educational inequality, school exclusion and designing adult literacy programmes. He worked for the University of Recife's cultural extension service (Gadotti, 1994) and became a professor in

the early 1960s. By this time, Freire had become well-known in Brazil for his design, planning and theorising of ground-breaking adult literacy initiatives in Angicos and elsewhere (see Freire, 1970), and this led to his appointment as director of the national literacy programme (Torres, 2019). This work was cut short by a military coup and Freire was subsequently imprisoned. Exiled, Freire settled in Chile where he held a position in the government Social Development Division and the Research and Training Institute for Agrarian Reform (ICIRA) as well as collaborating with UNESCO. He honed and refined his ideas in Chile through his work in non-formal adult education, literacy, and popular education (Gadotti, 1994; Schugurensky, 2011; Torres, 2019). Freire's brief sojourn in Harvard University in 1970 was followed by almost a decade with the World Council of Churches based in Geneva[1] (Freire and Faundez, 1989). This period of his life was marked by an extraordinary level of engagement with emancipatory social movements and popular educators across the world, including involvement with major post-colonial educational and literacy initiatives.

When Freire returned to Brazil in 1980 he began working at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo (PUC) as well as working with the Centre for the Study of Education and Society, one of the many such research collectives he established intending to support educators (Gadotti, 1994). He was also involved in founding the left-wing political party the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party) and in the late eighties he became the Municipal Educational Secretary of Sao Paulo (see Freire's book *Pedagogy of the City* (1993) for his own reflections on this experience as well as Apple, (2013) and O'Cadiz et al (1998) for assessments of these initiatives). After three years he resigned from this post. In his last few remaining years he went through a particularly intense period of writing in which he reflected on his past work and explored the challenges for education in a neoliberal era (Freire, 1994, 1998, 2004 *inter alia*).

Freire's life and work were shaped by his profound commitment to social justice (Torres, 2019; see all Freire's work but this is especially clear in the biographical reflections in *Pedagogy of Hope*). It is impossible, according to Freire (1972), to be neutral in the face of unnecessary suffering and he repeatedly argued that education needed to be reimagined as part of a wider struggle for a more equal society. Freire's radical political commitment was nourished by a deep moral conviction about the inherent value and capability of human beings

and horror at the way the capacity for freedom, curiosity and agency is denied, and even destroyed, by inequality. This moral sensibility, or perhaps more accurately moral vision, animates all his work.

Intellectually, Freire drew heavily on the radical humanist tradition and was particularly indebted to the revolutionary readings of Hegel offered by Marx, Lukacs, Fromm, and Fanon, supplemented by a wider interest in educational theory, phenomenology, existentialism and liberation theology. This conceptual synthesis was very heterodox and creative, even though this is harder to discern now as his ideas have become so familiar. Freire was neither a Marxist nor an existentialist in any typical or traditional sense. His Christian faith - a version of liberation theology - was equally distinct and was based on the idea that Jesus stood with the poor and that oppression and domination are mortal sins. Taken as a whole, Freire's theory - as this list of thinkers and themes named above suggest - is above all a dialectical philosophy of education and all his books seek, using different registers and formats, to do justice to the processual, complex, mediated, relational nature of social and educational experience and action. His writing is also permeated by a sense of possibility. Freire's philosophy is finely attuned to processes of becoming and to the flow and pulse of life as well as what deadens and kills the human spirit. To use a concept of Fromm's (1964) that was important to Freire, a 'biophilic' philosophy, a restless, curious way of thinking attuned to our necessary incompleteness as individual and social beings, and to the radical openness of history.

Much of the texture and value of Freire's work is based on reflecting sensitively and carefully on the importance of exploring the specific culture and socio-historical context in which any educational encounter is situated. According to Freire, we cannot develop an emancipatory education without open dialogue between students and between students and the educator. Thus one of Freire's key insights is, to paraphrase Marx (1888), the educator has to constantly educate themselves by tapping into the rich lived experience and everyday knowledge of students. Freire never tired of reminding us that people carry into the classroom invaluable insights into their own lives and society. Respect, and active interest, in this knowledge are fundamental for 'humanising education'. Critical dialogue builds from this through a double movement: the affirmation and exploration of the importance of everyday knowledge whilst also creating distance from the self-evident

and given quality of the world as it appears and is experienced. This move into experience and critical reframing happens through problem posing which allows us to 'to read the world' (Freire and Macedo, 1987) and deepen our understanding of the powers and structures that shape us. This is what Freire (1972) termed 'conscientisation' and establishes the basis for emancipatory praxis, that is reflexive agency on various scales, with the aim of dismantling or weakening oppressive relations and practices. Freire proposes that this can only be cultivated by educators holding fast to the political and moral certainty that progressive change is possible, combined with sincere humility and care in assessing what this might mean for individuals and communities in specific historical and social contexts. This acute and subtle sensitivity to the dialectical movement between particular material and cultural circumstances and general historical possibilities has given Freire's work an intellectual and political suppleness which has meant it has 'travelled' easily in time and space.

## The impact of Freire on adult education and beyond

Without doubt, Freire is the most renowned figure in modern adult education who has influenced, orientated and even defined our field in profound and remarkable ways. By necessity and custom, this fact is mentioned frequently in adult education courses, at conferences and in publications and has become so familiar a proposition that its true significance barely registers. A simple thought experiment might serve to make this a little less banal: pause for a moment and imagine adult education practice and research, whether in historical or everyday terms, without the figure of Freire, without his concepts and arguments, without his practical experiments and collaborations.

Freire has inspired projects and initiatives in Australia, Africa, Asia, Europe and across the Americas. As Martin Carnoy (2006, p.8) has noted Freire is "an anomaly among educators because he is truly international" his "ideas are in the world and of the world". We know that in traditional academic terms Freire is one of the most cited authors within adult education. This is true both historically and in recent years. For example, he is by far the most prominent author in the 2018 *Palgrave Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning* (Milani et al, 2018) and continues to be widely cited in key journals. Of course, Freire's books remain the main wellspring for radical popular

education, many forms of community education and critical pedagogy, as well as providing one of the key reference points in transformative learning theory. There are eleven Freire institutes internationally and numerous academic networks, such as the Popular Education Network (Crowther, 2013) and ESREA's Active Democratic Citizenship and Adult Learning network, where his ideas remain vital and central.

Significantly, Freire has made what is distinct and important in adult education relevant to other disciplines and areas of scholarship, ranging from international development to sociology. In fact, Freire has been cited almost half a million times and remarkably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is one of the three most frequently referenced texts in social science (Green, 2016) and it is also worth noting he is the only author of the twenty five most influential texts in social science who comes from the Global South.

As we have noted already *dialogue with people in context* is fundamental to Freire's approach to education. The strong emphasis Freire put on understanding the historical and cultural formation of communities led to new ways of thinking about curriculum and also foregrounded, in a new way, the importance of research for adult educators. The use of codifications based on extensive preliminary research with a community naturally led to other ways of approaching this research, such as the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1995) and, more indirectly, the use of cultural studies in critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Giroux and McLaren, 1994; Shor, 1992) and other arts-based pedagogies (Clover and Stalker, 2007). Freire's insights paved the way for the development of participatory action research (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991) and fed into the collective work that led to the establishment of the International Participatory Research Network under the auspices of the International Council of Adult Education (Hall, 2005). This focus on the importance of participatory research has been very generative methodologically (see Grummell and Finnegan, 2020 for a number of recent examples of researchers building on this tradition).

Judged in Freire's own terms citation patterns and methodological innovation are relatively unimportant in and of themselves. The key issue is whether these ideas and practices contribute to emancipatory change. Without doubt, Freire's work as an educator, his writing, and his meetings and many collaborations, have emboldened and inspired activists and

practitioners for sixty years across the world, in diverse settings and on a range of scales. It has been especially significant for popular education, mass literacy campaigns (Archer and Costello, 1990; Kane, 2013; Torres et al, 2015) and in community and international development education (Hope and Timmell, 1984). Assessing the full scale of this is impossible but we do know, as some of the articles in this Special Edition indicate, this led to initiatives that involved millions of people.

Much of Freire's (1970, 1978) work in places such as Guinea-Bissau, Grenada and Brazil on educational reform and mass literacy campaigns is well-known because of the scale and ambition of these projects, but it is important to also remember that his work has directly informed innumerable local initiatives which have been sustained and highly impactful. For example, the Adult Learning Project in Edinburgh or the work of Highlander in Appalachia. Freire continues to be drawn upon by contemporary social movements, ranging from the Movimento Sem Terra in Brazil (Kane, 2013), to recent anti-capitalist and ecological campaigns (Hall et al, 2013). In this context, it is worth noting that Freire is still seen as a threat to the status quo and before his election the current President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro promised to "enter the Education Ministry with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire" (Telesur, 2019) and has gone to great lengths to undo reforms initiated or inspired by Freire in Brazil.

## Popular democratic ferment and the rise of neoliberalism: Historicising and critiquing Freire in a changing field

It would be against the spirit of Freire to treat a Special Edition about Freire as an occasion for hagiography or toothless nostalgia. When we read Freire's early work in the light of second wave feminism, we are reminded, as Freire notes, that each of us is the product of the culture and circumstances of our times, including the relative absence in his writing of women's experiences and voices. Whilst he made strides to engage with feminist critiques after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the 1970s, the glaring absence of gender awareness reminds us of the situated, incomplete and partial nature of his theory of emancipation.

There are other blind spots and weaknesses in Freire's theory of course, such as his relative disregard in theoretical terms for questions of political economy and a tendency to underplay the complexities of social and educational institutions and knowledge production.

More generally one also needs to consider on the centenary of his birth whether rapid social change has made Freire less relevant. Reading Freire today it is striking the extent to which his work expresses and codifies what was learnt by democratic and egalitarian social movements during a particularly intense period of history. Freire's pedagogy emerged, and was profoundly shaped, by a global democratic ferment between the late 1950s and mid 1970s linked to decolonisation, 'third world' liberation struggles and an upsurge in the emancipatory movements of students, workers and women (for a useful framing see Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein, 1989). In the popular imagination, this is often linked to a single year -1968 (Marker, 1978). In many ways, we can see Freire as an educator and epistemologist of, and from, the movements of 68. These movements were varied but were marked by commitment to equality, a keen interest in extending democracy and a desire to rethink how we approach knowledge (Wainwright, 2009). It is worth recalling that Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki (1975, p 127) in a report for the Trilateral Commission viewed these mobilisations as a major threat to the status quo, linked, in their telling phrase, to "an excess of democracy". Freire's radicalism, his militant hopefulness, his trust in the good sense of people, can be traced back to the energy and activity of these emancipatory counter-publics.

Naturally, this ferment also shaped the field of adult education - which has historically had a strong relationship with democratic movements - and interest in radical educational proposals (Hake, 2021). For example, in decolonising societies such as Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde islands, there was a strong interest in developing adult education to overcome the educational neglect and miseducation of colonisation. In wealthy states, especially social democratic ones, radical educators, could often find space to advance radical education within established adult education structures alongside what was happening within movements. In this sense even when Freire's ideas were institutionally marginal they were buoyed by their wider visibility in society[2].

As we know, the socio-political landscape today is very different. The wave of anti-colonial independence movements did not lead to the type of autonomous national development that was hoped for in most cases. If we consider Cabral's inspiring vision of Guinea-Bissau in the 1970s and then think about governance in this country today we get some inkling of the distance we have travelled and the disenchantment this has involved.

The hopes for a renewal of democratic politics sparked by the collapse of authoritarian socialist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s also fizzled out during difficult, and in many places, traumatic social changes in this region. Perhaps most significant of all, and these things are obviously connected, has been the rise of neoliberalism. The policy measures taken in Chile after the military coup against Allende marked the first chapter in the adoption of neoliberal ideas at a state level (Harvey, 2005) but these were still very 'marginal' ideas in international terms. However, by the mid 1990s these ideas had global purchase. Achieving this involved direct conflict with organised labour and a wider assault against collectivist and egalitarian ideals in culture and politics. Political conflict, combined with shifts in technology, finance and the international division of labour, has altered in dramatic ways the international architecture of power, weakening the movements of grassroots democracy which inspired Freire. Alongside this, the neoliberalisation of formal adult education in many states resulted in changes in funding and management which have shrunken the space for educators to develop situated, open forms of adult education with emancipatory goals (Bowl, 2017; Tett and Hamilton, 2019). Over time this, alongside the ambiguous impact of the professionalisation of adult education, has rendered much of the field deaf, or at the very least incapable of responding to, emancipatory social movements.

Freire (1994, 1998, 2004) repeatedly and forcefully rejected the fatalism of neoliberalism. The idea that history was finished seemed an absurd, patently ideological, proposition to him. He also discussed how this can be responded to in a generative and active way through hopefulness, avoiding dogmatism on the left and by building broad alliances between diverse, progressive movements. In many respects, these emphases anticipated the main aspects of contemporary 'grassroots' democratic thinking (Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014). Nevertheless, when we read Freire today it is clear how much ground has been ceded, and how much the ground has been transformed since *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's ideas need to be engaged with this historical passage of time in mind, with a type of double consciousness that allows for the recovery of lost histories and repressed hopes whilst grasping how and why these ideas are now 'out of joint'. From this perspective, we think Freire can then be adapted and critiqued so that it can better speak to the complexities of financialised capitalism, the rise of fundamentalisms, the proliferation of social media and issues of ecology, climate justice and climate change.

## Looking backward, looking forward

Freire's writing on the 'banking system of education' which rejected didactic or 'front end' loading approaches to learning is foundational to what we now know about how adults learn (Freire 1972). Freire knew that learning was embodied, that learners had agency, he argued they were able to think carefully and critically about their own learning needs and had the capacity to disrupt, critique and challenge their teachers. What he proposed to challenge traditional rationalist and behaviourist approaches to learning was to argue for 'problem posing' dialogue in which both teachers and learners engage in ongoing dialectical and dialogic conversations about education and learning, but also through conversations about the world around them. For Freire, education was an inherently political process, education was and could never be politically neutral. It is inextricably connected to the pollical and economic conditions of our time. Importantly, it is the social justice intent of Freire's writing, believing education should be connected to a struggle against inequality in society, which remains important. These ideas about education and learning remain vital to adult education. The Australian Journal of Adult learning (AJAL) is very pleased to celebrate this with articles that reflect on the legacy of Freire and on the way his ideas are still being used.

It is hoped this Special Edition of the journal will help record the effect Freire has had on research in adult education and learning, and also, perhaps, to spark interest in readers, academics and scholars new to his work. We see his ideas in contemporary struggles for education justice for adult learners and how through education lives are profoundly transformed through access to literacy and numeracy education, improving learners' lives by providing opportunities for work, income and housing, enabling them to participate more fully in a living democracy.

## The articles in the Special Edition

The Special Edition begins with a poetic tribute to Freire from Budd L. Hall who was one of the facilitators involved in Freire's visit to Tanzania and went on to play a central role in participatory and popular education research in adult education. Entitled 'Surf On Pauliño' it recalls a 70th birthday celebration held for Freire in New York which Freire attended and whose presence there, says Hall, allowed the gathered activists and adult educators to also 'celebrate ourselves through him'. It deftly and

simply captures some of the qualities and charisma of Freire as a person and how he appeared to bring 'a warm breeze of historical possibility' with him. We can think of no more fitting way to begin this collection.

The first two articles explore Freire, literacy and liberation in South Africa, Australia and Timor-Leste. The articles are fascinating in terms of the historical detail they offer but also argue for a particular way of approaching Freire. As the author of the second article Bob Boughton puts it, 're-reading and re-writing Freire must be done, not in university seminars or academic journals, but in the practice of teaching literacy on a mass scale'.

John Aitcheson and Veronica McKay's reflection on the impact of Freire's thinking on literacy programmes in South Africa, (and in particular on the ongoing Kha Ri Gude campaign), addresses this challenge in vibrant and compelling ways. Fittingly this article is the result of a reflective dialogue. Aitcheson and McKay present what they call a 'duoethnographical' approach, situating their work in the context of their different initial encounters with Freire's thinking in apartheid era South Africa when Freire's books were banned by the state and circulated clandestinely. It reflects on the different routes they took to arrive as joint leaders of the Kha Ri Gude campaign. Aitcheson, as a scholar activist, fresh from five years of restriction without trial, encountered Freire's work in the context of the struggle against the state. He saw Freire's work, and in particular his commitment to praxis, as reflection in action, alongside that of Marx, Fanon and the post-war hermeneutic philosophers influencing civil society literacy work, the black consciousness movement, and the creation of the United Democratic Front. He maps the impact of Freire's thought on popular and political movements and the rise, and post-apartheid fall of a wider commitment to literacy as a tool of empowerment. The article recounts how after the end of apartheid "Freireanism went downhill fast". Interestingly, this is linked by the author to the desire of even the most alternative and radical educators to see the development of a state supported and funded adult education system. The second author, McKay, also engaged in the struggles against the injustices of apartheid as a student, when she also volunteered as a literacy tutor. In that context, she encountered Freire's thoughts through Ann Hope's and Hilary Timmel's *Training for Transformation* (1984) and then through a clandestine copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. She describes her experiences in developing programmes grounded in problem posing

and problem solving dialogue, action-reflection programmes, and in founding the Institute for Basic Education.

One of the fascinating aspects of this article is the way earlier experiments in radical education which were neutralised or disappeared in a period of defeat were later reactivated. In the latter part of this article the authors discuss how the experience developing adult education programmes focused on 'anti-banking education' led to a new coming together. Finally, after years of false starts, the State committed to a major literacy initiative to run the impressive Kha Ri Gude programme which successfully reached four million adults. A key element of the materials produced was the production of generative codes designed to generate dialogue, problem posing and solving among learner groups. The programme was designed to stimulate campaigns to mobilise communities to action and reflection, and to 'help shape the trajectory of living'.

The second article by Boughton and Durnan is an account of the adaptation of the Cuban *Yo Sí Puedo* literacy programme in the very different political contexts of newly liberated Timor Leste and to Aboriginal communities in Australia over the past twenty years. The Cuban model has, as Boughton and Durnan claim, been exported widely and reached more than ten million people internationally. Boughton and Durnan's paper notes how this approach is both similar and distinct from Freire. In particular, Boughton recognises that the methods, materials and lesson plans differ from Freire's focus on the central role of dialogue in the shaping and development of programmes, but argues that the approaches share in a common belief that 'before you read the text you have to read the context', and that time is spent in adapting the approach to local circumstances. Reflecting on the lessons of the campaigns, Boughton argues first that the Cuban programme is grounded in an analysis that sees the social and economic inequality produced by an imperialist world system as the root cause of the problem of mass literacy on a global scale. Secondly, he stresses the importance in any mass literacy campaign of structure, organisation, disciplined coordination and training, and points to the strength of the model in engaging volunteer tutors, often not substantially more literate than the students in the development together of their programmes (this is different from the Freirean approach). Thirdly, he argues any mass programme needs to be contextualised, and to have inbuilt processes for reflection and adaptation, not least to ensure that first world educators recognise their own ignorance when working to

understand the communities they partner in such programmes. Reading Freire in the light of another radical approach to literacy reminds us that Freire is only one, albeit unusually influential, figure within a wider and longer history of popular education. This also makes his distinct contribution to educational thinking clearer.

The first two articles alert us to the various ways Freire has been deployed in literacy campaigns and liberation struggles. The third article by Griff Foley is similar to the poem and two preceding articles in that it deals with memory but is approached from a different angle. It is an account of Foley's own professional formation and learning in the form of a montage of memories, a type of bricolage. It moves over a lifetime of work and activism in the author's home country of Australia as well as his experiences of teaching in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Woven into this biographical montage is a discussion of a number of educational and political science concepts framed within a dialectical theory of power and learning. Central to this is Foley's belief in the continuing relevance of Freire, especially the ideas of generative codes and themes, for critical education and engaged citizenship. As part of this, Foley draws on extensive research he has done in the past which points to the centrality of learning in human life, especially informal and incidental learning. These give rise Foley says, pace Gramsci, to a type of 'common sense' and distinct forms of rationality. Each social configuration has its own common sense and generative themes. This adaption of Freire's concept as a type of socio-historical sense-making that can be progressive or reactionary is thought-provoking. The piece is underpinned by a strong sense of the everyday capacity for solidarity and critical thought but also a deep awareness of pathologies in the present era, most notably the fact that "ecosystems and social bonds that sustain life on earth [are] under immense pressure". Foley finishes the article with a call for a new form of critical rationality, linked to ecological sustainability, capable of dealing with the mystifications of neoliberalism, the scapegoating of migrants and the climate crisis.

The fourth text is by Helen Underhill and is entitled *'Pedagogy of the Oppressed and discomfort in activist-scholarship: an autoethnographic account of engaging with Freire as teacher, adult educator and researcher'*. In it the author critically reflects on her own embodied journey of learning, drawing on anthropology and critical educational research combined with Boler's writing of 'learning as discomfort'. The paper is a series of reflective 'moments' about her own adult learning which is

reflexively weaved through an encounter with Freire's philosophy. She commences by noting that schools are spaces of schooling 'docile bodies', or spaces of rationalist performativity, which assess, rank and categorise students according to their 'abilities'. She moves on to analyse learning in social action (largely informally), through the relational engagement with other activists and how Freire's ideas were foundational in learning with others about how to critique, disrupt and challenge power. As she claims, 'A central tenet of Freirean pedagogy is the commitment to revolutionary praxis - to 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 33) that is distinct from activism as 'action for action's sake' (p. 69)'. Her final reflective 'moment' outlines the importance of engaged research which conflicts with an objectivist approach to research. Underhill describes education as a space of tension and contradictions where grasping the limits of your own practice and the structural and institutional constraints you are working within you can be useful and generative. The paper outlines how an experience of discomfort in a workshop she attended in South Africa led her to understand how research should be engaged 'with' rather than 'on' marginalised communities. This form of research moves beyond research that privileges the researcher or the academy, highlighting the significant difference between producing knowledge for the university and conducting research that can work with and for communities. The article concludes by acknowledging that her story of adult education, activism and research positioned with Freire's writing, demonstrates how adult education is 'critical to understanding the possibilities for transformative education and research'.

In *Annunciation and denunciation in Paulo Freire's dialogical popular education,* the fifth article in this issue, Linden West invites us to reflect on the role religion plays in Freire's work. He argues that to see Freire's words without understanding Freire's Christian view of the world is to see only half the picture. It is a powerful, and perhaps for some, even an unsettling argument. West suggests that Freire's beliefs are at the heart of his work. They can be found in Catholic Social Action programmes, in liberation theology and in solidarity with the poor. As West reminds us, Freire himself said that his Christian upbringing partly explains his pedagogical beliefs. Christ 'is the light that led me to Marx' Freire said in one of his letters, '…My relationship with Marx never suggested that I abandon Christ'. West coherently argues that Freire's vision of the new order 'is a mix of Marxism and liberation theology: a place where

no man or woman or group exploits the work of others.' Further, that in a critical spirit, understanding self and others through hope and love, is a means of humanising the world. West also discusses the inspiring work of Colin Kirkwood. The article thus, somewhat indirectly, brings Freire in dialogue with a long and interesting tradition in Britain of exploring the role of religion in radical thought, which has been especially powerful in some strands of adult education, not least the Workers' Educational Association, from R.H. Tawney to E.P. Thompson. The article concludes with evocative stories from a workshop intended to develop active citizenship in Israeli teacher education. Here, West details the humanising effect of narrative storytelling which can reveal new life, new hope and new learning through dialogue. A powerful end to a stimulating article which, above all, turns on the possibility of redemption.

The sixth article by Vicky Duckworth and Marie McNamara deals with class inequalities and education based on life history and biographical research. Two aspects of Freire are foregrounded in it. First, Duckworth and McNamara stress the importance of using participatory research methods in educational research. Amongst other things, this means attending carefully to power relations and seeking to eliminate, or at least minimise, the traditional hierarchies of academic research. As feminists have long maintained, this has implications for both the doing and the presentation of research. The traditional academic mode of 'neutral' presentation is directly challenged here by the authors by offering an account of education and inequality which is grounded, contextual and personal. They explore their educational and life histories alongside each other to make sense of power and possibility in a classed society. Duckworth first met McNamara as her tutor on an adult literacy course and they became friends. Their shared community and class background - they grew up fifteen minutes from each other in similar housing – means this is a type of 'insider research'. They discuss the power of thinking across their lives and why and how they had similar experiences in schooling and also traces their different post-school trajectories. They say that this process meant that issues that had been "kept hidden were suddenly exposed. Everything we felt, including shame, was being challenged as we realised that we were not alone in our experiences that had made us feel like outsiders to the educational system".

Second, the paper acknowledges and critiques the role of education in the reproduction of class inequalities but at the same time makes a case for the

transformative possibilities of education on various scales. For both authors, education and learning has been empowering. Duckworth says of her friend:

> *'Marie is still the same person; it is her financial and economic security and her perspective on the world that has changed. In Marie's case it also enhances social cohesion within her community: through enhancing the agency of the individual, it benefits the family and, beyond that of the home community.'*

In telling these stories Duckworth and McNamara pose questions to us about the various, overlapping and conflicting, ways adult educators understand change and transformation.

## Letters to those who dare teach: Another world is possible

In preparing for this Special Edition we were conscious of the way Freire chose to communicate with other educators in creative and often novel ways and formats such as the 'talking books' (Escobar et al, 1994; Horton et al, 1990; Freire and Faundez, 1990; Shor and Freire, 1987) and books of letters (Freire, 1978, 1996, 2004). This was of course deeply rooted in his way of viewing knowledge. Like so many readers we have gained a great deal from the form and content of these publications but it does raise useful, possibly uncomfortable questions, in preparing a journal on Freire. Would much of Freire's most valuable work get through contemporary peer review processes? Are we speaking and listening to practitioners in our academic fora and in publications? Are we leaving enough freedom for grounded, reflexive research which cannot fully follow established conventions? We think and hope we have done so with the articles that are featured in this Special Edition but we also very much wanted there to be space for other ways of communication and this brings us to the final part of this Special Edition: four letters.

Paulo Freire spent over ten years in exile from his native country. His letters are full of reflections and advice to modern readers and were a way to share his ideas about the unity between theory and practice. They are a chance to look over his shoulder and to hear his voice, whether in the 'report letters' to Guinea-Bissau in *Pedagogy in Process* or the more personal *Letters to Cristina*. 'My experience in exile,' he wrote, 'was enriched by the letters I wrote to friends'. Writing, for Freire, was not an option but a 'deep pleasure … [and a] '… political project that must be met'.

This is why we have invited readers to contribute 'letters to a teacher': not to emulate one of Freire's last publications, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, but to help bring his thinking to life. It is appropriate that the letters here are from teacher educators.

The first of these is by Sergio Haddad who has led the Sao Paulo NGO Acao Activo for many years and played a leading and inspiring role in Latin American and wider international popular education. He worked alongside Freire and is one of, if not the, leading Brazilian authorities on his work. He uses his letter to say that Paulo Freire's voice is a necessary one for today. Haddad reviews his life and concludes that Paulo's contribution was primarily based on dialogue. 'Effective, critical, respectful dialogue was at the centre of his pedagogical thinking' Haddad concludes, in a masterful summarising of why Freire's words are important right now, at this time when repression, inequality and poverty are evident everywhere. In short, we need Paulo Freire because we need social transformation in a damaged and threatened world.

In the second missive, 'The critical power of Freire's work', Licínio Lima, the well-known Portuguese Freirean, addresses teacher educators and reflects on why Freire's legacy remains current, namely that education is not 'value-neutral'. Licínio argues with passion that we need a critique of 'traditional, bureaucratic, dehumanised education that reproduces social inequalities'. The author reminds us that Freire's work is also more than this. It is about alternatives '… and a world of possibilities for transformation'. This is a plea to see Freire's work as full of doubts and questions, encouraging debate and a critical understanding of education. Licínio concludes with a reminder of the violence and oppression Freire would have fought against in the new environment of, '… physical and symbolic violence, restrictions on freedom and democracy, environmental disaster … access to vaccines and oxygen by the current 'ragged from the world'…'

Our third letter 'Dear Carmen' is to someone on the threshold of a career in teaching. In it the author of the letter, Paul Gurton, suggests that he could have done more to allay Carmen's fears. He reminds her of an inspiring teacher who encouraged cooperative learning in her school and urged her not to be disheartened by the narrowness of the current primary curriculum in England. Gurton offers a living example of how dialogic teaching is thriving in some primary schools where Freire's principles can be seen in practice. It is a letter full of hope and encouragement. 'These

children,' Gurton suggests, are developing an agency of their own, '… and beginning to use language to interpret the world'. The letter ends with a critical moment that remains with the writer and the reader.

In 'A RED-letter day' Tony Davis, another teacher educator, describes to a Technical and Further Education teacher how they might have more agency in changing the way that teaching is assessed in their college. He suggests turning the observation of teaching sessions into a research project in which risks are taken and colleagues peer-review one another's work in a supportive way. Tony argues that it is necessary to take risks when you teach if we are all to improve what we do for adult students. His letter suggests engaging with 'accountability' and turning our teaching into a transformational activity in which we learn. 'Our job as teachers' he says, 'is to help adult learners to be curious, excited about the learning they do, to grow as individuals, and to care'.

In reading these letters, in listening to the voices, you may find that you are stirred to write such a letter yourself. It is a way to continue a dialogue about contemporary issues. In one of Freire's last letters (*Letters to Cristina: Eighteenth Letter*), he speaks of making the dream of a better world a reality, and that accepting the dream means accepting the process of building it. In education we have much to do. Now that we have started, or rather recalled, reflected and restarted, we look forward to more letters from you and further critical dialogue.

## Endnotes

[1] He combined this with the work of Instituto de Ação Cultural (IDAC) which he established with other colleagues to support the educational work of groups in the global south struggling for independence.

[2] The reconfiguration of adult education and the state form in the neoliberal era was a major theme of the last Triennial conference of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) held in Belgrade in 2018 and the discussion there informs these comments.

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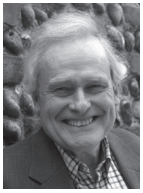

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# Surf On Pauliño

Budd L Hall, PhD

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Lire les mots
Lire les textes
Lire les vies
Lire le monde
Lire nos coeurs

I mean picture this
600 street-wise American and Canadian activists
Assembled in the conference hall of the New School of Social Research in New York City
Where in 1932 the first North American meeting of the Workers Education Association was held

A birthday conference for Paulo Freire, the most influential Educational thinker of the 20th century
Academics jammed in next to homeless organizers who are
Jammed in next to Lady Garment Workers who are
Jammed in next to the Puerto Rican Independence underground who are
Jammed in next to kindergarten teachers who are
Jammed in next to high school students who are
Waiting to hear from Paulo Freire

And Paulo, 70 years old, who has come to town to help us all
Celebrate ourselves through him, stands up behind a table on the
Stage

"I'd like to tell you",
Paulo says in his quiet gentle voice,
"About the best gift that I have had for my birthday.
I received it from a young boy in Recife, in Northeast Brazil where
I was born.
He gave me the gift of a picture which he had drawn himself
A picture of the crashing Atlantic coastal waves
And in the picture was a man riding on what I think is called a
Surfboard.
And on top of the board, riding the waves, was an old man with a
white beard and glasses.
That old man was me. It was a picture of me.
And my young friend had written words beneath this picture in his
own handwriting.
He told me “Surf On Pauliño”
Surf on little Paul
“And", Paulo said with a smile that reached out to the entire hall,
"I intend to do just that".

For Paulo was a transcendent rider of the waves
Waves of respect for the oppressed people of this planet
Waves of intellectual curiosity; lover of words
Waves of exile and loneliness in Chile, Geneva and Africa
Waves of love for his children, his dear Elsa who died before him
Waves of love for the final love of his life, his widow Nita.
And waves of love for his friends in such places as Guinea-Bissau,
Cuba, India, Fiji, France and, yes, for us in Canada.

For if he was a teacher
For if he was an activist
For if he was a writer
For if he was a teller of stories
He was above all a person in the great and ancient tradition of
Brazilian mystics

More than a teacher
More than an activist
More than a writer
More than the teller of stories

He carried with him a warm breeze of historic possibility
He carried with him the memories of many struggles
He carried with him vulnerability and need
He carried with him opportunities for friendship
He carried with him the new eyes of the young
He carried with him revolutionary agency
He carried with him his hand for ours
He carried with him the electric atmosphere of a Northeastern
Brazilian Storm

Paulo often apologized for his ways of speaking languages other
Than his beloved Portuguese
And yet he held audiences at hushed attention when he spoke in
English, French or Spanish in every corner of the world
He found ways through his distinct ways of speaking English and
French and other languages to draw us in to his speech
To draw us into himself
So much did he seem to need us, his audience, that we hung on his
Every word and we helped him to reach out to ourselves

So that in the end
we were his text
We were his words
He was our text
He was our words

Lire les mots
Lire les textes
Lire les vies
Lire le monde
Lire nos coeurs

Pauliño
Surf on

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I acknowledge with respect the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSANEC peoples on whose traditional territory the University of Victoria stands and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day

## About the poem

This poem was written to celebrate the birthday of Paulo Freire in the year after his death in 1998 and was first published in Concept, the journal of community development, Edinburgh. 

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# A historical remembrance of Paulo Freire in South Africa: A tale of two activists

John Aitchison
Veronica McKay

*This article is based on our two narratives through which we explore how Freirean thought had an impact on our respective praxis as academic activists in apartheid South Africa. We reflect specifically on the influence the work of Freire had on informing and advancing our respective struggles against apartheid education. This article therefore emanates from our process of thoughtful dialoguing and writing about how our understandings of Freire enabled us to contribute to the South African struggle for liberation in our respective spaces. We discuss, as a starting point, our early engagements with Freirean literature during our separate journeys. We then reflect through our latter discussion on our combined efforts to design, develop and implement a large-scale Freirean-infused national literacy campaign in post-apartheid South Africa. These efforts were informed by our understandings of Freirean thought.*

*The article aims to show the early and the continued relevance of Freire's work, during the struggle for liberation in South Africa in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It also shows how Freirean thought remained relevant in the early twenty-first century through, among other things, the implementation of adult literacy.*

***Keywords:*** *Freire, literacy, adult education, reflection-action and praxis, Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign*

## Introduction

The apartheid period in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 was a period of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination which denied black people political and economic rights and enforced segregation. This period gave rise to an intellectual culture of opposition in some South African universities within the broader anti-apartheid movement. Both authors of this article were at universities in the years before South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. They played an active role as education and literacy activists during a time when Freire's ideas had "an important influence in the Black Consciousness Movement, the trade union movement, and some of the organisations associated with the United Democratic Front . . . his ideas remain influential today, from trade unions to grassroots struggles" (Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2020).

This article presents our two intertwining narratives through which we reflect on how Freirean thought had an impact on our respective theory and praxis as academic activists. We share our historical narratives, and we interpret and reinterpret our accounts about how our academic–activist journeys and the development of our understandings of Freirean thought enabled us to, individually and jointly, contribute to the struggle for liberation in South Africa.

## The narrative approach

Methodologically, our article utilises a reflective dialogue approach between two practitioners, an approach which Freire himself modelled as a dialogical interaction through which new knowledge is created. In our reflective dialogue, we make use of narratives[1], locating and reflecting on our individual experiences of Freire. We locate this in a historical context and capture the emotion of the moment. We used these reflections to interpret our present day use of Freire's work. This approach is modelled in the work of Torres (1997) and Shor (1993) who used reflective dialogue engaging Freire in their use of a reflective dialogue. There are numerous more recent studies adapting the use of reflective dialogue as a method

for community research such as those by McKay and Romm, (2014); Kazhikenova et al. (2021) and Tsang (2005). Moen (2005, p. 1) refers to the narrative approach as being both a “frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, [as well as] a research method, and a mode for representing the research study. Hence, the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method”.

We take, as a starting point for our discussion, our early separate engagements with Freirean literature and narrate the way in which Freire’s pedagogical influences in the areas of dialogical praxis and conscientisation informed our work.

Although our initial narratives of our early years were separated by the fact that our histories preceded the internet and the cell phone and by our geographical separation of some 600 km, our interpretations of Freire gave us a common theoretical basis that shaped our paradigms and provided a theoretical basis for collaboration on the successful implementation of the Mass Literacy Campaign.

The article therefore considers how our understandings of Freire informed and advanced our struggle against apartheid education[2] and influenced our subsequent work in the South African Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign, which we discuss in the latter part of this article. In this latter discussion, we share our combined narratives and consider the way in which the South African Mass Literacy Campaign encapsulates our understandings of Freire, providing a theoretical basis upon which we could draw and extend our praxis-oriented theory-practice conversations enabling the Freirean-infused implementation of the large-scale national literacy campaign in post-apartheid South Africa.

The combined narrative of Freire "living on" is pertinent for the special edition of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning in which we celebrate the life and work of Freire and his contribution to adult learning in South Africa.

The article begins in the next section with a reflective narrative from the first author, John Aitchison, and then proceeds to describe that of the second author, Veronica McKay. We present these two narratives in dialogue with each other. In the latter part of the article, our stories contribute to a single narrative of how, in the face of the demise of Freirean practice in South Africa, we were able to ensure that the South African Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign encapsulates Freirean thought.

## John's story

In 1970, I was released after five years of total political and social restriction without trial by the apartheid regime. It was hard finding employment and finally I got a part-time job working as a printer for a church education project. One day the person in charge brought me a book which he thought I would be interested in. It was a rather dull grey book without a cover that had been sent to him by a friend in the United States of America. It was by Paulo Freire and was called *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972b). By the time I had devoured it, it had been banned by the South African government (as a politically subversive book) and mere possession of it could have resulted in a jail sentence. It was not an easy book to read; it was rather dense and assumed a high level of academic literacy. But despite that, the book was entrancing for it put together into a whole the various strands of thought that had been slowly weaving their way into the struggle against the apartheid environment.

The first strand was the Marx of the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (1988) which had relatively recently become available in English and a few copies had been smuggled into the country. A friend from the underground Communist Party lent them to me. Here was a different and philosophically more speculative Marx with less of what Marx later described as "the economic shit" he had to write about. Here was a Marx who wrote about work as a life purpose in which human beings act on and transform material things and thereby also transform their identity as human beings. This process, however, under conditions of exploitation, leads to alienation and estrangement. Freire had taken this strand of thought and shown the vital conscientising role of education in this transformative process. It enabled people to understand that they were transforming human reality through their work (including their cultural work), but again, albeit that education could itself be turned against liberation in what he called "banking education" (Freire, 1972b, p. 80).

What was exciting about Freire was that he went beyond the Marxist analyses, highlighting that education was not merely a reflection of the economic base but that it was important, with educators having real agency. This view of the teacher was in line with Gramsci's translated works which in the 1980s and 1990s exercised a similar and more strident influence with his theorising the role of organic intellectuals.

The second strand was the European hermeneutic philosophy after the Second World War in which Freire was well versed, taking ideas from Gadamer, Benjamin and others. In essence, there was a need for methodical contemplation of our experience to reach understanding. Such thought was influential among some theological teachers in South Africa who applied it to the exegesis of scriptural texts and to the "text" of South African society. This strand is of crucial importance to the actual literacy teaching methods that Freire recommended.

Lastly, there was Frantz Fanon, the Algerian writer on colonialism, the struggle against it and its aftermath. All his books, and notably *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), were banned. They provide much of the backing for Freire's acute analysis of colonial political and psychological oppression and the pitfalls that hamper post-colonial reconstruction (vividly confirmed in what happened in many African states and South Africa itself after liberation). Fanon was a growing influence on the Black Consciousness Movement associated with Steve Biko and on the associated black theology movement.

It was a heady intellectual mix.

What happened next, which I had to observe somewhat from afar when I was re-restricted in 1971 for another five years, during which there was the gradual growing of Freire's influence. His influence increased on literacy educators, the Black Consciousness Movement and finally on the United Democratic Front which galvanised the final years of internal struggle against the apartheid regime (Luckett, Walters, & Kotze, 2017; Sefatsa, 2020).

I heard that an old friend, Angela Norman, who worked for the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED), was running literacy classes and using and propagating this "socio-psychological" method. The SACHED, despite its official sounding name, was an alternative body originally set up to help black students expelled from universities because of their anti-apartheid activities and which ran distance education programmes. The "socio-psychological" method was not overtly called Freirean because his works were all banned but it drew on Freirean concepts. One of her co-workers was Anton Johnson who later worked with his partner, Agneta Lind, on world literacy initiatives. These ideas were taken up by the short-lived University Christian Movement (UCM)), another anti-apartheid body (also eventually banned), that circulated a summary of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and

set out to run a literacy project. The literacy project was compromised as a police spy had infiltrated and gained control of the distribution of the materials. What was crucial was that the UCM adopted Freirean conscientisation methods in its organisational practice. The situation in the late 1960s, early 1970s is well summed up by the well-known education activist, Neville Alexander (1990, p. 57):

In South Africa, the discovery of Freire's method and his concept of conscientisation came at just the right moment, so to speak. Helbig, basing himself on various South African sources, has shown how Freire's ideas were introduced to the University Christian Movement and through it to SASO in about 1970 by Rev. Collins. Although the government banned Freire's works, about 500 or more copies of Pedagogy of the Oppressed made the rounds at the historically black universities and were eagerly studied by the young activists of the Black Consciousness Movement. In Freire's works, they saw the mirror image of that which they rejected in the Bantu-Education system as well as the possible way out of the cul-de-sac. Informal courses in Freire's methods were conducted at these unintended 'breeding grounds of communism' (an accusation levelled by Verwoerd and his minions against the liberal English universities in the 'fifties'!) and soon some of the SASO students and others had begun conducting literacy and other conscientisation projects in urban and some rural townships.

In the mid-1970s, a number of small literacy organisations began to be set up, largely by young anti-apartheid white people, in urban areas that adopted a Freirean approach. One of the earliest and best known of these was Learn and Teach. By the early 1990s, there were over a hundred of these organisations, amalgamated in a National Literacy Cooperation and almost totally dependent on foreign donor money. Most of them used Freire's literacy methods quite directly. However, because many of them ran English language literacy groups, that did not work as well as it would have had they taught basic literacy in the South African indigenous languages so as to derive the benefits from learning to read in one's mother tongue. It also has to be noted that because most of these were small organisations the scale of activity was minute, and the impact was limited by the scale.

In 1985, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed and from the start education and literacy was one of their concerns.

Many of the new literacy organisations worked with COSATU. COSATU became a major influence in the early post-apartheid development of adult basic education (ABE) in policy, legislation and as a constitutional right. It wanted literacy, numeracy and worthwhile knowledge which at that time had leanings towards decolonising knowledge.

The final important influence of Freire was on the United Democratic Front (UDF), the broad coalition of nearly a thousand organisations, large and small, that took the internal struggle against apartheid to its final crescendo. The UDF used Freirean conscientisation with a vengeance to mobilise and educate. One of the powerful agents here was a set of three training manuals, originally developed in Kenya by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel (1984) and then published by the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, called Training for Transformation. It was a seemingly bizarre amalgam of T-Group theory, Freirean conscientisation and literacy teaching, very basic Marxist economics and papal encyclicals. It became the training Bible of a large number of UDF activists in the 1980s, particularly of those working outside the labour movement.

## Veronica's story

At six years of age, I was with my family on a trip to a farming area in the north of Pretoria when I saw a white farmer chasing a black child who was about my age and who had allegedly stolen an orange from the farmer's crop. The child in tattered clothes screamed as the farmer beat him with a sjambok (leather whip). The screams remained with me as one of my earliest recollections that all was not well in South Africa.

This feeling of "unwellness" was reinforced, growing up in a community surrounded by the Johannesburg gold mines with thousands of migrant mineworkers. I was always puzzled as to why these big strong mature black men needed to ask me to read an address or a price tag or to check the change they received in a shop. I began to realise that the lack of literacy skills was a deeper symbol of the unwellness of South Africa but was too young to understand the political and historical roots.

Later in the mid-1970s, as a university student, I volunteered to teach literacy through a Catholic outreach programme for students. Although I did this without any theoretical understandings of adult education, I gained exposure to the importance of activist fellowship. My university life gave me my first exposure to Marxism, tear gas and the pain of a

police baton – all of this confirming my commitment to the struggle against apartheid and the imperativeness of literacy.

The students' protests against apartheid education (see endnote 2) in Soweto (Johannesburg, South Africa) in 1976 came as no surprise as schoolchildren ignited national student protests in a struggle against the state, calling for the abolition of apartheid education. The students expanded their focus from educational demands to broadly political ones while mooting the slogan "liberation before education". This ushered in a new political culture. It was recognised that no element of the apartheid regime could be dismantled by the students alone without mobilising workers and other members of the communities.

In the early 1980s, I joined the University of South Africa as a Junior Lecturer in Sociology. The university did not traditionally have a liberatory tradition and the management took a dim view of any activism. Later my friend and colleague Elizabeth Mokotong recruited me as a member of the Mamelodi Education Forum which was part of the newly established National Education Crises Committee. This Committee was established with the intention of moving beyond protests and boycotts towards a mass-based popular attempt to deal with the national crises in education. Although both organisations were banned and political activism was a dismissible and reportable offence in our university, we continued with our academic–activist engagement. We did this while teaching Marxism and Humanism and drawing on Freirean thought from Hope and Timmel's (1984) *Training for Transformation*, which, as John mentions above, was the holy grail for activists at the time. I was fascinated by Hope and Timmel's focus on participatory education as a catalyst for identifying the root causes of problems people faced in their lives.

The literacy network grew alongside the national struggle and subsequently within the emergence of the trade unions in 1985. Labour unions and workers played a key role in the struggle against apartheid. There was an expansion of the intellectual culture of opposition in South African universities. During this time, I received a copy of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from a friend who had returned from exile. I treasured the book which spent most of its time under my mattress knowing full well that being found with it could land me in trouble. The book was significant in enhancing my theoretical understandings of the role of education in

transformation. It garnered my interest in Freire's notion of praxis and reflection as an action and this informed the action-oriented methodology I applied in feminist consciousness-raising research (McKay, 1989).

I later honed this methodology in my doctoral study, *A sociological study of people's education in South Africa: A humanist evaluation* (McKay, 1990). The study focused on the period of "people's education for people's power", as a direct counter to apartheid education. It explored popular education movements in general and focused specifically on the transformative potential of people's education as a growing social movement in South Africa. The movement was not for merely deracialising education but rather opened possibilities for exploring a new vision of education with transformative epistemologies and pedagogies being developed in preparation for a democratic society. Freirean thought provided the bedrock of my study and subsequent writing (cf. McKay & Romm, 1992).

I was also fascinated by large-scale literacy campaigns and was fortunate in being able to visit Cuba and Venezuela in 2006 to observe the implementation of the *Yo, sí puedo* literacy campaign which was guided by Cuban advisors. I previously had the opportunity to meet literacy campaigners Rosa Maria Torres (who had led the Equadorial Literacy Campaign) and H. S. Bhola during their visit to South Africa at the dawn of our democracy in 1993 and remained inspired by their deep understanding of literacy as praxis.

Rosa Maria Torres' (1997) article *One million Freires* includes her dialogue with Freire and explains the range of interpretations of Freire as being analogous to the tower of Babel. She says the following:

Some refer to Paulo Freire's *method* (or *methodology*), others to Paulo Freire's theory, others to Paulo Freire's *pedagogy*, others to Paulo Freire's *philosophy* . . . others to Paulo Freire's *program*, others to Paulo Freire's system. [And, Torres says] I asked him once which of those denominations he felt most comfortable with. 'None of them', he answered. 'I didn't invent a method, or a theory, or a program, or a system, or a pedagogy, or a philosophy. It is people who put names to things.'

Be that as it may, my research and my teaching of adult education and Sociology of Education used these "names" drawing on Freire's methodology, philosophy, theory and pedagogy. Freire emphasised the

emancipatory components of praxis, the notion of generative themes as concrete representations and the importance of dialogue in learning – as opposed to banking education. Importantly, Freire's notion of praxis as reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed resonated with my earlier learning from the Hope and Timmel (1984) manual and with Giroux's (1988, p. 121) notion of the "teachers as transformative intellectuals". Giroux (1985, p. xix) gives a clear explanation of the way in which Freire's pedagogical model offers "theoretical signposts" that come to be decoded as they are applied in specific contexts. My own work[3] was undergirded by the continuous decoding of "signposts" which needed to be applied to my praxis. I draw on Freire's conception of reflection and action and use participatory methods which, for Freire, are derived from dialogue and self-reflection and are instrumental in bringing about emancipatory social transformation.

Critical reflection in Freire's (1978, p. 99) terms is an action.[4] He explains that there is no dichotomy by which praxis can be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. This is because critical reflection is the action of transforming ideas and the action of reflection on the options of consciously reflected alternatives. Freire's suggestion that "reflection as action" underlies much of his belief in the importance of reflection in social transformation. To ensure humanised praxis, Freire extends the notion of reflection, coupling reflection with what he calls an existential necessity – namely dialogue – which he indicates:

> *. . . is the encounter in which united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized. This dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person depositing ideas in another (Freire, 1985, p. 61).*

I consistently drew on Freire's conceptualisation of "reflection as action" in the emancipatory enterprise arguing that reflection is essential to emancipatory action as informed committed praxis accompanied by critical reflection. Freire's explanation of praxis as "the ongoing process of action and reflection of people upon their world in order to transform it" gave rise to my focus in my later work on the role of human agency in the enactment of emancipatory action which I discussed in McKay (2018, 2019).

With literacy being an important catalyst for transformation and in view of the large proportion of South Africans who lacked literacy skills, I was granted permission to set up the Institute for Adult Basic Education at my university, the University of South Africa, at the dawn of the South African democracy in 1993. This department had to provide the critical mass of adult educators necessary to reach what we then believed to be 15 million adults with little or no education. John was already working at the Centre for Adult education at the University of Natal in Pietermarizburg. The Centre was originally established in 1971 as an extension unit and was later, in 1984, renamed the Centre for Adult Education with a view to embracing adult education and adult basic education more broadly.

## Our two stories converge

With the establishment of our respective departments for adult education, our two stories merge. In our separate spaces we developed adult educator programmes which focused on anti-banking education, drawing on Freire's recognition:

> *Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (Freire, 1972b, p. 80).*

Over the years we graduated tens of thousands of adult education practitioners who were to engage with adult education in all its forms – agricultural extension officers, literacy teachers, health and community educators, and trade union shop stewards. All had been exposed to Freirean thought and to the commitment to transformative learning.

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1972b, p. 83)

## The decline of the Freirean impulse

Unfortunately, in the period of political transformation after the formal dismantling of apartheid in 1994, what was known as Freirean-influenced practice declined.

In adult education, and particularly in literacy and ABE, there was the predictable desire for a large-scale provision of state adult education to undo decades of exclusion and discrimination. There was therefore no significant resistance, even from the most alternative of educators, to the idea of building a system for state adult education. The discourse about ABE (and by the mid-1990s adult basic education *and training*) replaced the previous non-formal discourse of the 1980s in which the term literacy was dominant. The quest for a workable ABE system led to a formalisation of curriculum and didactics that eventually stagnated as the government starved it of the resources as South Africa increasingly became part of the neoliberal world order (Aitchison, 2003a, 2003b).

During the early days of democracy in South Africa, many of the literacy activists were incorporated into in the development of the adult education system regarding the development of policy and research, but they were soon ousted by the new bureaucrats who slavishly followed the neoliberal developments and devalued the importance of adult education as redress and the benefits of sound policy, research and education.

What remnants survived of Freirean advocates who were still active soon went into further decline. This included:

- The small radical literacy NGOs from the 1980s such as Learn and Teach (mentioned above in John's narrative) and later ones such as the REFLECT network which wilted as foreign donor funds dried up since aid was now given directly to the state department of the post-apartheid government.
- Small organisations and community-based organisations that used to deliver Freirean literacy programmes died with the introduction of very formalised ABE provision by state departments.

Within a short time, the Adult Education Departments in the state sector were starved and increasingly marginalised in budgetary terms, with only 0.83% of the national education budget being allocated to them (Aitchison et al., 2000). Luckett et al. (2017, p. 269) referred to this period as one of "tensions, contradictions and diminishing collective hope".

The universities which had spawned a number of vibrant adult education centres and institutes, notably the University of Natal, the University of the Western Cape, the University of Cape Town and latterly, the University of South Africa, were by the year 2000 largely

destroyed as neoliberal managerialists took control of the universities. These managerialists determined that adult education and literacy was neither profitable nor a suitable career path for the new academic elite. There is some irony that the University of Natal's Centre for Adult Education was closed soon after it set up a Paulo Freire Institute.

## The near end of the story

But the story does not end here.

One of the earliest visions in the anti-apartheid struggle had been a mass literacy campaign. The Freedom Charter of 1955 had a clause that stated: "Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan."

South Africa had never had a literacy campaign and all the laudable work of literacy NGOs and the night school system of the state had had a minuscule impact. But finally, from 1999 to 2006 there was a serious state intervention to start a literacy campaign. This was partly influenced by South Africa's commitment to the UNESCO Education for All goal of reducing illiteracy by 50% by 2015. The first attempt in 2000, the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI), had been somewhat abortive because the government department of Adult Education mandated to implement the campaign failed to mobilise learners or to set the campaign in motion. On realising this, the Ministry entered into an agreement with the University of South Africa's Institute for Adult Basic Education under the leadership of the second author, Veronica McKay, and the university was able to successfully reach approximately 300,000 learners, a momentum which was drawn upon in the later Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign.

Then in 2006, a detailed plan was prepared by a Ministerial Committee to which both of us were appointed and which afforded us the opportunity to visit Cuba and Venezuela to observe the *Yo, sí puedo* literacy campaign. This campaign was guided by Cuban advisors, used impressive community mobilisation strategies and used core texts to enable its large-scale implementation.

Based on our detailed plan, the South African government implemented the Kha Ri Gude ("let us learn") Mass Literacy Campaign from 2008 to 2017 reaching over 4 million adults. We drew on Freire when developing the campaign strategy and the campaign materials. We

also applied Freire's dialogical approach to the construction of a participatory assessment model through which we were able to gauge learner achievements. It is not the purpose to describe this campaign here but what needs to be noted is that the design of the literacy classes – small groups, a primer, and other support materials – was thoroughly informed by Freirean conceptions of conscientisation, with the use of illustrations as codes based on current social realities and the application of learning to everyday realities. This practice of literacy, as Freire (1972a, p. 27) explains, heightens awareness of how the socio-cultural reality shapes our lives and how in turn we have the agency and the capacity to transform it.

## Freire lives

The Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign drew heavily on Freirean principles. Care was taken when preparing the materials to include what Freire refers to as generative themes and codes or problem-posing materials. These materials stimulated discussion in the learning groups, with each lesson starting with a carefully designed picture presenting a concrete experience of the theme to stimulate discussion (McKay, 2020). The pictorial codes based on generative themes were intended to raise questions and to stimulate the learners to think of different possibilities, or, as Freire (2000, p. 52) indicates, to stimulate problem-posing and problem-solving dialogue. The illustrations and generative words included in the learner materials were used to initiate discussions related to problems emanating from the apartheid era. These discussions were about, for example, the lack of education, forced removals, household food security, health and human rights.

We focused on using literacy, the generative themes, codes and words as a driver for conscientisation and for what UNESCO (2006, p. 138) calls more "adult-specific outcomes" that adult literacy programmes can produce. These outcomes include political awareness, empowerment, critical reflection and community action and enhance the political, cultural, social and economic benefits that literacy might offer.

Our exposure to other campaigns, including the *Yo Sí Puedo* campaign, alerted us to the need to develop a set of core national materials that could be used to scale and which were versioned to cater for the 11 official South African mother tongue languages (all of which

were embossed in Braille) and regionalised or customised insofar as languages were regional. In order to ensure that the materials were not only technical, we also drew on Freire's elucidation of learning as problem-posing and attempted to build in a process of reflection or action and an emancipatory praxis.

Moreover, commitment to engaged research is expressed by Freire (1978, p. 78) as highlighting the methodological interrelationship between theory and praxis and the use of generative themes. As he states: "the more active an attitude men and women take regarding the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality".

After having to hide our copies of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we now had a real opportunity of establishing a large-scale campaign that was grounded on Freire and backed by the political will to make it possible.

The campaign offered many possibilities for social change and for empowering a critical mass. All of the earlier South African projects that attempted to use Freirean approaches were small in scale with limited impact. Our campaign model was scalable and was delivered nationally by 40,000 volunteer educators who mobilised about 600,000 learners each year. It was akin to what Bhola (1984) termed a "crusade" with its annual roll-out of about 600,000 learners and approximately 40,000 small literacy clusters (of 18 participants), each with a volunteer educator who was grouped under a supervisor or support person despite the name.

The large-scale delivery gained a momentum of its own. Boughton (2013) highlights the vibrancy of campaigns as opposed to small-scale literacy programmes for scaling up literacy. This view is based on the belief that literacy campaigns contribute to a social impact because they mobilise communities into reflection and action. As Boughton (2013) points out, in these communities there is a need for change and broad-based, large-scale programmes enable this. He contends that literacy campaigns work to produce change simultaneously at the level of the individual and their social context. He and others liken mass literacy campaigns to Freire's (2006) *Pedagogy of Hope* and the social organisation of learning as elaborated on by Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (cf. Botman, 2014; Boughton, 2016; McKay, 1997, 2019, 2020; McLaren & Leonard, 1993; Shor, 1993). These authors highlight

the way in which critical pedagogy engenders a critical consciousness when groups of learners problematise generative themes from daily life.

It was for this reason that the materials developed for the Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign took a thematic approach drawing on the local, national and international millennium and sustainable development goals. Through the materials, we aimed to make explicit links between literacy and the MDG/SDG-inspired developmental objectives (highlighting, for example, HIV and AIDS, gender, democracy, human rights and environmental awareness). We immersed the teaching of reading, writing and numeracy in the development-related themes to accentuate the social, economic and developmental possibilities afforded by literacy acquisition. The pre-developed literacy materials were supplemented with educator notes and a volunteer supervisor or mentor provided support at the non-formal adult learning sites. In addition, educators were required to supplement these materials by sourcing relevant authentic texts from the life worlds of the learners.

We made a deliberate attempt to mainstream social justice issues across the curriculum to empower learners to think about related matters and to make applications in their everyday lives. Freire points to the structural conditions which form "people's thematic universe" and argues that the generative themes initiate the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom stimulating people's awareness and going beyond their existential experience.

Akter et al. (2017, p. 271) describe "empowerment" as being complex and multidimensional and varying across disciplinary traditions and contexts, pointing out that most definitions focus on gaining control over decisions and resources that determine one's quality of life or "translating choices into desired actions and outcomes". In this sense, we related praxis to agency and the ability to make purposeful choices. Hanemann and McKay (2015, p. 5) following Freire, stress that when assessing the impact of literacy acquisition there is a need to also assess the extent to which literacy programmes "help shape the trajectories of lives".

## Conclusion

The success of the South African Kha Ri Gude Campaign was recognised by it being awarded the UNESCO Confucius Literacy Award for the Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign in 2016. This was international

confirmation that the influence of Freirean theory and practice was still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Through applying Freire's notions of praxis, we believe we were able to generate agency among the learners in the literacy campaign. Hanemann's research (2011, p. 7) suggests that agency was supported through the Kha Ri Gude Campaign's participatory system of learning and teaching, monitoring and strategic planning which allows for exchange and mutual learning and also for continuous improvement of the Campaign structure and practices. The structured reflection processes built into the Campaign practices improved the quality of the teaching and learning and empowered both the learners and the educators.

The sense of agency among the educators was expressed throughout their "communities of practice" as "communities of reflection". In addition to empowering the learners, the educators reported that the experience gave meaning to their own lives initiating the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom as it did for us as professors and managers who continued to decode the signposts of the Freirean approach. For us, it was not only using Freire in the empowerment of others but also believing that Freire's legacy lives through our own empowerment story.

We conclude our reflection by asserting that Paulo Freire leaves us a legacy which is far more superior, more significant and much more enduring than any literacy method or educational theory.

Indeed, Freire lives on.

[1] We recognise that the narratives of two activists engaged in a dialogue have the limitations of being limited to only our two voices; however, we merely use our narratives as a means to locate our experience and engagement with the work of Freire in various contexts.

[2] Apartheid education refers to education based on the apartheid state's Bantu Education Act of 1953 which was intended to teach African learners to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water" regardless of an individual's abilities and aspirations. The then Prime Minister Verwoerd, when explaining the introduction of the 1953 Act, pointed out that "natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans is not for them. . . . [that] There is no place for them in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" (McKay, 1990, p. 17; Rose and Tunmer, 1975, p. 266). Moreover, since education for Africans was not universally offered, the absence of schooling and quality schooling as well as associated poverty resulted in high illiteracy rates in South Africa.

[3] Over the years my work contexts changed from training literacy educators to extension workers and included working with community development workers, youth development workers, literacy campaign operatives and teachers for the formal sector. Each context required the decoding and application of signposts.

[4] During an impact evaluation of the literacy campaign in 2017, the review found that the literacy learners not only felt more confident but that they also challenged patriarchy in their communities. They participated in and challenged decision-making in their communities and the wider socio-political environment.

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***John Aitchison***, when a student at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg was restricted without trial for ten years by the apartheid regime. In 1981 he joined the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg where for many years he headed the Centre for Adult Education. Later he was head the School of Education there. He has played a significant role in national adult education policy development as well as in the development of schoolteacher upgrading programs. He has also been active in a number of human rights and rural development organisations such as the Association for Rural Advancement (of which he was Director for a time).

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# Our homeland is humanity: The Cuban School of Literacy and Pedagogy of the Oppressed

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*The ideas of the Cuban 'School of Literacy' are much less well-known in the west than Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This paper is an exploration of the theoretical and practical links between these two historic examples of popular education. The analysis is informed by our direct experience working and undertaking participatory action research alongside Cuban literacy specialists on adult literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia. These campaigns utilised a model known internationally by its Spanish name, Yo, Sí Puedo (Eng: Yes, I Can!). We also include material from interviews in Cuba with leading literacy academics and practitioners.*

***Key words:*** *Paulo Freire, popular education, adult literacy campaigns, Cuba, Yo, Sí Puedo, Timor-Leste, First Nations education*

Last year was the fiftieth anniversary of the publication in English of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This year, 2021, marks the sixtieth anniversary of an equally significant landmark in the history of Latin American popular education, the Cuban national

literacy campaign of 1961 (Kozol 1978). In this paper, we explore some theoretical and practical links between these two events, by reflecting on our experiences working and researching in two recent adult literacy campaigns in Timor-Leste and Australia, both of which utilised the Yo, Sí Puedo (Eng: Yes, I Can!) campaign model developed by the Institute of Pedagogy for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) in Cuba. Over a sixteen-year period, from the initial planning of the Timor national literacy campaign in 2004-5, through to its completion in 2012; and in Australia from 2011 to 2020, we worked with Cuban literacy specialists on the design, delivery and evaluation of these campaigns. Bob was the chief investigator on two Australian Research Council projects, evaluating the conduct and impact of these campaigns. Deborah worked as a research associate on the study in Timor-Leste, and as campaign coordinator on the Australian campaign. Over the same period, we twice visited Cuba, to learn more about the 'Cuban School of Literacy' from adult literacy academics at IPLAC in Havana. In this paper, we invite readers to consider the extent to which these two campaigns, in theory, and in practice, constitute a contemporary Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

## Timor-Leste's National Literacy Campaign 2004-2012

Our involvement with both Timor-Leste and Paulo Freire began in 1974. In that year the Carnation Revolution in Portugal ended decades of fascist rule, initiating a process of decolonisation in Portugal's overseas territories, including what was then known as Portuguese Timor. Paulo Freire was visiting Australia when news of the revolution arrived (Freire 2006, p.156-8). From here, he went directly to meet with leaders of the national liberation movements of Guinea-Bissau and Angola, to begin his collaboration with them on mass literacy campaigns. Coincidentally, his ideas were simultaneously heading in the opposite direction, with a group of university students returning to Timor from Portugal, where they had learned of his work from their radical anti-colonial comrades in Lisbon. They brought with them a literacy manual, *Timor is Our Country,* written in a local language, Tetum. They then trained other students to go with them into the countryside, to mount a literacy campaign aimed at building support for the anti-colonial independence party, the Revolutionary Front for the Independence of Timor-Leste (FRETILIN). But within months, the Indonesian government began a destabilisation campaign to prevent a 'little Cuba' from emerging in the region, culminating in a

full-scale military invasion in November 1975. The students who had begun the literacy campaign retreated with much of the population into the mountains where they continued their popular education work, in 'bases' controlled by the resistance army, FALANTIL. Eventually, many were captured and killed, but their ideas, and the ideas of Freire, lived on among the armed resistance and the underground (Da Silva 2011).

From 1975 until the final defeat and withdrawal of the Indonesian army in 1999, we worked alongside Timorese refugees in Australia in solidarity with FRETILIN, which, in 2002, became the first post-independence government. In 2004, we took part in a National Literacy Conference organised by a partnership between the Ministry of Education, Oxfam and Dai Popular, a popular education movement established by university students from the Resistance (Boughton & Durnan 2004). At that Conference, the FRETILIN Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, committed to the establishment of a new national literacy campaign. The next year, when Alkatiri was in Havana to renegotiate the Cuban health assistance program, the Cuban President Fidel Castro offered to send a team of IPLAC advisers to begin work on a campaign. The first eleven advisers arrived a few weeks later (Pers. comm., Mari Alkatiri, January 2010).

The Coordinator of the adviser team was José Manuel 'Llera' García, a senior official from the Cuban Ministry of Education, who had participated in the 1961 campaign as a high school 'brigadista'. Llera spoke Portuguese, having fought in Angola in the 1970s in the international military force which Cuba sent to assist the independence movement to repel an invasion from apartheid South Africa. The Deputy Coordinator, Rafael Ferrer Ortega, also a Portuguese speaker, had previously worked on literacy campaigns in Angola, Haití, México, and Venezuela. Llera and the Cuban ambassador, Ramon Vasquez managed the administration, budget and relationships with the Timorese Ministry of Education, while Ferrer led the contextualisation and piloting of the campaign during 2006, the professional development of the Cuban team, and the training of all the local staff (Pers. comms. Garcia, Ferrer, and Vasquez, Timor-Leste 2006-07; Herrera 2008). From 2006 until 2012, we worked alongside the Cuban adviser team and the Timorese staff in the Campaign Secretariat on the planning, preparation, delivery and evaluation of the campaign, spending varying periods in Timor-Leste. The action-research component of this work was part-funded under the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Program.

The first class opened in Dili in June 2007, with a ceremony presided over by the newly-elected President Jose Ramos Horta and the FRETILIN Prime Minister, Estanislau Da Silva. A further four hundred similar classes opened over the following months, reaching almost every village across this tiny nation. Over the next five years, the Cubans expanded their adviser mission to 35, as some returned to Cuba and others arrived to replace them. By 2012, over 200,000 people had completed the YSP classes, and every one of Timor-Leste's thirteen districts had been declared 'free of illiteracy' (Boughton 2010; 2012).

The declaration of villages and districts as 'free of illiteracy' ('Livre de analfabetismo' in the official language, Portuguese), which was endorsed by the Timor-Leste Ministry of Education, raised concerns among some international education specialists working in the country. The same practice has been criticised by some Latin American literacy specialists who have written about the Yo, Sí Puedo campaigns in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia. As readers of AJAL know, contemporary literacy scholarship considers literacy not to be a discrete skill, which you either have or do not have, but a social practice existing on a continuum, from minimal to highly developed and specific to context. What 'free of illiteracy' meant to the Cuban literacy specialists and their Timorese counterparts, who were well-aware of this debate, was that over 95% of the people in the village or district who originally identified as needing literacy instruction had successfully completed the *Yo, Sí Puedo* lessons and could write their name, comprehend simple texts and compose a simple personal sentence or two in one of the official languages (Tetum or Portuguese). They had thus reached the first stage on a much longer journey, through a phase of post-literacy and on, towards the literacy practices achieved through basic education. In the campaign tradition, this way of measuring and celebrating individual and collective success at this first stage has historically played an important political role in maintaining the momentum and 'fervour' of the campaign activists, including in the 1961 Cuban campaign and the many which followed it (Bhola 1984).

## YSP in Aboriginal Australia 2009-2020

In 2009, we reported our findings on the YSP campaign model in Timor-Leste to a roundtable of Aboriginal education and health leaders in Alice Spring (Boughton 2009). This meeting established an Aboriginal Steering Committee to design a similar campaign in

Aboriginal communities in Australia, to be led by Ngemba man, Jack Beetson, previously the President of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers (Beetson 1997). In 2010, we spent two weeks in Cuba, meeting with IPLAC and other leaders of Cuba's popular education community. In 2011, with funding from the Australian government's Workplace English Language Literacy Strategic Results Program (WELL SRP), work began to prepare for a campaign in the western NSW town of Wilcannia, in partnership with the Local Aboriginal Land Council. The first Cuban adviser, Jose 'Chala' Leblanch, arrived in February 2012, and the campaign was launched a short time later (Boughton et al 2013). After two successful intakes, funding was secured to extend it to two more communities in the region, in Bourke and Enngonia, and a new national Aboriginal organisation, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF) was established to develop a national campaign. Since then, the campaign has run over a dozen more intakes in communities, in western NSW, in Campbelltown in Sydney, and in Ltentye Apurte, Central Australia. In that time, two more Cuban educators, Lucy Nunez Peraz and Felix Hernandez Diaz, have undertaken missions in Australia. Currently, campaigns are running in Ltyentye Apurte and Tennant Creek, NT, in Yarrabah, Queensland and Bourke, NSW. At the time of writing, 258 First Nations students had successfully completed the campaign.

From 2012 until 2020, we worked alongside the Cuban advisers with LFLF and locally-recruited First Nations staff to develop and adapt the YSP model to the particular circumstances of the communities in which it ran. Deborah was initially the Australian campaign coordinator, and later LFLF's education and training manager. Bob coordinated the ongoing longitudinal evaluation of the campaign process, outcomes and impacts, utilising participatory action research methodology, part-funded by a second ARC Linkage grant.

## The Cuban School of Literacy

The *Yo, Sí Puedo* campaign model is a product of what one of its originators, Dr Jaime Canfux, refers to as the Cuban School of Literacy. Canfux, a veteran of the 1961 literacy campaign, told us that Cuba's revolutionary approach to adult literacy began in 1959, when Che Guevara and other leaders opened the second armed front in the Sierra Maestra, during the campaign to overthrow the United States-backed

Batista regime. Up to 90% of the soldiers they recruited had little or no literacy, and classes began with them. In the areas they liberated, the Cuban revolutionaries opened primary schools and continued adult education classes, staffed by university student volunteers like himself. When the national literacy campaign was launched, he began teaching literacy, and then became a campaign coordinator in Oriente Province, responsible for 19 other teachers, 157 "brigadistas" and 750 people with little or no literacy. The brigadistas were high school students, 10000 of whom joined the campaign. Each teacher looked after a group of brigadistas. But there were also local volunteers, called "popular literacy teachers", who stayed in their own districts and taught there. The 'professional teachers' met every 15 days to review progress. In an interview for a US study, Canfux recalled his time in that campaign:

> *The importance was given to forming consciousness to prepare the men (sic) who would later have the destiny of Cuba in their hands. And above all the moral values because this country was very corrupt. Honesty, solidarity, comradeship. That's how it started, and in many liberated areas there were primary school teachers.... This is the way it happened. It was natural and spontaneous. The ideology came from the revolution at that moment. There was no other pedagogical line (Canfux, n.d.).*

Freire had already begun his work in Brazil and in Chile and had met with Raul Ferrer, one of the architects of the 1961 campaign in 1965. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, written around that time, he makes several references to Cuba, to Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in particular (Freire 1972, pp 62, 98, 131, 133, 138). But his work did not become well known in Cuba until much later. That said, Canfux believes they shared a common approach:

> *Afterwards, much later, Paolo Freire called it the psycho-social method. And he said something that is very true. That is that before you read the text you have to read the context. But we had done this before! Because life imposed that on us! And afterwards Paolo didn't conceive of a national campaign for literacy. Of course, he didn't have the necessity that we had. He was working in communities in reading circles. Yet we coincided in many respects (ibid).*

Canfux eventually rose to be a Vice Minister in charge of Adult Education within the Ministry of Education. He completed a PhD in Pedagogical Sciences, and his thesis, "Politics and strategies used in the National Literacy Campaign of 1961 in Cuba" was the first systematic study done in Cuba on the campaign. After moving into the academy, he established the Chair of Adult Literacy at IPLAC, located within the Enrique Varona Pedagogical University in Havana. He ran IPLAC's adult education doctoral program and was responsible for training Cuban advisers to take part in international literacy missions. In 2000, he began developing the YSP model with Dr Leonela Relys Díaz who had joined the Cuban campaign as a 'brigadista' when she was 14 years old. Subsequently trained as a teacher, Relys led the development of the radio literacy program in Haiti, then worked on its adaptation for television, in Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Argentina and Brazil. (Perez Cruz n.d.; Canfux Gutiérrez et al 2004; Pers.comms, Canfux, Havana May 2010)

Rafael Ferrer, who led the pedagogical work in the Timor-Leste campaign, was one of Canfux's doctoral students and lived with him in Havana when he was completing his PhD. In 2006-07, it was Ferrer's training sessions, and those run by other mission advisers, that first exposed us to the philosophy and literacy teaching method of the YSP model. Later, at IPLAC in 2010, Canfux and other IPLAC staff provided more detailed presentations on the model. We returned to Havana briefly in 2013, to take part in an international Conference, Pedagogia 2013, as part of a panel on Yo, Sí Puedo campaigns with Canfux and other educators from literacy missions in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia. At meetings with IPLAC, arrangements were negotiated to continue the Australian campaign.

In Timor-Leste, we learned the practicalities of the YSP model, including the national and local structures that are built to 'socialise' and mobilise the support of the population; the contextual research and piloting that is done before the campaign is fully developed; the logistics of equipping classrooms; the recruitment and preparation of local staff; the sequencing and conduct of the lessons using the DVDs and the exercise books; the records that need to be kept to monitor progress; and the types of activities which are developed for the post-literacy phase. We also learned the basic structure of each DVD lesson, which is based on an 'algorithm' repeated in every lesson, including the discussion of a

'positive message', a Cuban adaptation of the Freirian idea of thematic coding; and the importance of the 'action-reflection' process in every element of the campaign. In the sessions at IPLAC, we gained a deeper understanding of the Cubans' philosophy and theory behind the way the campaign unfolds. That said, it is only now, after spending many more years working in the campaigns in Australia, that we have fully understood how the Cuban model and the ideas of Freire coincide.

## Global 'Illiteracy' and the 'dehumanisation' of imperialism

The first and perhaps most important learning is that the Cubans identify the social and economic inequality produced by an imperialist world system as the root cause of the problem of mass illiteracy on a global scale, especially its colonialist and neo-colonialist aspects. That is to say, illiteracy in the Global South is one side of a contradiction, the other side of which is the high level of education in the west. Both are products of the same global economic system. In words which echo the arguments of Freire, they say that overcoming this division of humanity into the more literate and the less literate undermines the humanity of us all; and that a fully human society on a global scale will only become possible when this contradiction has been resolved so that everyone can participate equally in the process of building a better world. Their 1961 campaign, and the international literacy missions they have continued since then, are directed to this end, the resolution of a globally-produced dialectical contradiction. Their inspiration is expressed in the words of a Cuban revolutionary leader from the nineteenth century, Jose Marti: "Our homeland is humanity."

Applying this to the campaigns in which we worked, it is no accident that 50% of the adult populations of Timor-Leste and of First Nations in Australia have not gained basic literacy in the official languages of their countries. Rather, it is a direct, predictable result of the colonial education systems which the imperial powers – Portugal and Indonesia in the case of Timor-Leste, Great Britain and, later, the States and Commonwealth of Australia – built and maintained in the lands they invaded and occupied. This history is alive in the present, in the experiences and the consciousness of the people who lived under those systems. In Timor-Leste, they have now achieved formal independence, but the legacy of hundreds of years of colonial oppression does not thereby simply disappear. As the students of Dai Popular told us, "We

have freed the land. Now we must free the people."

Likewise, in First Nations communities in Australia, peoples' attitudes and expectations regarding settler-colonial education have been built up over generations, since the first proclamation of the imperial governor Lachlan Macquarie offered education to the children of those who would surrender at the same time as he authorised settlers to murder any who did not. For the next two centuries, at different times and in different places, First Nations peoples variously experienced total exclusion from schooling, institutionalised neglect and abuse via mission and settlement schools staffed by unqualified white teachers, and the kidnapping of children to take them away to be educated. Moreover, this 'education' was intimately connected with other equally oppressive aspects of the colonial settler states' approach to the country's original owners, such as forced relocations, mass incarcerations and extreme labour exploitation. It is less than fifty years since the last exclusionary policies were abandoned, and First Nations leaders invited to contribute to the state's education policy for their children and young people. Still today, much of what is taught to First Nations children and young people ignores or denies the reality of invasion and colonisation and the real causes of the economic and social marginalisation and exploitation of their families and communities (Ratcliffe & Boughton 2019).

*Yo, Sí Puedo,* growing as it has from the experiences of generations of resistance to similar forms of oppression, both in pre-revolutionary Cuba, but also in the ex-Portuguese colonies in Africa and the liberation movements of Grenada, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Venezuela, offers a different model of education. Its conscious aim is to support those who participate, as students, teachers and community leaders, to join in a process of south-south cooperation, and to begin to build a decolonising form of education, an education for liberation which the people themselves control (Boughton & Durnan 2014a). Compare Freire, for whom:

> *the pedagogy of the oppressed.... must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation (Freire 1972, p.25).*

*Yo, Sí Puedo* is not a charitable act of benevolence, but rather the first stage of a very long process by which people can themselves build the organisation and understanding they need to transform the conditions which led to their illiteracy.

## The key role of structure, organisation and training

The second thing we have learned is that a mass literacy campaign only succeeds through a highly structured, disciplined and coordinated process. To mount a campaign, it is necessary to build over time alternative educational structures and practices which do not replicate the educational spaces created by the colonial system. An alternative structure is necessary because it is only from within a different structure that we can all learn to think differently and learn how not to reproduce the same contradictions between the more educated and less educated that we are seeking to overcome. The fundamental feature of this alternative structure is that it should socialise and mobilise the people who have lived under the oppressive conditions created by colonialism, so they see the possibility of something different and experience their own power to take control of their own education. However, this does not occur spontaneously, through the more powerful and better educated professionals and experts simply stepping away, so the people 'just do it'. Rather, it emerges over time, from within a structure, the design of which is the product of the Cubans' own long experience and substantial expertise.

In Timor-Leste, Ferrer spent several months teaching our Timorese colleagues how to build the structure required for the campaign. The first task was to establish a National Literacy Commission, representing a range of government agencies, not just the Ministry of Education; and also, the popular 'civil society' organisations. The Commission structure was then replicated at the district and subdistrict level, and in each suco (Timor-Leste's equivalent of a local government area) where the campaign would run. Each district and subdistrict commission identified a coordinator, who then worked with the suco structures and their Cuban advisers to survey their communities to discuss with the people the specific local circumstances, to identify the people with little or no literacy who should be encouraged to join the classes, to select local facilitators, and to mobilise the local population to support the campaign. The coordinators were responsible, once lessons began,

for ensuring that the local facilitators recorded attendance at each lesson, and the progress of each student on a weekly basis, identifying any students who needed additional support. The facilitators and coordinators spent three weeks in workshops with the Cuban advisers, learning the basics of lesson preparation and delivery using the YSP DVDs. On a regular basis, the facilitators from several sucos came to a central location for additional training as a group, led by one or two Cuban advisers. The Cuban team leaders also made regular visits to the districts from Dili, to review progress, and to support and provide additional training to their own adviser teams. Each week, the Cuban advisers and Timorese campaign coordinators submitted reports on each individuals' progress in each class. The data was entered into a database in the Secretariat in Dili, where weekly meetings were held to review progress and identify problems. In summary, the campaign was highly organised and coordinated, with a cascading system of training, supervision and accountability operating between the centre and the local classes.

In Australia, while some Commonwealth government agencies have been prepared to fund campaigns in specific localities, as have agencies in two of the eight state and territory governments, government support has been insufficient to allow for the model to be developed at a region-wide, state-wide or national level. The national-level organisation remains the Aboriginal-controlled NGO which initiated the campaign, the Literacy for Life Foundation (LFLF), which works in partnership with local Indigenous organisations to develop the campaign in each community. However, LFLF still follows the Cuban model, by establishing a local 'commission', which LFLF calls a Campaign Working Group (CWG). This includes local community leaders and other indigenous organisations and sometimes government service agencies. This local CWG assists LFLF's staff and the Cuban adviser to select local staff, a coordinator and usually two facilitators, one male and one female. They also help with mobilising support across the community and with identifying potential students. The local coordinators and facilitators are expected to report back to the CWG on a regular basis and to seek their help to adapt the campaign to the local conditions and to solve any problems that arise with student participation and progress. As in Timor- Leste, the first phase of the campaign includes a household survey, in which local people trained for this purpose visit

every household to discuss the campaign and to find out who might want to participate, while also collecting some 'baseline' data from which to assess the overall level of need and interest. This survey is designed to prompt an open-ended dialogue with each household about the issue of English literacy and how it is used in people's lives, information which the local staff then use with the Cuban adviser to help contextualise the teaching to local conditions.

## Contextualisation and local control

The third thing we learned is that alongside the elaboration of the structure of the campaign, the pedagogical practices and the teaching materials must be contextualised to the specific situation in which they are being deployed, nationally and locally. The Cuban campaign model initially comes to a community with a set of 'ready-made' resources. These include the DVD lessons, the student workbooks, and handbooks for coordinators, facilitators and advisers. For those who read Freire primarily as a guide to pedagogical theory and philosophy, it may seem that this is over-determined and top-down, reducing the autonomy of local staff and students to determine the way they will learn.

In our experience, this is not the case. In fact, in a community where over 50% have minimal literacy in an 'official' language, the task of organising and managing a campaign to overcome this would be unthinkable, without a significant input of experience and professional expertise from outside. The Cubans provide this both in the form of the advisers and also in the materials they bring with them. However, as we have described, once the local structures are in place and local staff are recruited, there is an opportunity to adapt these to the local circumstances, in the work which the Cubans call contextualisation. The national and local structures are part of the means by which this is done, since they bring people from the 'host' country or community into dialogue with the Cubans, helping them learn about the context, from which they can then adjust their practice to better suit the local conditions and the peoples' experience. In Timor-Leste, Ferrer opened pilot classes in two communities during the preparation phase. On the basis of this experience, he developed a new facilitators manual which provided locally specific instruction for each of the pre-prepared lessons, so the facilitators could introduce local words and concepts into the lessons. In Australia, a set of lesson plans was prepared for each DVD

lesson and 'templates' for specific campaign activities. A new Australian campaign handbook has now been developed.

Once classes start, and as both local staff and students slowly become more confident in the process, they take more control, making the meanings that are most relevant to their lives. This process, both within the literacy class and in the ongoing in-service training of the local coordinator and facilitators, is achieved through critical self-reflection, in which the Cuban advisers and their local counterparts are expected to participate. Gradually, the learning which is occurring in the campaign becomes the subject of reflection, as the students reflect on what they are learning, the facilitators and coordinators on what they are learning, and the advisers and professionals the same. Collectively, all the campaign participants are building new understanding, based on the experiences of being engaged in this process. People are discovering things about how to change both themselves and the world in which they live. This is similar to the process which Freire describes as moving from naïve consciousness to critical consciousness (Freire 1972, p.101).

Another critical aspect of the DVD lessons is that each one is designed as part of a sequence, through which the actual skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing develop, slowly at first, allowing even the most hesitant learner to progress at their own pace until sufficient building blocks are gained to start constructing simple sentences. Canfux described this to us as an 'analytic-synthetic' process, since sentences and words are broken down into their components and re-assembled in every lesson, each one adding an additional letter or phoneme, which students memorise using a letter-number association system. There is a clear and predictable structure to each individual lesson, following what the Cubans call an 'algorithm.' Because the people chosen as local coordinators and facilitators are almost always people whose literacy proficiency is not much higher than their students, this systematic lesson design and predictability enables them, in a short time, to take leadership of the lesson without assistance from the professional adviser during delivery.

In Australia, we discovered that this was a major strength of the YSP model, that it enabled people who are not highly literate to be 'front-line' teachers in the classroom, and the people responsible for the community organising work which the campaign requires. Local community teachers

help students feel safe and comfortable in the classroom, especially when they are being asked to take risks. Many people have a palpable fear of learning, just as Freire describes it in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which they have to overcome, a fear of being disrespected, and made to feel stupid and unable to learn. Local facilitators know the students personally, they know their families, and they recognise this fear and shame because they have witnessed it and maybe felt it themselves. The students also know them and know that they can trust them. Moreover, the students are proud to see their own family, their own 'mob' playing these roles, leading the campaign, rather than, as with virtually every other institutionalised learning environment they have experienced, non-Indigenous people have been the teachers and the leaders. This is what we mean by saying the campaign decolonises learning. It disrupts the colonial model of learning and education, putting the community in charge. Moreover, because this is a novel experience, something that people have not seen in these remote towns previously, there is an excitement and an enthusiasm, especially as the lessons progress and people become more confident to behave freely, without fearing the consequences of being themselves. As Freire says, this is education as the practice of freedom.

The local staff also ensure not only that the classroom is a safe place, a place of freedom, but also that it is a place of solidarity, love and compassion. We see this in the way staff assist students, not only to complete the exercises and to take part in discussions but in helping them with a thousand other issues that they have in their lives, especially dealing with service providers, police and the justice system. Students also help each other, giving encouragement, something which the Cuban advisers model very well, acknowledging even the smallest achievement with rounds of applause and words of praise. In these ways, as well as simply by coming to these remote locations and living in them close to the people, the Cuban advisers demonstrate that they share this ethic of solidarity and compassion.

## Decolonising solidarity

Decolonising the education process requires significant change on the part of the education professionals working in the campaigns, ourselves included. Freire understood this, though in the situations he described, the professionals were still often doing the teaching. Coming from the colonisers' 'side of the frontier', we have to open ourselves

to a different kind of educational activity to those with which we are familiar. For a start, we know almost nothing of what life has been like in those communities, for either staff or students or local leaders. In both Timor-Leste and Australia, the 'true history' of colonisation has not been told, especially not down to the level of individual communities and families. The 'culture of silence' as Freire called it is not simply because people are not confident to speak of these things. Their voices have been actively suppressed; their truths denied. This makes us, the professionals, the uneducated ones, the ones who must learn.

At the same time, what we do know is still important, and must be shared. Our 16 years experience working with this model, and the study we have done both in Cuba and elsewhere, gives us an authority, as Freire calls it. The same is true of everything else we have been privileged to learn by being members of the winning side in the imperial world system, including our understanding of the practice of teaching. But, as Allman (2007) explains in her account of Freirian pedagogy, our 'professional' knowledge and experience has to be problematised in dialogue with the knowledge of the students, the local staff and the campaign local leadership; just as theirs too has to be problematised in dialogue with ours. This is the dialectic of teaching and learning.

As popular education 'professionals', we enter a community as guests, to support people to build an alternative decolonising educational practice, drawing on what we have learned but always having to listen closely to hear how this must be contextualised to the circumstances of the people with whom we are working. Once people decide that our desire to work in solidarity with them, recognising the value of their knowledge and experience and the limitations of our own, is genuine, they have been extraordinarily generous, willing to help us to learn what we need to know and do in this particular community at this particular point in history. That is to say, they induct us into the context, such that, over time, we become better at what we have set out to do, through a dialogical process which Deborah and her LFLF colleagues have described previously in this journal (Williamson et al, 2019). This does not excuse us from doing everything we can to prepare ourselves for this work, to take advantage of the education we have had to find out what we can about the history and current circumstances of each community, always knowing however that what we think we know will change once we have been in the community for any length of time.

None of this happens quickly or easily. As with any social movement, a lot of what needs to be done is slow, difficult, often tedious work. Moreover, as professionals who have been taught to believe that we already have the knowledge and skills to do this 'properly', we have constantly to guard against 'taking charge' and asserting leadership in such a way as to reproduce the colonial relationships the campaign is designed to overcome. In Australia, we find that we must constantly remind ourselves and other professional staff that the campaign only succeeds when the local facilitators and coordinators and CWG take control. Otherwise, the campaign becomes another example of the "uncritical/reproductive practice" (Allman 2007, p.272) of colonial education, i.e., reproducing ideas and knowledge about power and control and who should exercise it that sustain colonialism.

Imperialism has been building its systems and structures, including its education structures, for a very long time, and to overcome the consequences of this is a "long haul" (Horton et al 1991). We are being asked to build a different world in the shell of the old. But this is also what makes a literacy campaign such an important foundation activity for any effort to decolonise our education systems. A campaign brings into the education process the people who the colonial structures expelled, giving them a role and a voice where they previously have had none. This is not to say that everyone who takes part and becomes more literate will become a participant in further efforts to change things. Some will, and do (Williamson & Boughton 2020). But once people have learned that this kind of learning, the learning that literate people undertake, is possible, they have the opportunity to take it further. This begins in the post-literacy phase of a campaign, which provides opportunities where the basic literacy skills that have been acquired through the lessons can be practiced (and thus consolidated) in situations of direct relevance in peoples' daily lives (Durnan & Boughton 2018).

## Conclusion

When Freire wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed in the 1960s, he was well aware of the Cuban revolution. He later worked with Cuban literacy advisers in Angola and Nicaragua in the 1970s (Perez Cruz n.d.). When he visited Cuba himself for the first time in 1987, he told Esther Perez:

> *...for me the Cuban Literacy Campaign , followed by Nicaragua several years later, can be considered in the history of education as two of the most important facts in this century (Perez 1987, p.5).*

When he died in May 1997, he was about to return to Havana to receive a medal from Castro. Because *Yo, Sí Puedo* had not yet been developed, we can never know what he might have thought about it. But we do know that the Cuban literacy specialists who developed the model were aware of Freire and his ideas and consider their work to be based on a similar philosophy. In our interview with Nydia Gonzales, another 1961 campaign veteran who in 2010 was President of the Cuban Association of Teachers, she told us she was using Freire's texts in popular education classes for advisers studying to join international YSP missions. At the same time, Cuba's literacy specialists believe they have overcome some major limitations of the Freirian approach, in particular the need for highly qualified educators to develop codifications specific to the particular situation of the students, and to undertake genuine dialogue on these codifications with students.

As teachers in the popular education tradition, we aim to enter into a creative relationship both with learners and with the context in which the learners live and work, in ways that are informed by the theoretical basis of our practice. The point is not to reproduce what Freire or anyone else knew and wrote, but to produce new knowledge, collectively. One cannot simply read Freire's theory and then apply his ideas in practice. The ideas with which we begin will necessarily change as a result of our practice, as we will ourselves as teacher/learners (Allman 2010). This is a dialectical process, which starts from the basic assumption of our own 'unfinishedness' which is simply one aspect of the 'unfinishedness' of humanity as a whole:

> *The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity. (Freire 1972, pp.56-7)*

Practicing popular education, we are discovering new knowledge, about ourselves, our students and the world we together inhabit; and not just the 'world in general', but the very specific world which we and our learners inhabit at a particular point in time, in the particular locations in which we work. For this reason, we argue that to be true

to what Freire wrote is to 'rewrite' it, in our own way, based on our own experience, in our own contexts. That is to say, we have to read his 'word' through reading our own world, our own circumstances, the situations in which we are undertaking our own practice.

Likewise, the liberatory character of the Cuban YSP model cannot be known in advance, from a knowledge of its theory. It depends on how it is practiced, on the extent to which the educators who do this work embrace a Freirian-style philosophy and approach, and adopt the humanizing values of love, solidarity and critical reflection which both Freire and the Cuban School epitomise. Without this, Yo, Sí Puedo could just as easily be applied in a non-liberatory way as any other 'method'.

In our view, the work of 're-reading and re-writing' Freire must be done, not in university seminars or academic journals, but in the practice of teaching literacy on a mass scale. Without practice on this scale, it is not possible to develop a movement for change capable of transforming the material conditions in which genuinely new theory and new ideas can arise. Freire understood this, which is why he took the ideas he had developed as a student into Angicos in 1962, and then, after initial experimentation, agreed to expand his work into a country-wide campaign a little later. Freire never stopped emphasizing that popular education was a praxis, in which theory could only develop from practical activity. "We make the road by walking", as he called his talking book with Myles Horton (Horton & Freire 1990). We are fairly confident he would have supported this effort to re-read his work through the lens of our experience of the Cuban model, which has, at last count, engaged over 10 million people with low or no literacy across the globe (Valdés Abreu 2016). As they say in Timor-Leste, *A luta continua! The struggle continues!*

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# Revisiting Freire

Griff Foley

*This paper is a personal reflection on Freire's influence on one Australian adult educator. I eschew the normal journal article structure and tell a tale of how Freire has influenced my practice and thinking in adult education and community activism over half a century. The narrative is structured as a montage, moving forward in time from the late 1940's, when Freire first began to develop his praxis, to today. The story is framed by two key Freirean concepts, generative themes and codes, and by concepts drawn from adult and professional education, political economy and ecology. These concepts are embedded in the narrative, rather than discussed separately: they help me to tell the story and they are part of the story.*

***Keywords:*** *Paulo Freire, generative themes, codes, critical thinking, learning in social action, montage, pedagogies effective and ineffective, neoliberalism, dialectical education, critical learning, hegemonic learning, miseducation, destroying rational discussion, discussion principles, critical learning in Landcare, learning a new rationality, environmental sustainability, Anthropocene, progressive initiatives, Freire hope and the learning dimension, informal and incidental learning*

## Introduction

Revisiting Paulo Freire 50 years after I first encountered his work has allowed me to reflect yet again on the complex connections between learning, education, practice, theory and writing.[1]

I will tell a personal story here, about how Freire has influenced my work. More broadly I will maintain that 75 years after he began his work in Brazil, Paulo Freire's educational ideas and methods are as relevant as ever. Today the arenas in which his praxis may be helpful are both more expansive and more constraining.

My story is written for the many people who are involved in facilitating critical and emancipatory adult learning, learning that deepens people's ability to understand and act on their world in life-enhancing and non-exploitative or oppressive ways. I have encountered many such learning facilitators, over many years. Their work has always been demanding, and it gets progressively more so in a world dominated by neoliberal capitalism, a mode of production that enriches few, immiserates many and lays waste to Earth's biosphere. I hope this paper gives these emancipatory educators some heart.

Because I want to speak to these educators rather than to the academy, what theory, method, data and conclusions there are in my story are embedded in it. There is, though, an overarching contradiction that connects the various stories. They all express a tension between two modes of learning, one enlightening and liberating, the other obscurantist and entrapping[2].

## Framing the discussion

In 1983 Donald Schon (1983) published a book that has had a profound impact on how people think about their work. He argued that in any field of practice, decisions are confused and tricky and people must learn to negotiate their way through these in thoughtful ways. The world of work, he said, is like a swamp that each of us must negotiate our way through. So, we need to learn to reflect on complex work problems and decisions both as they arise (he called this "reflection-*in*-action) and afterwards ("reflection-*on*-action"). Seen in this way any work situation becomes a continuous learning process.

Freire is one of many people who helped me to find my way through the swamp. I will tell the story of how he did this as a *montage*: 'a series of short self-contained scenes, whose juxtaposition highlights the important issues with absolute clarity' (BBC Bitesize). This form suits the story. It encourages the reader to read actively and critically, to make connections between the juxtapositions[3].

*Pedagogies, Ineffective and effective*

For Paulo Freire, as for so many of us, it began with ineffective pedagogy and irrelevant texts.

In the mid-1940's (Bethell 2000) Freire was trying, and failing, to teach Brazilian adults to read and write, using primers full of sentences like *Eva saw the grape*. He realised that such abstract educational materials did not relate to his learners' lives. A pedagogy based on them was bound to fail (Freire 1970, 22ff).

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Twenty years later I was having a similar experience in East Africa.

In a secondary school in newly independent Uganda, I'm teaching school certificate history to seminarians, large lads cheerfully jammed into primary school desks.

The topic is English local government. We're all struggling. I don't know a borough from a county.

The curriculum moves on from this colonial remnant to African history. We're looking at the Bantu migrations from the north and centre of the continent into east and southern Africa.

I draw maps of the routes. The students light up, responding with their peoples' migration stories.

Later, in Tanzania and Kenya, I have similar experiences. Straightjacketed in a rigid exam-oriented curriculum, I read *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner 1971). Its authors point out that most curricula are based on questions that students are not interested in answering. Why not, they ask, start with the students' own questions and build a question curriculum?

I do this, as much as is compatible with my obligation to prepare students for an examination that will decide their future. At this point, in the early 1970s, only eight per cent of their age cohort are getting a secondary education.

I use African and Caribbean literature and history to stimulate students to write poems and stories about their own lives and people. They take to it with gusto, producing poems and stories which go into our school magazine. This activity gives them writing practice, building their self-confidence and helps them to prepare for their examination.

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*Dialectical education*

So, it was for Freire. He moved from ineffectually wading through alienating primers to teaching from where his students were, in Sao Paolo favelas (slums). Using an epidiascope, he flashed words on walls: landlord, rent, police. His students now rapidly learned to read and write (Freire 1970, 31ff).

Over time Freire developed a theory to explain this learning process (Freire 1970, 1972).

Each era, he argued, 'is characterised by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites'. This is reminiscent of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemonic struggle, in which the interests and conceptions of a dominant social class are challenged by those of a previously subordinate class (Mayo 1999).

Freire's great achievement was to develop an effective educational practice around these ideas.

In the 1940s Sao Paulo Freire has discovered his key ideas: *generative themes*, the words in people's lives that mean something to them, that animate them, and *codes*, the educational stimuli that connect with these themes and foster effective learning (Freire 1972, Chapter 3; Freire Institute; Freire Generative Themes Google Search 17 5 21).

These words are social and political: they speak of learners' situations, which are often grim. The words also raise questions about what can be done about these situations.

Freire's pedagogy raises people's consciousness. This is what he called conscientisation, a process by which learners, in dialogue with educators, reflect on the social forces that shape their lives (Freire 1970, 49ff).

When people learn to reflect on their situations and analyse them critically, they open up ideas, opportunities and a responsibility for taking action to improve their lives. They can then transcend the *culture of silence* in which ruling class hegemony has previously entrapped them (Freire 1972, 54ff).

This is *cultural action for freedom*.

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Freire has discovered a *pedagogy of the oppressed*, which he implements in his work as an educational administrator and academic in Brazil. In 1964 a military coup puts an end to this work. The Brazilian dictators imprison Freire. Once freed, Freire moves to Chile, where he works for the Christian agrarian reform movement and the United Nations food and agricultural organisation. In 1969 he is a visiting professor at Harvard. He writes two slim books, *Cultural Action for Freedom and Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. By 2010 the latter had sold a million copies. (Stern 2010)

In 1970 Freire is appointed special education adviser to the World Council of Churches in Geneva. He returns to Brazil in 1980, joins the Workers Party in Sao Paulo and helps supervise its adult literacy projects. When the Workers Party wins the Sao Paulo mayoralty in 1988, Freire becomes the municipal education secretary. He dies in Sao Paulo in 1997 (Wikipedia, *Paulo Freire*).

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Freire was of his time. His praxis emerged at the peak of post-war optimism when welfare capitalism was the norm in the West and decolonisation was the trend in what we used to call the third world. These were the days when we progressives thought the dominoes were going to fall our way, in the direction of human emancipation and social justice.

Today we live in a very different world, dominated by an exploitative, oppressive and destructive neoliberal capitalism. But Freire's ideas are still relevant.

### *Encountering Freire*

In the mid-1970's, as a postgraduate student and casual teacher back in Australia, I fell into a tenured lectureship at Sydney Teachers College. Now I was preparing university graduates to teach in Australian secondary schools. Again, I struggled with a rigid, uninspiring curriculum. A key problem was that our students spent little time in their future workplaces.

A colleague and I proposed a school-based diploma of education. The existing blocks of teaching practice would be supplemented by students spending a day a week in schools during their year-long teachers college course.

After sustained resistance by colleagues, we were permitted to pilot a course with a group of maths trainee teachers. Predictably, our students thrived on the experience, judging it to be much more relevant than the college course.

Again, in Freirean terms, we'd hit upon what really mattered to our students, their generative themes, and built effective learning experiences (codes) around them.

### *Learning: informal, incidental, and critical*

It is only now, revisiting Freire, that I realise how formative his ideas were for me.

The Shona people say, *Mwari ni pari pasu*, God is all around us.

Likewise, generative themes and codes are all around us. They can be destructive or constructive, oppressive or liberating.

Freire defined a generative theme as the relationship between 'an objective situation and the perceptions held of that situation by the people involved in it' (Freire Institute). A code is any stimulus to learn and act that is truly meaningful for the learner.

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Learning, in its broadest sense,4 is all around us. Adult learning, as Alan Tough (1970) observed, occurs throughout life. Formal education is but the tip of the learning iceberg.

Many years ago, I became interested in how people learn, informally and incidentally, while they are doing other things.

In 1977, while researching the history of African education in colonial Rhodesia, I came across archived copies of the *Bantu Mirror*, a weekly newspaper published by the Rhodesian Native Affairs Department. The newspaper's intent, expressed in its content and style, was to persuade black Zimbabweans of the virtues of white hegemony.

But in the letters to the editor column, something else was happening.

Most of the *Bantu Mirror*'s readers had been educated in colonial schools. Yet many of their letters to the newspaper were critical of colonialism.

This incipient critical consciousness was partly due to ideas about democracy and nationalism that these early nationalists had encountered in school. But their whole experience of living in colonialism had shaped their consciousness and action far more powerfully than had their formal education.

I was witnessing the emergence of an insurgent, critical learning. It was tentative and ambiguous, but it was the beginning of a resistant learning that developed as the struggle for independence played out (Foley 1981; 1999, 111-115).

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Years later I interviewed Australians who had been involved in a ten year campaign to preserve a rainforest remnant. When I asked what they had learned from their experience, they were nonplussed. "We never thought about that", they said, "We just did it". But as they told their campaign stories it became clear that they had learned a lot. Their learning had been both instrumental and critical. They gained knowledge and skills in rainforest ecology, lobbying and advocacy. They also developed a more critical view of authority and expertise, and a recognition of their own ability to influence decision making. All this was incidental learning—it was embedded in social action and not articulated until I interviewed the activists about it many years after the campaign (Foley 1999, 27-46).

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This and other case study research (Foley 1993, 1995, 1999, 2001) taught me that learning is largely informal and often incidental—it is tacit, embedded in action and is often not recognised as learning. Further,

people's everyday experience and learning may reproduce ways of thinking and acting which support the, often oppressive, status quo, or it may produce recognitions which enable people to critique and challenge the existing order. Freire saw the former sort of learning as domesticating and the latter as critical and emancipatory. This dichotomy was central to his literacy teaching praxis.

### *Hegemonic learning - miseducation*

Freire recognised that experiential learning is not inevitably illuminating and emancipatory. It may, and often does, confuse and oppress (Freire 1970 23-24, 30; Freire 1972 45-59).

And such *miseducation* is frequently—and in politics increasingly—deliberately fostered.

In February 2014 the ABC journalist Leigh Sales interviewed Prime Minister Tony Abbott about his government's asylum seeker policy. Here is an extract:

> *TA: The important thing is to stop the boats. Our argument is not with the ABC, … [nor with] the Indonesian Government; our argument is with the people smugglers. We don't want to do anything that will make it easier for the people smugglers; we want to put them out of business forever…*
>
> *LS: You also don't want to put misinformation out there?*
>
> *TA: And we don't want to do anything to make it easier for the people smugglers to continue to operate. And that's what the public expects of us, that we will honour our commitment to stop the boats. We've gone 40 odd days now without a single illegal boat arrival in Australia. (ABCTV 2014)*

Abbott doesn't answer Sales misinformation question. Instead, he returns to his keywords, his slogans, his *codes*. The term *people smugglers* shifts the focus, from the refugees and the circumstances that cause them to risk their lives to get to Australia, to the people who, Abbott avers, exploit them and put their lives at further risk. *Stop the boats* signals the government's determination to prevent *illegal boat arrivals*, another frequently used term.

The tale that Abbott tells is simple, powerful—and harmful and cynical. It is harmful to asylum seekers, justifying their being incarcerated or turned back at sea. It is harmful to our own humanity, hardening our hearts, confusing our minds.

This Australian refugee story has now run for many years. It starts with the Keating government, with Opposition support, legislating the mandatory detention of *unauthorised boat arrivals* in 1992. In the intervening years, the treatment of asylum seekers has become progressively harsher. (Parliament of Australia Library, 2013)

Public discussion reflects this. *The illegal boat arrival* discourse, expressed *ad nauseam* by politicians and their media facilitators[5], has, over three decades become hegemonic, dominating popular thinking, blocking out other ways of thinking and acting on this question.

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For several decades now, political discussion in liberal democracies has been dominated by such sloganeering, which has been used to great electoral effect by conservative politicians like Howard, Abbott and Morrison in Australia, Reagan and Trump in the US, and Boris Johnson in the UK. Such negative, dishonest, miseducative tropes are now all-pervasive in political discussion in Australia and elsewhere.[6] They reflect more than a failure to learn. They evince politicians' deliberate rejection of empirical evidence and deliberate miseducation of the public.

The effects of this are broad and toxic. Vulnerable people—refugees (and in analogous ways other vulnerable groups like First Nations people, single mothers, and jobless people)—are scapegoated. Voters become more manipulable, as we are currently seeing in the negative shift in Australians' attitudes towards China, driven by cold war rhetoric disseminated by the federal government, the security/defence lobby and elements of the mass and social media (Brophy 2021. Thoughtful and civil discussion of vital policy issues is displaced by a political discourse characterised by conflict, avoidance, misrepresentation, and contempt for data and dissenting opinion.

In Freirean terms, humane and rational generative themes (our natural sympathy for and desire to help refugees) have been deliberately displaced through a propaganda process employing codes (*illegal boat arrivals* etc.) that misrepresent refugees' experience and motivations and turn some Australians against them.

### *Destroying rational discussion*

Rational, respectful discussion was central to Freire's literacy teaching, and to the broader adult education tradition. The principles of discussion remain the standard by which we should judge any adult education intervention, including deliberately miseducative ones.

Rational discussion requires people to adhere to a number of principles: reasonableness (openness to others' arguments and perspectives), orderliness (e.g., not talking over other people), truthfulness (e.g. not distorting the truth to win a point), equality (e.g. giving everyone the opportunity to speak), freedom (e.g. allowing different views to be expressed), and respect for persons (e.g. appreciation of people's histories and experiences), (Brookfield & Preskill 1989).

In our time these principles are continually violated.

### *Critical learning in Landcare*

In Australia, the community conservation movement known as Landcare is often seen as one of the great progressive initiatives of the past thirty years. But how do we know if Landcare works? Certainly, numerous fading Landcare signs on abandoned weed-covered sites raise questions about the movement's effectiveness. Certainly, too, reports of the Australian Auditor General suggest that we need to know more about what works in community conservation, and why (Australian National Audit Office, 2021).

It helps Landcare evaluation and practice if we treat projects as *learning experiences*. To ask the question 'What have we learned ?' directs attention to everything that shapes a project—outcomes certainly, but also group dynamics, the group's interactions with its community and government agencies, the project's historical, political and economic context, and the values and theoretical assumptions underpinning the project. Seeing a Landcare project as a continuous learning experience helps us to come to grips with the complexity of the work. It helps us to look for creative and achievable solutions to problems. By unpacking complexities, we see that problems can be resolved.

From 2003 to 2013 my wife and I led a Landcare project at Merewether in Newcastle. The experience was at once invigorating and frustrating, complex and full of learning.

Ours was a committed and productive group, all locals, many of us newly retired. We worked every Tuesday. In the first two years, we weeded and revegetated the bitou bush-infested coastal dune with local native plants. Then we did the same on the adjacent headland. Within a decade we had planted 42,000 native plants with a survival rate of 80+ per cent, restored three native vegetation communities and 40+ local native plant species. The in-kind value of our work was $502,000; we raised $202,000 in grants. The local council's volunteer coordinator called us 'the benchmark' (Merewether Landcare one-pager, 2013, 2021).

So, what has our Landcare experience, got to do with Paulo Freire?

As I've noted, for me the core of Freire's praxis, the bit I've carried with me for fifty years, is his concepts of generative themes and codes. In the Landcare project our (the volunteers) generative themes were radically different from theirs (the bureaucrats).

The uplifting statistics and the coordinator's praise were overlaid by a more complex reality.

Despite Landcare being utterly reliant on volunteer labour, the dominant approach to native plant restoration is bureaucratic. It is often regulatory and constraining. It frequently infantilises unpaid voluntary workers. It often results in low performance.

Fortunately, there is another conception of community-based environmental restoration. Here, projects are conceived and led by community activists. This approach is facilitative and enabling. Participants are respected and treated like adults. It is a high-performance model.


The words on the right-hand side of the slide were our group's generative themes, those on the left were our conception of those of the bureaucrats. We did not begin the project with these themes in mind. They surfaced as we lived and discussed our experience of the project, week by week, for more than a decade. Our discussions were casual, informal, over coffee, or when we encountered each other around the neighbourhood. Our ongoing conversation was a Freirean process of *conscientisation*: our Landcare experience was a critical education. Most of us had worked in bureaucracies. Now we were learning how it can be for people (citizens, clients) who have to deal with bureaucracies.

Our ten years of critical learning are encapsulated in these dot points, they were our 'generative themes' that emerged as the project unfolded. As we became aware of them our resolve was strengthened. In our experience the community-led approach to native plant restoration is animating and mobilising. It says, "Yes we can!" In contrast, the bureaucratic approach is fearful, authoritarian and disabling. It cries, "What might go wrong?" and "No we can't!" Working with and against this approach for a decade was difficult work, much harder than the physical work, which we all found highly satisfying.[7]

### *Learning a new rationality*

Landcare aims to achieve a sustainable balance between ecosystems and human communities. The concept of sustainable development is foundational to Landcare; it shapes how we think and act, and it is a goal we all share. Given that it underpins our work, it is useful to examine its assumptions.

The sustainable development discourse emerged in the 1970s. In 1972 a Club of Rome report recognised the limits of economic growth, and advocated accounting for the ecological costs of production, and the need to add distributive counterbalances to the inequitable effects of capitalist markets. From this arose proposals for zero growth and stationery-state economics (Meadows et al 1972

The 1987 United Nations report *Our Common Future* (the Brundtland Report) used the image of earth seen from space to dramatise an unfolding planetary crisis. "From space", the report said, we see "a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice, but a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery and soils. Humanity's inability to fit its doings into that pattern is changing planetary systems, fundamentally. Many such changes are accompanied by life-threatening hazards. This new reality, from which there is no escape, must be recognised—and managed" (World Commission on Environment & Development 1987)

As the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1996) points out, the sustainability discourse was a response to both the cumulative destructive impact of economic growth and the consequent emergence of environmental movements. Sustainable development sought to reconcile development and nature by managing threats to the latter.

But this goal was unachievable without an economic and political transformation, which to date has not occurred. (Nafeez 2014; Helmore 2021). What has actually been sustained is not the natural environment but the capitalist market economy. Half a century on there is strong evidence that we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, characterised by human domination of nature and its destructive effects. (Lewis & Maslin 2018; Moore 2017)

Social scientists like Escobar and the Mexican economist Enrique Leff (2008) argue that to prevent nature being absorbed into capital

in a way that only benefits privileged groups, conservationists must develop an alternative economic & political paradigm. This will involve local conservationists and their allies developing projects founded on different principles, such as commitment to production that sustains nature and benefits communities, and participatory rather than bureaucratic styles of management.

Neoliberal economics is not just a theory. It is also, and more deeply, a rationality—a mode of understanding and action that has been institutionalised and incorporated into the way we think[8]. We have *learned* this rationality, and we must now unlearn it. Achieving this, Leff argues, will require both solid theoretical argumentation and imaginative political strategy.

We learn, informally and incidentally, the dominant economic rationality. It becomes common sense, a filter through which we see the world. It directly challenges and subverts the goals of community conservation and other progressive social movements. (Foley 1994; 1998; 1999, 79-84)

We need, as Leff maintains, to critically understand this rationality, and articulate—and I would add *learn* — a new rationality based on principles of environmental sustainability and social justice. Here again, Freire will be helpful. We will need to discard neoliberal generative themes and develop codes that will help us to learn new life-enhancing generative themes.

### *The challenge*

This often feels like an impossible challenge. But if we look, we find many people rising to it. Think, for example, of some current Australian progressive initiatives: for the natural environment9; for a First Nations Voice to Parliament10; for an end to the abuse of women, the aged and the disabled[11]; for social housing[12]; for community-based parliamentary representation[13].

If we look further, we see an endless array of projects, many of them directly cultural and educational. On a recent morning, I read about the 55th annual Freedom Day Festival, held on Gurindji country, 'the birthplace of Aboriginal land rights'. In 1966, after nearly a century of land dispossession, labour exploitation and sexual abuse, Gurindji men,

women and children walked off Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory. After a seven year struggle, the Gurindji regained title to part of their land. This led to legislation enabling Indigenous people to claim land title if they could prove a traditional relationship to their country. The Gurindji struggle also generated the seminal (and educative) land rights song *From Little Things Big Things Grow* (55th Freedom Day Festival; National Museum of Australia; Street 2014).

On the same morning, I encountered *Let Colonialism Starve*, a Native American retelling of the US festival of Thanksgiving. It begins:

We at Seeding Sovereignty would like to share a historical undoing of the first feast that Americans celebrate as "Thanksgiving". We invite our readers to unlearn the socialized celebration of the genocidal holiday, but we also urge you to take a step further in understanding the rich history of Indigenous Resistance in the face of colonization. We hope that past instances of Indigenous insurgency spark hope and action in the present tense as Indigenous peoples face attacks on all forefronts in the year 2020. Let this zine guide and open you toward more concrete ways of being an accomplice, where action is extended beyond education and transformed into meaningful relationships with Indigenous people on our path toward collective liberation (Truthsgiving 2020).

In all of these projects, participants learn new generative themes and critique previously dominant ones. So far we barely understand the dynamics of this learning, let alone how we might better facilitate it. But yet again Freire's ideas can help us as we face this immense challenge.

### *Conclusion: Freire, hope, and the learning dimension*

Human life has a learning dimension. Most of our learning is informal and incidental: we learn but we often do not know that we are learning until that learning is made explicit. The ability to *reflect* and *critically analyse* and *act* on the implications of the analysis is, as Freire realised, central to effective emancipatory learning and action.

A further point: Emancipatory learning is both an individual and a collective process.

Declan Fry is an Australian writer descended from the Yorta Yorta people who live along the eastern stretches of the Murray-Darling River. In a recent essay about the Wiradjuri writer Stan Grant, Fry insightfully

links the individual and collective dimensions of learning.

Grant himself, Fry notes, is sure of his identity. He quotes Grant: 'Being Wiradjuri is not something I rediscover; our language lives in the now, not then'. Then, brilliantly, Fry connects Grant's surety to white Australia's uncertainty about its identity:

> *…although we have never lived in a continent of Indigenous languages, of agreement between coloniser and First Nations, and perhaps never can — not so late in history, so late in the goddammed day — we still have to grapple with the broken and surviving bits we have inherited…*
>
> *…the most colonial and racist part of that continent called Australia is its desire, since invasion, to always be waiting. It would rather assimilate or kill off First Nations, or attach itself to England or the United States, than face its fictions…*
>
> *….there is no new continent to write…Australia is already full. So quit waiting…, hoping your passport will arrive…If you think you've got sovereignty then don't talk about it, act like it….*
>
> *The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off. So be it, says Grant. Live with the difficulty. We don't need to be completed or healed—just allowed 'to live with the pain, with all the broken bits'.*
>
> *….Don't ever surrender yourself…For First Nations, and anyone else on this continent who wishes to keep their eyes open, sovereignty of mind is the biggest estate going…(Fry 2021)*

Such sound advice, for all Australians, and a profound illustration of the vital connection between individual and collective emancipatory learning.

And consider what a powerful stimulus and focus—code—this passage might be in a discussion about First Nations/Settler[14] reconciliation.

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I find hope and challenge in such wise writing as Fry's, and in the progressive projects I continually encounter. In these dark times, with the ecosystems and social bonds that sustain life on earth under

immense pressure, it heartens me to learn, daily, that there are countless people engaged in emancipatory learning, education and social action[15]. I see connections between these contemporary efforts and Freire's thought and practice, his understanding that emancipatory learning and social action are conjoined.

Radical adult educators need to recognise this dialectical reality. Times are hard, but there is hope in hard times (Solnit 2015). Emancipatory[16] struggles, and the learning and education embedded in them, persist, in innumerable arenas. Generative themes and codes continue to battle it out in these struggles, and Freire's ideas are as fresh and relevant for me as when I first encountered them fifty years ago.

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## Endnotes

1 I've explored these connections in various books and articles, some of which are cited in this paper. See the reference list to this article.

2 I'm aware of the ideological minefield I've wandered into here, battles between historical materialists, postmodernists, post-structuralists, neo-materialists, post-materialists, and so on. There is insufficient space for me to engage with these debates here.

3 'Montage became for him {Brecht] the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect the dissimilars in such a way as to 'shock' people into new recognitions and understandings'. (Mitchell 1998, 39). See also: '[Brecht's] epic theatre advances in fits and starts, like the images on a film strip. Its basic form is that of the forceful impact on one another of separate, distinct in the play. The songs, the captions included in the stage decor, the gestural conventions of the actors, serve to separate each situation. Thus, distances are created everywhere, which is, on the whole, detrimental to illusion among the audience. These distances are meant to make the audience adopt a critical attitude, to make it think'. (Brecht 1998, 38) Emphasis added.

4 Learning as a dimension of life. If there is productive learning, there is also destructive learning; learning may be formal, informal or incidental; education may be hegemonic or emancipatory.

5 Both their own public relations people and sympathetic/compliant/symbiotic journalists and commentators.

6 'And elsewhere…'. Ronald Reagan was a master of this technique. See Bryant 2020.

7 My conceptualisation of these models emerged from reflecting on the experience of our Landcare group over a decade, and from discussing and reading about the experiences of other groups. For a fuller analysis of the complexities of Landcare work, including examples of volunteer-bureaucrat interactions, see Foley 2004b, 2011, 2015.

8 There is fertile ground here for scholars of adult learning. As well as the vast scope for ethnographic research, the (informal and incidental) learning of this rationality can be 'read into' accounts of the electoral success of politicians like Reagan and Trump. See for example Bryant, 2020.

9 There are countless local, regional, national and transnational environmental struggles and projects. See for example, on a successful Native American campaign to remove a century-old dam that was decimating native fish in Northern California, Grable, 2021. And for comprehensive information about a 50 year ongoing struggle against a marina and housing developments in the northern suburbs of Perth see.: Save Ocean Reef. For analysis of activists' learning in an Australian campaign against coal-seam gas mining see Ollis & Hamel-Green, 2015.

10 For an overview of the Uluru Statement and its context see From the Heart. https://fromtheheart.com.au For further background and advocacy see: It's time for true constitutional recognition. https://fromtheheart.com.au/its-time-for-true-constitutional-recognition/ Both retrieved 17 5 21. For a detailed analysis of the origins and significance of the movement for constitutional recognition of Australia's First Nations people see Mayor, 2019.

11 See for example, on abuse of the disabled: Australian Federation of Disability Organisations. For evaluation of efforts to reduce abuse against women and children see: KPMG/Australian Department of Social Services 2017. On elder abuse see Mears, 2015.

12 On social housing see Mares, 2018, 2020.

13 For a useful introduction to this movement in Australia see Commons Social Change Library, and Hall, 2021.

14 I think 'settler' is a more accurate descriptor than 'white', 'European', or 'non-indigenous'. After all, all of us not belonging to a First Nation, or our ancestors, came to Australia from somewhere else and settled here.

15 The further challenge, the central strategic one, is how these disparate projects can coalesce and lead to national and global emancipatory change.

16 While 'radical' and 'emancipatory' are contested terms, I think they are useful. For discussion of their meaning and application see Foley, (2001b).

## About the author

***Griff Foley*** was formerly Associate Professor of Adult Education at the University of Technology Sydney. His teaching and research centred on the relationship of informal learning and individual, social and organisational change, & on the professional education of adult educators and other learning facilitators. Since retirement in 2000 Griff has been involved in Newcastle (Australia) community activities including Landcare, resident action & U3A.

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# Becoming an activist-scholar through Pedagogy of the Oppressed: An autoethnographic account of engaging with Freire as a teacher and researcher

Helen Underhill

*This paper contributes an autoethnographic account of how Paulo Freire's work shapes understandings of education, social change and the possibilities and practices of social research. Drawing on connections between anthropology and education (Schultz, 2014) that underpin Pedagogy of the Oppressed (McKenna, 2013), I explore spaces and practices through which Freire's seminal text provided me with the critical consciousness to interrogate the human experience of education and learning, and to question my practice as I transitioned from teacher to researcher, paying particular attention to learning through discomfort (Boler, 1999). The paper therefore contributes an applied contemporary reading of Pedagogy of the Oppressed to demonstrate its continued significance for theory and practice in formal and nonformal education, and its relevance for reimagining research practice. As a form of critically engaged reflective scholarship, the autoethnographic enquiry asks educators and researchers to question their own conceptualisations and practices of knowledge and research to consider a significant and urgent proposition: how we do the work to understand education and our imaginations of what and how it might become.*

***Keywords:*** *autoethnography, Freire, discomfort, activism, research practice, education*

## Introduction

Paulo Freire's analyses and insights of working with marginalised communities places the human at the heart of our understandings of learning and education. As a teacher, academic and researcher, engaging with Freire as philosophical anthropology (Gadotti, 2017) for educators reframed *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as the foundation for a manifesto of critically conscious pedagogy within all forms and spaces of education and research. When I realised Freire's critiques about education and imaginations of its possibilities evolved through work with communities rather than school-based teaching but that his arguments were integral to our thinking and practice in both contexts, my journey became a pursuit for reimaginations of education and the creation, construction and production of knowledge. In short, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* transformed my understanding of education into a politicised human experience and living pedagogy that *necessarily* reaches far beyond schools and schooling.

In this paper, I contribute an autoethnographic reflection of developing as an educator and researcher through Freire's pedagogy, drawing on my work in three different contexts: school-based teaching and higher education in England and research in low income communities in the global South. I argue that autoethnography enables us to reimagine and engage with Freire as a living pedagogy of discomfort, a process that is a necessary guiding principle for continuing to reimagine how we educate and research. The connections drawn between discomfort and praxis in different educational contexts present an original contribution to the study of Freire's work, particularly relevant to educators engaging in educational *and* community-based research and/or teacher education.

The paper begins with a brief introduction to the theoretical thread Freire built between anthropology and education to situate the contribution within studies of adult learning and education, and to begin the conceptualisation of activist-scholarship. The connection between anthropology and education is further developed in the next section as I reflect on autoethnography as a method of enquiry through which

researchers reflect critically on their own practice and understandings of education and learning. I provide an overview of the contexts that provide the setting for the analysis: school-based teaching and teacher education; social action and activism; and community-based research in low- and middle-income countries. I conclude by reflecting on how Freire's work contributed to my understanding and practice of activist-scholarship, calling for intentional engagement with discomfort as necessary within Freirean praxis.

## Anthropology and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

As the founder of an 'educational movement' (McKenna, 2013), Paulo Freire continues to be integral to the thinking and practice of students, educators and practitioners across the world, as is evident in this special issue. Before charting how *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* continues to shape my thinking and practice across different roles in education and research, this section introduces the anthropological underpinnings of Freire's work that can so often be neglected (see McKenna, 2013). Being explicit about the anthropological nature of Freire's work offers important insights into educators' ideas and beliefs and how they are created.

Theories and studies of adult education can benefit from anthropological engagements because they provide insight into how those who create, enact and develop education think about their practice and the ideas that shape what they do. Freire shows us that the educator's understanding of education and the position they take through their pedagogy is the foundation for how education is experienced by both teacher and student. Indeed, Mayo (2020, p457) offered a careful reminder of the many dualisms at play within Freirean praxis, noting that 'personal experiences also offer specific contexts for praxis' and processes of 'relearning.' Recognising the need to revisit experience (through autoethnography) to interrogate how knowledge is created and why we think in a certain way (Allman, 1999) presents new questions for understanding the materiality of how educators' theoretical, cultural, political beliefs are developed and sustained. Diverging from the suggestion that 'contradictions of opposites' are reconciled within praxis (Mayo, 2020, p457), I argue that autoethnography can deepen understanding of how troublesome emotions associated with conflict and opposition are critical to learning specifically because discomfort and the emotive dimensions of our work can be productive (Underhill,

2019b): in other words, reflexive engagement with opposition and contradiction provide the emotive impetus for critical thought and lead us towards praxis.

Through this paper's anthropological perspective of an educator's developing philosophy, I offer two significant contributions to our understandings of adult education, and to related fields such as teacher education: first, in increasingly complex times where Left and Right are pitted against each other through popular discourse in ways that are detracting from the possibility of revolution, engaged reflections of coming to understand our role as educators in systems of power and oppression are a necessary reminder of Freire's commitment to transformation through education so that we question our own; second, ethnographic reflections that consider knowledge and ideas provide critical insights into the human, lived and affective dimensions of praxis as we encounter our own experiences of 'problem-posing' education and transformative action (Freire, 1970).

With its commitment to community dialogue, cultural analysis and the lived experience of oppression, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is an anthropological critique of education and its possibilities. By engaging with communities through a people-centred pedagogy, Freire exposed how systems of education dehumanise and divide to ensure 'what serves the interest of one group disserves the interest of others' (Freire, 1970, p. 126). For teachers today, recognising this power differential as a form of everyday violence when working *within* the formal education system begins with understanding John Dewey's position that education can never be neutral (Dewey, 1916; Apple, 2003), and is the foundation for committed and critically engaged practice. Essentially, Freire's ethnographic account of community-based pedagogy led me to understand that schools are political spaces where educators can control the ideas and imaginations of future generations, often unknowingly and without question. I will argue that thinking about these questions, and working through them through research, is the basis for engaged activist-scholarship that engages critically with how we do the work for reimagining education.

Freire's grounding in anthropology and theories of knowledge establishes 'a method of investigation, research and evaluation in the area of education' that has been adopted across disciplines and

global contexts (Gadotti, 2017, p. 19). Anthropology can help us to ask questions about where our ideas and beliefs have come from and how we engage in a personal practice of problem-posing pedagogy that challenges our own thinking and practice. It is to this task that the rest of this paper turns, beginning with an introduction to autoethnography in educational research and the approach taken in this paper.

## Autoethnographic enquiry for reimagining education

Shaped by accounts of anthropology, education and adult learning, this paper contributes an autoethnographic account of challenging and creating ideas of what education is and could be through the lens of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I begin by establishing how autoethnography can illuminate understandings of education and its possibilities by educators offering their own critical reflections of how their beliefs about education developed. I then introduce the spaces through which Paulo Freire's seminal text challenged my understanding of education and enabled me to establish my own critical sense of how and why we seek to understand the world through academic research, within and beyond the discipline of education.

Before beginning, a note on terminology: I recognise that the term 'educator' often includes those who work with communities. In this paper, I consider how ideas and imaginations of education are created in different contexts so my use of 'educator' applies to both formal and nonformal settings (see Freire, 1992). However, reference to students specifically denotes learners in formal settings to reflect on the conventional (dominant) representation of a teacher-pupil /educator-student relationship. Further, I use 'activism' and 'activists' within this paper alongside and within discussions of critical thinking in relation to social action, noting the Freirean perspective that these terms reflect practice rather than praxis (Freire, 1970; Mayo 2020).

As a form of anthropological research, autoethnography illuminates lived experiences from a subject-researcher perspective, thereby contributing understandings of how education can confront issues of power (Reed-Danahay, 2009). Drawing on the presence of the situated self presents a more complete picture of knowledge, one that has a framework that includes experiences, histories and memories which are inseparable from the research process (Coffey, 1999). Autoethnography,

therefore, contributes detailed explorations of an educator's practice and thinking with the recognition that both are shaped by their own historicised experience of education.

Within educational research, autoethnography has been used to explore teaching practice in schools and universities (Granger, 2011; Wilkinson, 2020) and as an approach to reflective practice (Earl & Ussher, 2016). However, reflective practice is not necessarily critically engaged; it could be argued that it has been operationalised within a performative education system in ways that ensure the reproduction of teacher performance. For instance, reflective practice, as its 'fuzzy' (Colin et al, 2013, p. 109) name suggests, focuses on what an educator *does*. The lack of integration of theory and practice within developing professionals' reflections suggests they may pause and stop but not account for their thinking (see Thompson & Pascal, 2012). In other words, despite aiming for rigour within a process of meaning-making (Rodgers, 2002) reflective practice can be descriptive, failing to consider how and why particular ideas that underpin practices are formed. In the performative educational regime within England's schools characterised by Ball (2003), it could be argued that reflective practice within a performance management process is less likely to encourage educators to engage with ideas of knowledge and power that might challenge the discourses that ensure acquiescence within the system.

As a method that also relies on accounts of first-hand experience, the critiques of reflective practice outlined above are relevant for the practice of autoethnography, particularly given that personal accounts are situated within the researcher's lived experience. In this paper, autoethnography is employed to promote thought and interrogate experience without the intention for generalisability. It still requires rigour in how I approach and consider my data, recognising the potential influences of bias and memory, and raises specific concerns around ethical practice. For example, in referring to my own experience as an educator and researcher, I draw on the lives of others (see Tolich, 2010). Therefore, despite the emphasis being on my reflection, I have taken conscious steps to remove features that could identify those within the stories I tell.

When enacted through Freirean critical pedagogy as a form of praxis that is intentional and transparent in its politics, autoethnography can

be a valuable method of research because it recognises that 'learning *about* is not enough: we must also learn *from*' (Granger, 2011, p. 13, emphasis in original). For educators, this is critical to recognising that our experiences and philosophies are situated and relational. Adopting autoethnography as a tool for critical reflection, this paper offers new directions for teacher and adult education by reframing the conversation as a self-directed enquiry into an understanding of how the ideas that underpin an educator's practice emerge and evolve with and through work with others and their perspectives. For adult education, including teacher educators, engaging with personal accounts of the learning that happens through life and that widens our perspectives (Bateson, 1994) presents opportunities to reflect on the experiences that shape, determine and constrain imaginations of the possible.

Drawing connections between Freire's philosophical anthropology and educators' practices of critical reflection deploys autoethnography in an explicitly political way. In revealing personal experience and positionalities, autoethnography is a method that has ethical considerations for the educator and researcher (Wilkinson, 2020) who continues to work with communities, schools, teachers and within academia. Although there are risks associated with sharing personal experience in a work capacity (Earl & Ussher, 2016), my decision to pursue this method of research is directly related to my experience of reimagining the purpose of education and engaging in activist-scholarship (Schultz, 2014) that is intentional, critically engaged and necessary to navigate the discomfort I have felt working within the neoliberal educational system. My reasoning is twofold: first, sharing the process of reimagining my own understanding of education is relevant for other educators and student teachers in that it offers points of entry for others to critically engage with their own thinking and practice in ways that can navigate their own experiences; second, my experience provides a case study of how Freirean pedagogy of activist-scholarship can be intentionally multi-disciplinary and begin to dismantle inequalities within how we think about education and educational research.

Intentionality is critical to conceptualising Freirean activist-scholarship because it leads autoethnography to the 'relational dimension' of praxis and the notion that 'reflection on action must be allied to political action' (Mayo, 2020, p456). Being conscious about reflection generates the possibility for change because 'praxis… requires theory to illuminate it'

(Mayo, 2020, p457). Although theorising experience can be troublesome and uncomfortable (Underhill, 2019a), being intentional about our work and its politics can be empowering for educators; critical reflection can lead to new imaginations and the possibility to apply new ideas to multiple contexts through engaged interdisciplinary collaboration and 'co-produced' (Bell & Pahl, 2018) research. By engaging in the practice of autoethnography, the paper invites other educators to offer their journey to becoming part of the Freirean movement to illustrate possibilities for change and is, therefore, an intentionally political act.

Methodology in research is deeply political. Without recounting the well-established qualitative versus quantitative debate (see Brannen, 2017), it is widely recognised that competing discourses determine what counts as knowledge (Foucault, 1994) and that this subsequently shapes what counts as research. This paper, therefore, is shaped by a politics of method that is also Freirean in nature: challenging ideas by engaging with multiple understandings and truths, exploring complexity and learning (or unlearning) from unintentional but sometimes troubling moments within the research process. A significant part of this politics is recognising complexity associated with the contexts in which we create ideas about the world.

The three contexts explored in this paper each illustrate the enduring relevance of Freire's work for anyone thinking about learning, education and social change. Different ideas from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are woven into my reflections of that context as particularly significant to developing my thinking. The data derives from documentation related to recording professional development (a standard practice within the teaching profession in England), research diaries kept during my doctoral research and ongoing projects, and notes taken during the different readings of Freire's work. The reflections are shaped by my personal experiences and understandings and offer insights that cannot be generalised to the wider population or to other researchers or educators: the contributions are offered as examples of how repeated and continuous engagement with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a necessary endeavour for any educator committed to transformation because interpretations continue to change with our lived experiences.

Beginning, perhaps obviously, with schools, I discuss how the notions of docility and internal conflict emerged through my experience of teaching

in schools both as a teacher and teacher educator. The next section reflects on my experience of learning beyond the classroom, picking up on Freire's commitment to praxis and the imperative of critical thinking within social action. By recognising that learning can be constrained (see Underhill, 2019b), we see the continued relevance of Freire's thinking today: we can become 'a prisoner in a circle of certainty' (1970, p. 21) by being unthinking and unquestioning. Bringing these contexts together, the final section draws on Elizabeth Dauphinée's (2013) autoethnographic account from International Relations to reflect on research with a low-income community group in South Africa and the broader issue of scholarly activity, drawing connections between emotion and understanding (Underhill, 2019a) through notions of power, knowledge, emotion and humanity.

## Schools of docile bodies

Discourses of formal education continue to be dominated by the 'banking method' of teacher as expert placing deposits in the 'vessels' of the unthinking student population (Freire, 1970). As a manifestation of a 'market logic' which has been applied to education through neoliberal and neoconservative education policies (Gandin & Apple, 2002, p. 103), the conception of education has been transformed into schooling which 'serves the interest of the state' (Giroux, 2001, p. 241) by ensuring the next generation is ready to enter the neoliberal economy. This hegemony of dialogue is, according to Freire, the key to the myth of possibility and to a dehumanising education: 'one of the methods of manipulation is to inoculate individuals with the bourgeois appetite for personal success' (Freire, 1970, p. 130).

The notion of personal success permeates throughout the educational system, bringing with it a myriad of practices that embed judgement and comparison of staff and students. Data produced to report outcomes in English schools, for instance, measures and compares students, teachers, departments and schools against previous performances, future targets, and their peers, and is monetised to varying degrees through teacher performance related pay (Ball, 2015). The manipulation, to draw on Freire again, manifests as what Ball (2003, p. 220) explores as teacher 'performativity', leading some to question whether a particular educational practice is 'being done ultimately because it will be measured or compared?'

My own experience of the interminable pursuit of demonstrable successful outcomes reflects how discourses of education instil performative cultures and have the power to manipulate those within the profession, resulting in the reproduction of obedient 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977) and practices of self-regulation (Ball, 2003; 2015). Having developed into an apparently 'outstanding' practitioner (because so many of my students achieved above their expected target grades) I became a mentor, coach and adviser working with teachers with different levels of experience. I believed myself to be a 'thinking' and 'questioning' (Freire, 1970) person. After all, I was an active volunteer for various humanitarian and human rights organisations and a regular attendee at protests against, for example, rising global inequality, the Iraq War and the continued occupation of Gaza. For the English Language and Literature students in my majority white-European school, I planned schemes of work based on books that told stories of refugees and asylum seekers, of street children and struggle, and of places and people that raised awareness of various social inequalities. On the surface, the inclusion of 'other' stories, lives, cultures and voices went some way to 'decolonising' my curriculum (for a discussion within Australian schools see, McLean Davies et al, 2021). However, looking back through Freire, hooks (1994) and Hall (1997), I questioned the extent to which my students gained an anti-racist understanding of English Literature and Language. Critical literacy, as Mayo (2020, p461) notes, reminds us that 'one can read the word but not necessarily read the world while doing so.' Indeed, 'the stories students are exposed to significantly impact on the ways they understand and make meaning of the worlds they inhabit' (McLean Davies et al, 2021, p816).

As we studied the novels and poems, we engaged in dialogue about how the texts might shape students' understandings of the world. However, the interactions were conditioned by the language of assessment (objectives, targets, success criteria) and the questions I, as the teacher, felt were important. Although 'meaning making can also occur within "banking education" (Mayo, 2020, p462), the performative neoliberal regime demands students remain 'docile listeners' (Freire, 1970, p62) rather than co-constructors of a dialogue where they could 'come to feel like masters of their thinking' (Freire, 1970, p. 105). While there are many educators who engage with Freire to shape their resistant practice, the fact I was attempting to do things differently but remained unsure

whether I was getting it right tapped into 'a deep and dark professional secret that every teacher knew about but which no one ever talked about': the 'internal conflict' between what we are told to do and what we believe about education (Muchmore, 2002, p. 2-3). Together with Hall (1997), Freire's insights showed that the practice of expanding a reading list was not enough: I was thinking critically about the content of my subject, but I was at the beginning of my journey to Freirean praxis: I needed to go further in a process of continued learning and unlearning with my students, engaging in dialogue that took action in a process of transformation of the world where I would resist the 'spectacle of the other' (Hall, 1997).

One defining experience in my school-based career deepened my sense of internal conflict and the materiality of performativity as experienced by students and teachers. On summer results day in the late-2000s, I received the final grades for two exam groups. Two young men with differing learning and behavioural conditions, Paul and Tyson (pseudonyms), achieved three grades higher than predicted, reflecting their growth in confidence and self-belief. Yet according to all measures of success in England's secondary schooling, they had still 'failed'. Reflections at the time and subsequently revealed my anger, frustration and growing discomfort with the realisation that in *this* system, many will never achieve the hegemonic measure of success. Through the lens of Freirean pedagogy, however, feeling anger and frustration did not go far enough: understandings of education need to be challenged through Freire's notion of radical 'committed involvement' (Freire, 1970, p. 51). In my case, I chose to leave the system of 'schooling' (Giroux, 2001) in an attempt to reimagine the internal conflict, I was feeling about what it meant to be an 'outstanding' or 'effective' teacher (Ball, 2015) as an opportunity through which to learn and unlearn attachment to particular ideas and imaginations (Underhill, 2019a) of education and social transformation.

Ten years on, as a university-based teacher educator working with post-graduate students, the space through which to bring Freire's principles to the next generation of teachers is diminishing. For example, my decision to use the term 'resistance' in sessions about the National Curriculum for English in schools was part of my committed involvement to critically-engaged praxis. In one teaching session, students reflected on the content of subject English through

Freirean notions of banking and problem-posing education and critical consciousness, and bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994). Many commented (verbally and via email) that the critical questions posed by Freire and hooks, underpinned by conscious struggle, made them question both content and practice, from choice of texts and authors to pedagogy and teaching strategies, how they questioned, grouped students and thought about assessment. However, one student returned the following week to say her husband, also a secondary English teacher, said such conversations were 'dangerous' and she 'should be careful' of this kind of thinking when she got into school 'properly' (personal communication, 2019). As McKenna (2013, p. 450) illustrates, Freirean pedagogy requires more than recognition: it requires us to 'make trouble', to keep engaging critically, developing theories and critical practice. Whether teaching English or Biology - the case Freire deploys in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1992, p. 68) - we must remember the content cannot be 'understood apart from its historic-social, cultural and political framework'.

Reflecting on my role from a Freirean perspective shows me teacher educators need to create the conditions for troublesome teachers whose ideas of revolution and resistance are sustained in schools, continuing to evolve and respond to changing practices and experiences of oppression from across the education system. Amid an increasingly neoliberal and hostile higher education context in England, the transformative praxis beyond schools and schooling is ever more urgent and necessary. The next section establishes collective action and adult education as key to developing troublesome knowledge and pedagogies of resistance, focusing on how my understanding of learning in informal contexts began during my teaching practice but remains core to how I continue to reimagine its possibilities.

## Learning to learn through social action

Having experienced the uncomfortable disconnect between beliefs about teaching and the expectations associated with school-based practice (Muchmore, 2002), Freire's position that 'liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (1970, p. 60) struck me particularly deeply: the discomfort I felt when navigating the tension of classroom practice and activism provided the space necessary to develop and maintain radical values. In this section,

I draw on my experience of engaging in social action (social movements, campaign groups, voluntary organisations and charities) to illustrate the continued influence of Freire in my journey to reimagining education and academic work.

During my time teaching in a large state-maintained school teaching 11–16-year-olds, I established a small but committed youth action group. The young people developed into campaigners and activists, and I witnessed their criticality develop through participating in action and thinking related to inequality and struggle, an observation that laid bare the constraints that 'schooling' (Giroux, 2001) places on students' imaginations of a different world and 'inhibits their creative power' (Freire, 1970, p. 58).

The experience exposed a contrast in dialogic practice between activism and formal education settings that would go on to shape my academic research. Within the activist groups (including the school-based group that included some of the same students to whom I taught English), we talked about power, inequality and marginalisation, holding small acts of public campaigning, resistance and solidarity. Contrast this with my classroom teaching where I - as the teacher - 'owned' the dialogue within the classroom: I decided the enquiries, directed the questions and invited participation. No matter how student-centred I made my lessons, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exposed the transactional system that was reinforced by policies, practices and a 'pedagogic-bent' designed to '*prevent* (counter-hegemonic) thinking' (Harley, 2012, p. 18, emphasis in original). As Dewey (1916) established, education has long been the tool through which to control the masses, albeit under the veil of promoting individual freedom: students had been 'reduced to things', constrained vessels rather than liberated humans (Freire, 1970, p. 84).

Freire challenged my imaginations of education and pedagogy to be more human, affective and committed. Through small acts of resistance, I had encountered the powerful learning that happens beyond the classroom and had my eyes opened to the possibilities of lifelong learning in social movements and activist groups (see Welton, 1993; Foley, 1999; Jesson and Newman, 2004; Hall and Turay, 2006; Leach and Scoones, 2007; Beaumont, 2010; Ollis, 2011). Although I was yet to find the language to articulate the unease and discomfort of learning (Boler, 1999) about my own part in sustaining dominance (Zembylas

& McGlynn, 2012), it had become clear that deep and critical reflection on educative practice and its philosophical underpinnings is necessary if educators are to become conscious of their own role in preventing critical thought and the subsequent perpetuation of inequality and oppression, and that recognising alternative spaces of learning was a key place to start.

A central tenet of Freirean pedagogy is the commitment to revolutionary praxis - to 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1970, p. 33) that is distinct from activism as 'action for action's sake' (p. 69). Given ideas, beliefs and emotions are entwined (Melucci, 1985; Boler, 1999; Underhill, 2019b), we need to learn through the discomfort associated with challenging our part in the 'circle of certainty' where we make our own truths (Freire, 1970, p. 21) about the world and of our place in its recreation. Inspired and troubled by the cognitive dissonance of being a schoolteacher reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I was compelled to question my beliefs about the human experience of truth creation and reproduction. Freire's (1970, p. 84) exploration of the 'anthropological character' of education as situated within lived experience exposed the schooling-education dichotomy. I was forced to acknowledge how my imaginations of education were constrained within and reinforced by the performative game of which I had become a key player as I participated in performance management systems, rating teachers based on observations of individual lessons. Just as activists' learning can be constrained by their attachment to particular truths because they have lived histories with affective and emotional ties (Underhill, 2019a; 2019b), the same is true for educators: confronting the truth of why we what we do *in that way* is the foundation for developing a continuously evolving and living pedagogy. In the next section, I demonstrate how these reflections led me to reconsider how we do community-based research before revisiting the possibilities for adult education.

## Engaged research: the necessity of encountering Freire

In her autoethnographic narrative of research during the Bosnian war, Elizabeth Dauphinée (2013) finds her position as an academic confronted by the man who would, in usual academic writing, have been described as her 'key informant'. He challenges her: "you're building your whole career on what I lost, and you never came to even ask me

what it was like" (Dauphinée, 2013, p.167). Coming to terms with the realisation that she built a successful career on the trauma of others, Dauphinée's rejection of traditional academic emotional distance by writing the self (Coffey, 1999) into the story of the research forces her readers to confront how we design, implement and disseminate work based on the lives of the 'other'.

> *Violence must be quantifiable in your world. It must count bodies, burned houses, livestock, and graves – lost libraries, churches and synagogues, mosques. It must count the flood of refugees driven across the border from their own fields into those of others – into fields that do not want to shelter them. You have no scale with which to weigh the contents of heart or soul. And so, you can identify victims – static, immobile entities – but you have not asked yourself about the violence the committer of violence has done to himself, and you have not bothered to theorise that (Dauphinée, 2010, p. 800).*

Although the narrative form of Dauphinée's *Politics of Exile* (2013) contrasts with the theoretical exegesis of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, both scholars place themselves within the research through anthropology, offering a commitment to understanding the human experience from a position of humility and humanity. Critical anthropological enquiry encourages people to reflect on their 'situationality to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it' (Freire, 1970, p. 90). Within the academy, this forced me to question practices of engaging in academic scholarship that would encounter suffering and trauma and report on the most raw cases of human existence through disconnected prisms of significance, objectivity, replicability and rigour, rather than empathy, care or humanity. Along with Freire's call to act upon being challenged, Dauphinée's critique of academic research became a critical backdrop to the final context – exploratory research with a low-income community in South Africa.

Having established connections with a group that had developed community-led initiatives to reduce gender-based violence, we gathered in a two day workshop to explore our work together on understanding their approaches to community-led learning and recovery. I recalled Freire argue 'investigators… never forc[e] themselves, but act as sympathetic observers with an attitude of understanding towards

what they see' (Freire, 1970, p. 91, emphasis in original), establishing the foundation for Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Torres, 1992; Macdonald, 2012) through his exposition of power, inequality and the possibilities offered by community-led development. Despite the many examples of PAR in practice, anthropologists have found themselves 'troubled about how best to do this work', questioning how to balance institutional constraints within the academy, practitioners' knowledge and situated, lived knowledge (Schultz, 2014, p. 228). However, revisiting Freire and Dauphinée during my time in South Africa, also exposed the lack of emotion in accounts of participatory and community-based research that left me unable to explain the work we wanted to do together in traditional language of academic work:

> *I know there's something different, magical, transformative here, but it doesn't fit within the 'normal' academic work… We recognised the moments of connecting to how we feel inside, slowing down. Of looking people in the eye, of sharing in vulnerability and of speaking aloud… Today made me realise the development paradigm is 'I am doing community education', but what if I don't actually understand/speak to what the community is? (author's field notes).*

The final session of the workshop followed what the group often refer to as body work, intended to develop trust, understanding and a shared humanity. The shared reflexive dialogue revealed the community's belief that these activities were essential for them to feel my vulnerability as they shared their 'living testimonies'. I was reminded of Freire's (1970, p. 95) seemingly simple position that investigator and community work 'always as a team' and that the relationship be based on humanity and understanding. However, it was only through critical autoethnography – the practice of stepping back, interrogating my thinking and experiences - that I was able to acknowledge the value of my own vulnerability and emotions to co-creating disruptive and transformative research.

Writing the self into the representation of community-based research by thinking with autoethnography encouraged me to consider how my presence in the field impacts the researcher and the community (Coffey, 1999), and could respond to calls for a commitment to praxis within the academy (Crowther, Galloway & Martin, 2005). As a developing researcher, bringing together Freire's exposition of power

within community education and research with Dauphinée's (2010, 2013) example of purposeful autoethnography challenges the dualism of the 'researcher' and 'researched', demanding a deeper interrogation of the emotional work associated with critically engaged scholarly investigation. For me, much of the emotional work centred on a growing discomfort with the dominant representations of 'success' in education and research, along with a commitment to scholarly activism and the exploration of the many other possibilities of knowledge and ways of knowing. Reimagining discomfort as pedagogically productive (Underhill, 2019b) generates new ways of thinking about research practices (such as 'participation') where embodied and lived experiences are key to continuous, shared and mutual learning. Freire shows us this recognition of humanity within research is critical to education and knowledge, from conceptualisation to practice. In the next and concluding section, I return to Freire's important linking of education to the human experience through the notion of activist-scholarship, summarising how autoethnography has enabled my journey towards becoming an activist, scholar and researcher who advocates for a reimagined approach to educational research as a form of Freirean living pedagogy.

## Conclusion: Activist-scholarship as Freire's living pedagogy

This paper invites further interrogation of the disconnect many educators feel between 'classroom focuses and the world out there' (Benford, 2015, p. 44), suggesting that to ignore the emotional character of our work is to strip education and research of their connection to the human experience. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exposed many ways ideas and practices of education dehumanise both the oppressed and the oppressors, a recognition that reinforces this paper's call to employ critical autoethnography to understand our role as educators and researchers in the (de)humanisation process and how this shapes us and the students and communities with whom we work.

In my case, Freire's language was initially confronting, and necessarily so. His direct challenges were key to recognising the politics of schooling and understanding that being troubled by some of the educational practices was the first stage in becoming an activist-scholar. The term activist-scholarship has gained growing traction since the early 2000s, particularly within the humanities, offering an identification for those

who 'see the value in radical education and the public debate of ideas which challenge the norm' (Chatterton, 2008, p. 421). Although there is clearly a wealth of historical and contemporary literature and theorising on the various notions of transformative social change in a range of academic disciplines, the neoliberal university and marketisation of academic work from research funding to publishing practices arguably constrains ideas and imaginations (see Connell, 2013). Indeed, Choudry (2020, p. 29) highlighted the significant difference between producing knowledge within and for the university in 'self-referential loops of academic scholarship' and academia as 'a space that can be inhabited, occupied, and its resources used for valuable political work' (2020, p. 40), a reflection that is important when considering how ideas are shaped. The feminist movement, for example, was advanced by activist-scholars within different disciplines drawing on women's lived experiences to give voice to the 'concerns of women and girls… to 'reframe' how these issues are perceived and analysed in policy discussions' (Price, 2002, p. 143). However, given academic scholarship remains gendered and racialised (Behl, 2019), even critically engaged enquiries are shaped by unseen structural and systemic conditions that constrain both the content of knowledge and the processes through which it is produced and, as Ball (2012, 2015) notes, reported and measured.

Although qualitative methodologies have been critical to giving voice to marginalised groups by recognising ways of knowing 'that celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' (Mason, 2006, p. 1), participatory research has been critiqued for reproducing unequal power relations within communities and the research process itself, eventually becoming co-opted into hegemonic development practice (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). The shift to co-production in educational research (Bell & Pahl, 2018) can be viewed as a form of methodological resistance to the 'regular army' of quantitative research (Reinharz, 1990, p. 294), but we cannot be complacent. Critical autoethnography is one tool educational researchers can draw upon to continuously interrogate practices such as participatory research and co-production more deeply and critically to keep questioning how imaginations of ideas, knowledge, practice *and* research evolve and the implications.

My story of activism, education and research come together through Freire to illustrate how adult education is critical to understanding the possibilities for transformative education and research. Freire brings

these spaces together by giving us tools through which to critically engage and reflect. This enquiry shows that becoming an activist-scholar develops through experiences of 'challenging, inspiring and innovating' (Chatterton, 2008, p. 421), learning to reimagine education and research through a living pedagogy where discomfort, troublesome emotions and lived experience continuously pose new questions and imaginations, and are written into the process of reflexivity. As a form of activist-scholarship, this framework asks educators and researchers to question ideas of knowledge and methodology, and to consider how to create a more engaged practice within 'an academic world that encourages a scholar's 'achievement' – measured and evaluated in specific ways that reinforce and reward individualism and competition' (Choudry, 2020, p. 40). However, Freire's exile should serve as a reminder that writing ourselves into the story of how we conceptualise, practice and engage is a political commitment: being willing to take risks with more than our place in the academy's grading and ranking systems (Choudry, 2020) is the foundation of a critical ethic for research and reimagining the possibilities of education from a critical, radical and revolutionary position.

This paper aimed to contribute an autoethnographic account of how educators continue to draw upon Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to understand contexts, practices and possibilities of education and academic research. The process deepened my commitment to Freire's pedagogy and Freirean principles by entering into a dialogic 'encounter' (Boler, 1999) with my own lived experience of education and continued learning, forcing me to question what this means for how I engage in academic scholarship, community-based research and university teaching. The autoethnographic approach argues that educators need to draw on their discomfort to look beyond how we understand education by considering a significant and urgent proposition: how we work to do the work to understand education and our imaginations of what and how it might become.

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# Annunciation and denunciation in Paulo Freire's dialogical popular education

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*I consider in this paper the question of balance in popular education between what we can call annunciation and denunciation, inspired by the work of Paulo Freire. By annunciation, I mean the role of love, affirmation, encouragement and profound encounters with otherness; by denunciation, I have in mind the spirit of critique and challenge to the established order of things. In the process, I question the marginalisation of liberation theology in Paulo Freire's work among some radical educators. There has, I suggest, been a sundering of spirituality, and especially religious insight, from rational enquiry in the academic mainstream, which has influenced readings of Freire. Modernity has privileged intellectualism and critical rationality as the only valid way of knowing; matters of faith and varieties of religious experience have correspondingly been privatised.*

***Keywords:*** *secularism, religion, capitalism, critical spirit*

## Introduction: recovering the lost dimensions of Freire's work

I consider in this paper a question of balance in popular education between what we can call annunciation, on the one hand, and

denunciation, on the other. A balance that can shape learner experience, for better or worse, in struggles for radical change, individually and collectively. By annunciation, I mean the role of love, affirmation and potentially profound, agentic encounters with otherness in existentially significant forms of learning; by denunciation, a spirit of critique and fundamental questioning of the established order of things. In the process, I challenge the neglect or marginalisation of the spiritual, and above all, liberation theology in Paulo Freire's work. There has, I suggest, been a sundering of spirituality from rational enquiry in the academic mainstream. Modernity has privileged intellectualism and critical rationality as the only valid way of knowing; matters of faith and varieties of religious experience have been privatised.

There can correspondingly be an overly rigid secularisation of educational experience, and a denial of religious inspiration, bringing a danger of hermeneutical reductionism and ontological sterility, as well as a psychological restriction. Freire developed a living, vibrant, loving religious as well as secular perspective within popular education, doing justice to the richness, complexity and existential challenges of ordinary human beings. He strove to establish the right balance between critique, and affirmation and encouragement, between love and critical action in the world. The roots of his liberation theology lie of course in profound inequalities, injustice and violence against the poor in Latin America, and more widely, as well as the conservatism and corruption of the Catholic Church. He was to insist provocatively that the poor were given the great gift of epistemological privilege within liberation struggles. They knew what it was like to suffer, bringing them closer to a suffering, crucified Christ. And thus, to understanding, experientially, what the priorities might be for wider human flourishing.

Popular education, for Freire, was an agentic, profoundly spiritual as well as material encounter within humanly and ecologically embodied historical processes, like capitalism. The biblical narrative of the annunciation symbolised history turned upside down: new life and hope being found not among the wealthy and privileged but incarnated in the experiences of a poor Palestinian girl from a backwater of the Roman Empire. The symbolism of her story is one of new, maybe divine, loving, spiritual and, critically, emancipatory potential entering the depths of being, providing profound resources of hope for a whole humanity. A story of transcendence in imminence, power in the lowly, and ecstatic

poetry in the Magnificat (Luke 1, 46-55; Luke 4, 18-19). Paulo Freire drew inspiration from the Austrian born theologian Martin Buber's (1937) I/Thou dynamics; of the divine potential in everyone in good enough relationships. Drawing on Freire's inspiration, I bring into the frame two in-depth narratives of the lived experience of actual and potential transformation in the lives of specific learners and consider the symbolic interplay of annunciation and denunciation, for them, on the margins.

There can, to repeat, be a tendency, among Western educators, and in the wider academy, to neglect the theological grounding of Freire's work (see, for example, Mayo, 2004). Freire's deep Catholic religious faith is easily overlooked or is seen, by radicals, as an unnecessary transcendental encumbrance when interpreting his work (McClaren, 1994). After all, the Catholic Church's patriarchal abuses, its demonstrable seduction by power and privilege, its too frequent alliance with colonialism and the abuse of indigenous, poor and marginalized peoples are well-documented. Think of residential schools in Canada, largely run, on behalf of the Government, by the Catholic Church. Or the abuse of children by priests or of young single mothers tyrannised in Ireland. Irwin Leopando (2017) notes how various education disciples of Freire barely mention his faith and theological inspiration. These are not polite topics for radical academic conversation, nor to be taken too seriously.

There is a problem in referencing religious influences in popular adult education as a whole, where once they had an accepted place (Formenti and West, 2018). Fergal Finnegan (2020), for instance, in enthusiastically reviewing a recent book, in part theologically inspired, by Wilma Fraser (Fraser, 2018) on seeking wisdom in teaching and learning, admits to feeling discomfort at acknowledging the inspiration of religion, even when framed through a feminist lens. The dark history of the church in his native Ireland hovers over his reading. Even when the neglected Goddess of feminine ways of knowing, Sophia, is to the fore, and there is a critical spirit towards patriarchy, colonialism and instrumentalisation in a radical adult education. Despite, as stated, the prominent place of religion in the history of adult and popular education, in various countries, modernist secular judgement can be disdainful (Formenti and West, 2018).

Critical rationality and the intellectual denunciation of oppressive economic, cultural and political forces are what really count, among

academic radicals. Annunciation smacks of outdated transcendental, mystical obscurantism. Love gets a mention (Finnegan, 2021) but pivotal resources of hope lie in intellectual activity, like critical theory, critical realism and/or secular feminism, if oppression is to be challenged. Emotionality, relationality, the complex interplay of inner and outer worlds, and love, may get an occasional mention in the literature of transformative learning, for instance, but the place of religious inspiration can be tentative, even though there are notable exceptions (Tisdell, 2017; West, 2016; 2017; Formenti and West, 2018). To bring Mary, the mother of Jesus, into the frame and the symbolism of the annunciation might seem eccentric. Yet, the symbolism of annunciation: of new life created, however fragile, and of certain kinds of 'transcendental' experience in testimonies of learning can be resonant. As in the blessing of a sunflower turning its head to the sun, touching the heart, maybe soul, on a learning pilgrimage, in a moment of grace (Tisdell, 2017; Formenti and West, 2018). Or when new life is created in the recognition given by an emotionally attuned tutor, in a literature class, which could lead, in alliance with the good symbolic object of literature itself, to agency and appreciation of feminist critique. A spirit of annunciation can be observed, in many and diverse ways, if we are hermeneutically and imaginatively open to such metaphors (Tisdell, 2017; Fraser, 2018; Formenti and West, 2018; West, 1996). In the poetic language of the Magnificat new life and resources of hope are created for everyone, most of all the poor and lowly. Perhaps it is the capacity to see and interpret experience afresh, playfully, like a child as well as an adult, in open, eclectic ways, which really matters (Formenti and West, 2018).

I suggest that the symbolism of the Annunciation both celebrates new, embodied, liberating life alongside the messiness, fragility, ambivalence, and pain of such encounters (Formenti and West, 2018). As learners, as people, in such moments, we may be called to take risks, which are existentially difficult, even frightening. Learning, of any significant kind, tends to be conflicted, agonising, anxiety provoking, if potentially liberating too. We get glimpses, as learners, of new life but are asked to take this largely on trust. Learning, as psychoanalyst Deborah Britzman (2003) notes, is often rendered in idealised ways, emptied of human conflict, of hate and ambivalence, as well as love. We need a more inclusive, imaginative, reflexively aware as well as critical sensibility if we are not to close down interpretation prematurely. Quite simply,

Mary's life, or what we know or imagine of it, suggests something altogether darker as well as inspiring in her encounter with profound otherness. Perspectives like these get lost, especially in Marxist readings of Freire's work. It is true that Freire's adoption of Marxism, at a later stage in his development, really mattered to him. Marxism helped him develop a language and interpretive power to unmask the dark, hidden, oppressive workings of capitalism; a theoretical language needed by learners too. Freire was deeply attracted to Marx's analysis of capitalist dynamics, of the power of manipulation, consumption, solipsistic individualism and structural inequalities in human oppression. But, for Freire, Marx consolidated his, Freire's, liberation theology rather than transcended it (Leopando, 2017). It was his religious faith that mattered throughout, even if he would happily have taken communion with both Jesus and Marx alike. To Marx, he may well have said, that in breaking bread together, new life, hope and radical energy, symbolically, were born again. Marx, of course, as a good Jew, would have disagreed but hopefully, they could have exchanged knowing smiles, and allowed a deepening dialogue to develop.

## Freire, liberation theology, annunciation and denunciation.

I want to sketch out some key aspects of liberation theology, and its place and inspiration in Freire's work. Liberation theology, Cox (1984) suggests, is a very distinctive way of interpreting the role of theology in the world. It has less to do, for instance, with making Christianity plausible in the eyes of increasing numbers of sceptics, especially educated Western ones, but seeks instead to confront the political, cultural, economic and religious structures that marginalise or oppress countless peoples around the world. Its purpose becomes one of unmasking the suffering and harm done to people, rather than to convince in some more abstract, theological way about Christian 'truths'. Freire (2000) himself rejected abstract theorising or sectarian proselytizing of any kind. Here lies a conception of God who supports people in making history and in their attempts to become more fully, generously and creatively human rather than instructing them in quiescence. Liberation theologians become, in such terms, conscientising, humanising educators in their own right.

There is method at the heart of the process. It was developed in Catholic Social Action programmes where people – theologians and clerics - spent

many hours working in the slums and poor villages among everyday believers, and those who struggled to believe anything. Christians, it was stressed, must incarnate the Gospel in their everyday situations. These were places where God might reveal his or her purpose and presence in surprising ways, as in one intimate encounter with a young woman in a poor Palestinian community, centuries ago. It is not about pontificating on a body of truths. Rather the first step is charity (or love), then action and commitment to the service of others. It is a world-focused philosophy, identifying the cultural and religious ideologies and assumptions of the everyday. Suffering is not about fate, or a result of personal sin, or God's will per se. God desires solidarity with the poor and a life enhancing praxis, including materially and spiritually. Freire himself, (Cone, 1986), provided a language of empowerment at the grassroots, encouraging people to learn from their own experience of the world. We cannot become more fully human without engaging in critical activity. But first, and fundamentally, is love, the greatest gift of all; or what I call loving self/other recognition, in the spirit of critical theorist Axel Honneth (West, 2016). When this is offered - in generous, respectful, empathic ways – a new spirit is incarnated in individuals and whole groups.

History and lived experience matter greatly in these perspectives. Inner peace – for theologians, clerics, Freirean-inspired educators and those with whom they work - will only be found by engaging shoulder to shoulder with ordinary people, helping to name and challenge oppression in lives and thus better to participate in the making of history, agentically. To do so requires a language of inspiration that works for them. Jesus' actions can only be grasped, experientially, by enacting them to the best of our abilities as educators, in the here and now. To seek to embody love, not in the sense of necessarily feeling warm or affectionate but as a theological virtue through which we seek to love our neighbour as ourselves. Love, for Freire, takes precedence over faith, hope and criticality:

> *'Precisely because humans are finite and indigent beings, in this transcendence through love [that] humans have their return to their source (i.e., God), who liberates them' (Freire, cited in Elias, 1994, p. 38).*

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (Freire, 2000) Freire insisted that love is the foundation of dialogue and a kind of dialogue in itself. Gerri and

Colin Kirkwood (2011, p. 35) write that the possibility of love is 'the simplest point of departure' in Freire's ambition. Humans can only flourish in love and fellowship, solidarity, and dialogue. God participates, in these terms, in the making of history, through loving solidarity with the poor; and in bringing new life and redemption in suffering.

Making history is no painless task. New life and hope do not abolish struggle and suffering but may represent only the beginning of an unfolding process, in which every one of us has a role to play. For Freire educators and leaders must be at one with the people, in communion with them, if any new life is to be made incarnate. Moreover, and provocatively, rebelling against injustice can be a profoundly redemptive act if this includes recognising and restoring the humanity of the oppressor too. Dehumanisation of any kind is death; dialogue between oppressor and oppressed, and processes of self/other recognition, are inherently difficult but can also be profoundly life affirming. Freire's is both a way of peace as well as struggle: to give birth to difficult dialogue, which can help us break the vicious cycles of perpetual violence. But dialogue is often hard and asks no less than everything. Freire in these terms is more Edward Said than Franz Fanon. Said (1993) challenges a rhetoric of blame in the context of colonialism and those who struggle against it (like Freire's landless peasants in North East Brazil). Said (1993, p. 19) seeks an alternative to what he calls 'a destructive politics of hostility', in confrontations between Western and non-Western cultures, imperialism and post-colonial cultures. 'The world', he writes' 'is simply too small to let these [violence and hostility] passively happen' (p. 20). There can be 'a crossing over in discussion, back and forth debate', 'in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the Empire' (Said, 1993, p. 34). Dialogue, in other words is possible, if problematic; remembering that to fight violence with greater violence reminds us of endless cycles of violence in places like Israel and Palestine or the hell of the Committee of Public Safety, so destructive of the hopes and aspirations of 1789 (Bainbridge and West, 2021; Said, 1993).

Moreover, educators must experience their own death and rebirth in learning lives if they are themselves to become more fully human. This is reminiscent, in my eyes, of aspects of the psychoanalytic project. Putting aside social status and intellectual pride or an academic mindset, for instance, is always difficult. As is interrogating our capacity for narcissism and self-delusion. Superiority and illusion must die, however,

as must their version of truth (Jenkins and Betsan, 1999). Learning becomes about being born-again. Conscientisation for Freire, (Freire, 2000), demands, in effect, our own Easter. It is like beautiful but painful childbirth, bringing into the world renewed hope alongside the pain of dying and the anxiety, vulnerability and the absolute dependence of birth and early life (Freire, 2000). Literacy circles, for instance, in poor areas, make sense only as part of humanising the world, the casting out of self-blame and the expulsion of the invasive shadow of the oppressor from the psyche of the oppressed; and in the case of educators and academics, from our own psyches too (Freire, 1998).

In fact, Freire's vision of the new order is a mix of Marxism and liberation theology: a place where no man or woman or group exploits the work of others. All workers serve the well-being of everyone (Freire and Macedo, 1996). There is no abandonment in Freire's theology of critical spirit, but it is dependent on love and self-knowledge if it is to incarnate in humanising ways. It is not about the death of tyrants but their transformation in mutually humanising, if perpetually difficult encounters. Such mutual recognition may be reminiscent of aspects of relational psychoanalysis. Of recognising the ambivalence we may feel towards the other, which can, at first, seem overwhelming. Of anxiety at being exposed to what we do not yet know, in the vague promise there is something better. Of being expected to leave behind older ways of being and seeing, that at least got us this far. Of feeling exposed, and vulnerable, in the face of new existential possibilities that may at first seem remote. Of suspicion, initially, of all those - educators, therapists, or Catholic social activists - who offer promise of new life and a new world, if people can learn to trust. Hate and love, hope and anxiety, the conscious and unconscious are handmaidens together in the difficult business of agentically coming to be, in dialogue, and thus of interpreting and changing the world, and ourselves, afresh.

Collective transformation, for certain kinds of ideologically driven radicals, requires, however, more of reason's light than love or religious faith. It is the material roots of alienation that matter, so to speak, rather than appeals to theology, in whatever form. Reason matters for both recognising as well as challenging capitalism's domain and the false consciousness of consumption, religion and all superstition. Religion, to repeat, in these perspectives is indulgent, escapist self-mystification (Leopando, 2017; Thompson, 1993). Religious perspectives of whatever

kind are considered dogmatic and sectarian, resisting the power of critical conscientisaton (Leopando, 2017). But Freire, I have suggested, saw things very differently. Irwin Leopando (2017) demonstrates how Paulo Freire's lifelong pedagogical work derived from a 'sacred sense of inviolable dignity, worth and well-being of the person' (Leopando, 2017, p. 215). And how, consequently, he strove for more humanised, person-orientated, Godly societies. Freire himself was appalled by the estrangement between secular and religious perspectives. For him, the fundamental difference was between sectarian or fundamentalist conviction, and non-sectarian, dialogical and loving relationship, however imperfect. Secularism itself can take fundamentalist forms.

To understand Freire without reference to his radical religious beliefs is equivalent to reducing the history of socialism to Marxism-Leninism. A cornerstone of Freire's pedagogy was to create open, loving, creative spaces for listening, dialogue and mutual recognition. Transformation happens when thinking is in harmony with heart, intuition, imagination, aesthetics and the working of spirit in relationship (Freire, 1998; Leopando, 2017). Moreover, Freire's teaching reminds us that critical discourse too easily lacks empathy and I/Thou qualities. It may encourage the belief that strength in argument and debate matters most, and the aim is discursive victory, even though the process itself alienates, including those who may be close to our own position. This is what Freud labelled the narcissism of small difference (Leopando, 2017; Formenti and West, 2018).

## Persons in relationship

Freire continues to inspire many people, in the United Kingdom and more widely. Colin and Gerry Kirkwood (see, for instance, Kirkwood G and Kirkwood, C, 2011; Kirkwood, 2012; 2020) provide a case in point. Their work raises questions about the place and nature of annunciation and denunciation in popular education. Of how we all struggle with the interplay of the inspirational and the critical, the material and spiritual, the personal and collective in our lives. Colin Kirkwood's (2020) recent work is a reflexive interrogation of earlier aspirations as a Freirean educator. He aspired, with his wife Gerri, to a Freirean praxis: reflection and action in a virtuous dynamic. For Kirkwood, Freire's idea of theory arose from sustained reflection on practice and from wide reading. Drawing on diverse sources, Freire, in Kirkwood's view, regards practice

as a theoretical activity – a kind of living, thinking, creative adult education – where there is constant flux and reflux from the abstract to the concrete and back again. And where there is a deep rejection of people being treated as objects, submerged in realities, relationships and supposed educational processes that deny their humanity. Freire, Kirkwood maintains, foregrounds people as subjects who can know and act in their worlds to become more fully human in the process, potentially transforming themselves and their reality in the process.

Kirkwood is strong on the material and relational realities of peoples' lives, and how these may constrain, imprison and objectify, but not to the neglect of the spiritual. He draws especially, but not exclusively, on humanist, personalist, socialist as well as religious perspectives. His writing – about a mining community in the North of England, where he once lived and worked, chronicles the everyday grind of keeping on keeping on when money is tight, disability inhibits, miners' strikes demand savage sacrifice, and people are objectified by those in power. It is a world seemingly controlled by others: local vicars, the National Coal Board, bosses, managers, landowners and/or sundry professionals. Hard labour, in the mine or home, grinds you down, alienates, when your productive and reproductive spirit – your humanity - is controlled and manipulated by others.

In the small industrial town, Staveley, where he worked, formal religion could be part of the command-and-control structure. God, 'he', in these terms, was often at the apex of hierarchical authorities that kept, via the 'divine' word, rich men in their castles and poor men at their gates. The interpretation of biblical texts was served as unvarnished truth, the word beyond words, an authority not to be challenged in the light of your own experience. We get glimpses in Kirkwood's account of a powerful spiritual commitment to a more authentic language, grounded in naming the world as it is actually experienced. Language matters deeply as a distinctively human activity, the means by which the oppressions, suffering and human possibility in the world find a voice. Language, Kirkwood demonstrates, is crucial to the vibrant life of a radical newspaper Staveley Now, for instance. He helped nurture this working alongside local people; encouraging the creativity of a working-class poet, perhaps, or writing forged in local dialect, redolent with the guttural, earthy richness of how people actually talk. There is a depth of meaning and authenticity in what becomes in effect an act of creation.

Acts of creative, heartfelt language, composed both personally and communally to challenge the supposed common sense of power.

There is a Freirean-inspired desire not to paper over the cracks when the language of the powerful controls, blinds and oppresses. This is a quotidian challenge. A local poet called Danny Potter wrote for the newspaper. His poem Llanwern embodies a prescient ecological resonance between then and now: of a marsh drained and filled up by shale, *'brought in by lorries nose to tail, jamming up the town. Shale from the tips in valleys there, dumped on hills once green and fair, pity we never moved Aberfan* (in 1966, in that other mining community, in Wales, a massive, unstable slag heap enveloped the local village school and killed countless children). Potter's poem, Kirkwood observes, is vivid, laconic, loving and critical. Authentic words are given to difficult issues when many may not want to know or feel culturally bludgeoned into a kind of silence. Work of this kind incarnates a constant search for truth, dialogue and some liberation – to create new, transcendent life in making sense of suffering.

Kirkwood (2012) has sought his own spiritual illumination in personalism and John Macmurray's idea of persons in relation. Macmurray sought to reinvent and rediscover some of the core meaning of religion, not discard it. Institutional churches had largely abandoned sufficient concern for the material things of life, he argued, replacing this with the opiate of comfort in the afterlife. Macmurray sought instead, like liberation theology, to place the spirit of Christ in relational solidarity with the poor in their material as well as spiritual struggles (Kirkwood, 2012, pp.10-13). Spiritual in giving focus to the constant quest for meaning, to feel understood and fully accepted, not least in an assumed unworthiness. Or in the shared symbolism of a sacrament like the communion. Henry Miller, the writer, a fugitive from what he saw to be the humbug of the Catholic Church, nonetheless insisted that the eucharist symbolised profundity: of how life begins with bread and that we should constantly offer a prayer of thanks. The making and baking of healthy, nourishing and satisfying bread depends on clean air and water, the sun and our own nurture and care-fullness, in contrast to the cellophane wrapped, mass-produced, overly processed bread of the supermarket. In such ways, everyday life can evoke intimations of divinity, if we choose to see (McCarraher, 2019, 643). Materialism often fails to perceive these moments or the deeply felt personal (as well as shared) struggles for

meaning and direction. It too easily reduces the nuance of deeper, subjective and shared human experience to structural levels of analysis, losing humanity, wonder and enchantment in the process.

Here, the heart of the good lies in the quality of our relationships and dialogue with others, including a good universal other, who suffered that we might live. It can be taken and digested as metaphor, which can be sufficient. There is emphasis on the self-realisation of persons materially and spiritually, individually and in community. These ideas share with socialism the goals of liberation and social justice, but not at the price of a triumph of one ideological position over another in a zero-sum game. Or by neglecting the personal, inner life, or the quality of relationships in which we are embedded. There are direct echoes here of liberation theology. The idea of a divine God/good other, whom, in our praxis we can nurture and empower those with whom we work, at a personal and collective level. All in a language uniting the material and spiritual, the personal and collective that challenges the deeply conservative, hierarchical, overly detached black clothed men of much institutionalised religion.

## Annunciation and denunciation: two narratives from auto/biographical, narrative teaching and research

I want to introduce two stories – involving three learners - generated in in-depth auto/biographical inquiry, to consider the place of annunciation and denunciation in the learning lives of two women and a man. The first, an older female student, called Brenda, at a university; the second, a Palestinian woman, called Hanna, who participated in an auto/biographical teaching and research project, as part of a wider European Union funded initiative on cultivating active democratic citizenship and values in teacher education, lasting from 2015-19 (Bainbridge and West, 2021). The third person, linked to Hanna's story, is an Israeli Jew called Elie who served in the Israeli military. Hanna was struggling against historic and contemporary forms of oppression, as a Palestinian, living in the State of Israel. A different oppressive power, so to speak, replacing the Romans in Mary's story. Elie represented both oppressor and oppression.

Auto/biographical narrative inquiry is a process of chronicling people's stories, in a loosely structured, dialogical process, in which the aim is to

create richness and depth of narrative, through trust, respectful listening and reflexivity between researcher/teacher, researched/student. The work is often longitudinal, in Brenda's case over 4 years as she negotiated her way through an Access to higher education programme, on into a university. Donald Winnicott's (1972) notion of a transitional space is a key element in the research process, and for thinking about the kind and quality of space needed for deepening, respectful and open forms of storytelling and dialogue (Merrill and West, 2009; Bainbridge and West, 2021). A transitional space, (it might be in research, or teaching, and could be a literacy circle or university seminar), is where we negotiate who we are and might be, over time, and where love, in the form of recognition, can, when things work well, bring forth new intersubjective life. A moment of annunciation, in short, in profound recognition by a teacher or significant other; and symbolically, in Brenda's case, in a work of literature, transforming her feelings of who and what she was, and might be.

Brenda had been a struggling, non-traditional older student, and she was part of a study on adult learner motivation in higher education (West, 1996). She had learned to love literature, and strongly identified with an abused prostitute when reading Maupassant's short story *Boule de Suif (Suet Pudding),* in preparation for a seminar in the early stages of her time at university. Both the prostitute and Brenda were abused by men. The novel is set in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, and two Prussian officers assault the prostitute in a coach. Brenda told stories of a husband's betrayal, of a mother's control and of always feeling inconsequential in the world. Brenda felt deep solidarity with the prostitute through, in the language of psychoanalysis, projective identification, (in which parts of ourselves are projected into another and can be introjected once more in strengthened, life enhancing ways.). The prostitute herself fought back and kept on keeping on, regardless. Brenda suffered her own hell in university seminars, in a strange habitus, as she experienced tutors looking straight through her as if she did not exist. She felt, at times, no right to be there, as an "ordinary" older female student. However, one tutor encouraged her to speak about Maupassant, at a crucial moment, and she found words and agency to talk about her insights into the novel. The seminar became a place for her, as well as for others, where she felt alive. Being able to tell the story again in the research was a moment of recognition too.

Processes of self/other recognition help explain, in a slightly different language to Freire's, moments like these, or, as Freire might have put it, of "love," in the intuitive solidarity and care of a tutor. Love, as noted, is foundational in human flourishing, in the perspective of critical theorist, Axel Honneth too, as a basis for a more open, less defended presence in the world. Self-respect may come later when we are recognised as a legitimate member of a creative group like a literacy circle or university seminar. In subsequently becoming important to a group, we can experience growing self-esteem, from which we are better able to recognise others and social solidarities can grow (Honneth, 2007; Formenti & West, 2018). A word like annunciation opens us to profounder, if always fragile and contingent transformative processes, encompassing inter-and intrasubjective life. Life animating psyche, creating space for Brenda to appreciate the critical power of feminist analysis of patriarchal oppression, which had initially been difficult to digest. Denunciation in these terms requires annunciation to claim discursive, agentic, intellectual life.

## When Hanna met Elie

The second case is of Hanna and Elie, who were involved in teaching and research among Israeli Jewish and Palestinian educators in very recent times. The work consisted of developing auto/biographical, narrative workshops and research within a European Union financed project to cultivate democratic values and active citizenship in Israeli teacher education. The research has continued into the present, (Bainbridge & West, 2021). There have been interviews and week-long workshops in Canterbury, the latter in 2018 and 2019. A typical workshop involved up to 16 people with an opening round in which participants shared an object of biographical significance, like a photograph, poem, drawing, a piece of music, or even a fountain pen. There was a theoretical and methodological introduction to auto/biographical and narrative methods, agreement reached over ground rules, followed by a role play of a narrative interview, in which one of us, as facilitators, told stories of learning to be a citizen, while a colleague modelled good listening. The whole group discussed the experience, agreed on the interview protocol, and moved into small, deliberately diverse groups of four. Participants interviewed each other and then experimented with being interviewees, interviewers, and observers in turn. Over the course of a week, oral

material was developed into written auto/biographical accounts of how they became citizens and/or politically conscious. Written accounts were produced individually and/or in small groups; everyone presented their writing, and we considered how such methods might be applied in the schools, colleges, and universities where they worked.

The project was haunted, however, by questions of trauma and injustice in the bitterly contested geographical and imagined place called Israel or Palestine. The question of where home and security lie haunts Palestinians like Hanna, as it does many Jews. In Hanna's story, her family were forced to flee Haifa when the Jewish Hagenah (or terrorists in her perspective) arrived to ethnically cleanse their district in 1948. In one of our workshops, she met Jewish Elie in a group of four. Elie's family migrated from North Africa towards the end of the last century. Both Hanna and Elie are partly fictional characters, composites of various stories told to us by several people for ethical reasons, among others, to protect identities. Jewish people suffered of course their own catastrophe of the Holocaust while Palestinians suffered their trauma – Al Nakbah, or the Catastrophe – in the forced displacement of the 1948 war, continuing into the present. Our question was whether and if so, how, it is possible to recognise the other in all their humanity as part of a quest for dialogue, peace and justice, in however a provisional way.

For Hanna, Palestinian and Christian, colonisation encompassed a lost home, forced family migration, and stories of the death of a grandmother in 1948, alongside feelings of continuing humiliation. For Israeli Jews, like Elie, the other, Hanna, is a potential terrorist. Elie's family were made to feel unwelcome as Islamism, he said, and before that pan-Arabism, reared its head. Hanna introduced herself as working in an Arab College of Higher Education near Nazareth. She was an active citizen, working in the field of cultural studies for the preservation of Palestinian history and culture. She talked, later, outside the workshop, of the forced migration. Her immediate family now lives in Nazareth. She talked of her family's desperate search for safety in 1948 and of relatives lost, homes seized, and communities abandoned. The family fled to Nazareth, with other relatives, who were escaping a village, Saffuriyya, close by, being 'ethnically cleansed'. 'Surely Jewish forces would not desecrate a place full of Christian churches, for fear of losing Western support?' Hanna's forebears asked. They were right. She talked too of present humiliations with a relative currently living in Gaza

not being allowed to finish her degree studies in Bethlehem. They were arrested by Israeli defence forces on the way back to Gaza: handcuffed, blindfolded, and left waiting for hours in ritual humiliation. Hanna, in part at least, was talking directly to someone who could well have been her family's oppressor.

Hanna later described her family's lost home in Haifa and concluded with a question:

> *Do you know the novel by Ghassan Kanafani, Returning to Haifa? It's about a couple who did go back to their apartment. They arrived at their old home to find a Jewish Polish family living there. Who in fact had adopted a son they left behind. But they cannot communicate, any of them. There is a wall of silence.*

Elie, an Israeli Jew, told a story of Jewish people in North Africa. Persecution, anti-Semitism, and poverty, combined with the 'Arab struggle', and later Islamist fundamentalism, provoked his family's exodus. But his father was a bully and there was abuse in the family home. Later, like everyone else, Elie was conscripted into the military, deployed to deal with 'terrorist infiltration'. As stated, he could have been the person responsible for the abuse of Hanna's relative from Gaza. But his military experience brought him abuse all over again, this time from sadistic authority figures in the army. Elie quit the military:

> *I was instructed to beat up someone I knew. Not to hold back. That I needed to act like a psychopath. I tried. I put my fists to his face, like a boxer. I breathed deeply but began to tremble. It was not good. I couldn't hit him. He was much smaller than I was. Get out the Commander said, you are no use to us. This is not a (f……) kindergarten…*

What difference can a small experiment in dialogical adult education and research make in such a difficult situation? Where do annunciation and denunciation fit in this space? Can we really create open, in-depth forms of storytelling, where the other feels recognised by an imagined oppressor and s/he becomes more humanised in turn? Can narrative work of this kind offer sufficient glimpses of the other's humanity (in their pain but also courage to participate and take risks), thus creating new life, including space for a critical, intelligent denunciation of what destroys hope? Hannah Arendt (2006), in her book Eichmann in Jerusalem,

distinguishes between evil acts and evil doers. There are far fewer of the latter. Israeli troops are not angels, but they are not all demons either. Maybe, as Hanna got to know more of Elie's story, something good and substantial could have been created between them, in processes of self/other recognition. There were glimpses of new life and hope; of I/Thou qualities of interaction, of deeper intersubjective communication, but it was fragile, and time was short. This no doubt happens in countless Catholic Action programmes, popular and university education, in many places, as well as workshops like ours. But if the work does not always succeed, or is only fleetingly successful, maybe, as in the work of liberation priests and theologians, and almost certainly for Freire in his liberation theology, it is the quest that matters, or as Freire terms it, 'a permanent search' (Freire, in Freire and Freire, (2007, p. 87). It is not that certain kinds of outcomes are unimportant - clean water in social action, perhaps, or speaking and writing that vibrantly challenges received wisdom and incarnates existential truth among the marginalised. Rather that history and liberation theology are always unfinished business. A quest for dialogue and humanisation in a troubled world; a quest for sufficient mutuality so that critical theory and realism are incarnated with a human face, calling us, perpetually, to action.

## Conclusion: a bigger picture

Paulo Freire (1997) talked, with reference to liberation theology of the divinity - the mystery, the provisional and potentially loving humanity in each one of us - that can be liberated in a pedagogy of the heart; and in the quality of our relationship with others and the symbolic as well as the material world (like Brenda, Hanna and Elie above). In dialogue, in I/Thou dynamics, in the existential theology of Martin Buber. In processes of self/other recognition for Axel Honneth. A real community, in Buber's eyes, lay in comradely access to one another, readiness to give to each other, allowing for what we might term spiritual growth where the whole becomes so much more than the sum of individual parts (Leopando, 2017). Martin Buber (1937) insisted that we begin in relationship, not as isolated, solipsistic beings. The key to human flourishing lies in having sufficient I/Thou experience in contrast to dehumanizing I–It objectification. Of being recognized in our human potential by significant others maybe in a literacy circle or research. When the other and we are face to face, the distance between the stranger and self recedes, when I meets Thou. This is a

moment of annunciation, amid the ordinary debris and darkness of lives. In the quest for balance between annunciation and denunciation, the latter, on its own risks bringing demoralisation and eventually nihilism. Annunciation, without criticality, can induce naivete and ineffectualness. Without annunciation, however, in flesh and blood as well as symbolic terms, there is no humanity to do the critical work of composing a better world.

We can, like Freire, view these processes in religious terms. Radical social critics and adult educators, like E.P. Thompson, who was not Christian, argued that dismissal of the religious impulse in social transformation was profoundly ahistorical. We require, he states, in his study of William Blake (Thompson, 1993), a library ticket to the literatures of radical dissent before the rational or humanist enlightenment. We need a ticket too, I suggest, to liberation theology and to understanding its profound, lasting inspiration for Paulo Freire. Intellectualism and critical rationality take us only so far, whether in a university or literacy circle. We need a more holistic sensibility of what it is to be human in personal, spiritual, material, relational and even mystical terms, if we are to make the most of popular education.

'There must be some redemption' Thompson (1993, p. 221) wrote, echoing William Blake, in which the 'selfish loves' diminish and brotherhood (we should add sisterhood) increases (p. 221). Reason or rationality alone are insufficient without love. Pontius Pilate exercised reason, as do what Blake called the 'hirelings' of a genteel, conformist university culture or conventional, hierarchical religion. Something profound, like love, is often absent, then as now: as in Blake's images of Divine suffering, while Hell, and the Beast, lie in abuses of power and narcissistic, materialist illusion. Transformation required 'the affirmatives, in Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience, of 'Mercy, Pity, Truth and Love'. They require moments of annunciation. Freire understood this, profoundly, in the symbolic vision of Mary's encounter with the divine. The poetry and soul of popular, adult or for that matter higher education are easily diminished or lost altogether. Freire leads us to challenge reductionism, fixedness and conformity of whatever kind. We are encouraged, among many things, to be open to a biblical hermeneutic of a powerless God coming to earth, in redemptive solidarity with the poor and despised. Not as an exclusive truth but as, for present purposes, an essential way of re-interpreting Freire, and of

imagining what can and does indeed happen, in popular education, to the humans at its heart.

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# Literacy and transformation: Shedding of spoilt identities

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Marie McNamara

*This paper shares my former literacy learner and friend - Marie's journey - and my own. We explore critical approaches to education and beyond and how they offer a potential space for transformation not just for the learner but for the teacher. The ripple impact has supported us on our journey across nearly two decades. Our relationship was forged by a learner driven, and socially empowering model (Freire, 1993; Barton et al 2003; Duckworth, 2013, 14; Duckworth and Smith 2017, 2018) which takes into consideration the cultural, psychological and educational factors related to the Learners and their lives and driven by creating critical spaces for organic transformative tools for consciousness-raising (Freire 1995) and a caring space where hope can act as a change agent that fuelled our life. In this paper we argue that the aforementioned encourages dialogic communication between teachers and literacy learners whereby learners, teachers and communities can share stories, ask questions, analyse and subsequently work through effective and meaningful strategies to take agency over their lives, enhancing their situation and empowering them in the public and personal domains of their journeys.*

***Keywords:*** *literacy, transformation, dialogic, stories and agency*

## Literacy is personal

At a personal level literacy lies in the development of self-identity; in our social, cultural and emotional life, happiness and well-being. Returning to education offers a means to develop their literacy skills. Literacy is very much linked with subjectivity and how one views their self-worth in both the private and public domains of their lives. When considering the vernacular literacies Marie brought into the classroom, they were united in what Shirley Brice Heath (1983) describes as their 'way with words' which did not privilege her literacy practices at school or within the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS). This influenced her experience at school, the 'choices' she had or did not have and her subsequent journeys as adults.

## Literacy and empowerment

There is a strong educational tradition of literacy and empowerment. Paulo Freire's (1996) seminal text The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, addresses who and what education is for and whose group interests are promoted. Connecting literacy with critical pedagogy, he examines the ideologies of classroom practice and the 'banking theory' of knowledge; the banking concept, is essentially an act that hinders the intellectual growth of learners by positioning them as passive "receptors" and "collectors" of information that have no real connection to their lives.

Within this theory, he argues, traditional pedagogical practice is a means to fill the learners with information/knowledge that serves to maintain the status quo of structural inequalities and unjust hierarchies of power. The learners come to accept the dominant hegemony (we employ Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), a leading Marxist thinker, who used the term hegemony to signify the power of one social class over others, for example, the bourgeois hegemony. It embodies not only political and economic control but also the ability of the dominant class to assign its own way of viewing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'natural'. Gramsci's ideas have influenced popular education practices which we have drawn upon; these include the adult literacy and consciousness-raising methods of Paulo Freire in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1996) and methods of participatory action research (PAR)) which, rather than empowering working-class students, works to demoralise and label them as unknowing (Freire 1993: 64). In

Freire's challenge to the 'banking' system, he recommended a critical pedagogy model for teaching adult literacy. Educationalist theorists have developed this approach (see Giroux 1997; Lankshear and McClaren 1992; Lankshear 1993; Shor 1992, 1993; Duckworth and Smith 2020). They have challenged prescriptive approaches to curriculum designs that do not consider the history or background and needs of learners. These non-critical curriculums place dominance on an instrumental approach, ignoring the political, social and economic factors that have conspired to marginalise the learners and the communities in which they live. A critical model of moves towards the learner being the co-producer of knowledge. In doing so it shifts away from teacher-directed, top-down, commonly imposed and standardised assessments that prescribe the same for all students, regardless of their ability, values, ethnicity, history, their community requirements or their specific contexts. Instead, it takes an egalitarian approach, whereby there is a sharing of power between the teacher and the student in learning, the curriculum, its contents and methods. Freire (2006) proposed to do this via 'culture circles'. A 'culture group' is a discussion group in which educators and learners use codifications to engage in dialectic engagement for consciousness raising, liberation, empowerment and transformation. Education for liberation provides a forum open to the empowerment of learners, teachers and the community, while also providing opportunities for the development of those skills and competencies without which empowerment would be impossible. Such emancipatory practices encourage autonomy and critical thinking, exposing spaces where learners and communities can ask questions, analyse and subsequently work through effective and meaningful strategies to enhance their situation. Rather than being passive pawns of the system, they have the opportunity to be actors of their future and active members of their communities. In order to develop these skills, linking with New Literacy Studies (NLS) offers a socially situated model which, like the Freirian 'culture circle' challenges dominant models of literacy, for example replacing the economic driven model associated with workforce training, productivity and the notion of human capital (institutional literacies) with a socio-cultural model which includes vernacular literacies. It recognises that literacy practices are formed in a number of contexts and domains, for example: social class, gender and basic skills revisited the private domain of home and the public domain of schooling. In their book, Local Literacies Barton and Hamilton (1998)

explore the many literacy activities people are involved in across the different domains of their life. A key aspect of their findings is that people have 'ruling passions' which can be a key into where, why and what literacy practices matter to them. Learners 'ruling passions' offers a means to recognise and celebrate the learners' practices. Whether the practice is drawing, words, poetry or photographs like the 'Culture Circles', NLS draws on the literacies from the learners' lives. These artefacts are a way to develop a dialogue, leading to an analysis of the concrete reality represented by the learners and facilitating them to address inequalities in and through their lives.

The politics of literacy and its link to learner identity and empowerment is explored in our study, from the standpoint of how the learners' everyday lives have been shaped by the lack of and development of dominant literacies. Part of the praxis of the research is to draw on and disseminate participatory and democratic pedagogical practices as a way of countering the dominant models while questioning how power and knowledge are valued, what counts as literacy and what does not, who benefits from this and who is marginalised (Duckworth and Smith 2017. 18, 22). The impact of dominant literacies on the learners' journeys are revealed and the use of how a critical curriculum can empower the learners and lead to emancipation and transformation in their personal and public journeys (Duckworth 2009, Duckworth and Smith, 2018; Smith and Duckworth 2022).

## Methodology

The research draws on participatory research methodologies where the oppressive qualities of the 'researcher' and the 'researched' relationship were challenged. Participatory research has emerged in recent years as an approach which strives to be liberating and not controlling (see Habermas 1974) for social transformation, and 'consciousness raising' (see Freire 1996) among the underprivileged and minorities, where an ever-growing of labelling and stigma is given by society and amplified by the media (see Beresford et al. 2002). This approach was particularly important as the research group identify themselves as 'stigmatised', 'left behind' and 'caught in a stinkin' trap of despair'. PAR, with its alignment to social action, enlightenment (see Habermas 1974: 113) emancipation (see Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998), adult education intervention, development and change within communities.

## Par and Freire

PAR and Freire PAR builds on critical pedagogy put forward by Freire as a response to traditional, formal models of education in which the teacher takes the power and imparts information to the students, who are passive, empty vessels, waiting to be filled. This model fails to recognise the powerful knowledge learners bring into the classroom with them, such as socially situated knowledge (see Barton and Hamilton 2008). In this vein the main goal of PAR, as identified previously, is for both researcher/practitioner and participant to work in egalitarian ways and develop effective dialogue and critical consciousness and, in the case of this study, a critical curriculum which facilitates this. It is very important that the participants are involved in the research process, the goal of PAR being democratic, participatory, giving a voice to the oppressed and often silenced. It is worth drawing on Weiler's (1991) feminist critique of Freire, which recognises the strengths of his work whilst also addressing areas which would benefit from being developed. One such area is to suggest a move away from his universal claims, instead placing each study in its own political, economic and historical context. We have attempted to do this by providing an overview of the aforementioned including that of adult literacy and education (Duckworth and Smith, 2018. 2019). In an age of neo-liberalism and globalisation, the Freirean concept, based on the premise that by overcoming oppression people will move towards true humanity, is problematic. Indeed, transformation and empowerment of the learners/teacher may be individually focused rather than community bound, leading to the oppressed becoming the oppressors and a failure to engage in social justice and liberation. Whilst realising areas of Freirian concepts may need developing for this study, We are also very much aware that education was a setting where people acquire an awareness of the structural inequality and their struggle under a dominant ideological system (Freire 2004). This awareness provided the opportunity to challenge hegemony and engage in an 'approach to social change which puts knowledge back into the hands of the people' (Heaney cited in Byrne 2005: 179). This connected with our intention to foreground social justice at the core of the undertaking and a sense that educational research (like education itself) should have an important role to play in addressing social inequality. As such we strove to convene research discussions in a safe space, a space moreover that shared characteristics with critical pedagogical space.

This critical approach to research was essential in challenging power positions whereby the sharing of stories was driven by care and love and not intellectual capital based on authority.

The sharing of our stories makes possible connections between these local stories with national and international audiences. In that sense, the project contributes to the creation of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), which can foster networks of collective resistance in the field of adult literacy and education that cross local and national boundaries.

## Life history

Life history and biography provided important entry points (Goodson & Sikes 2001; Duckworth, 2013). As our life stories are closely bound up with our upbringing and geographical spaces we inhabit and continue to inhabit. Sharing my story whilst Marie shared hers was an important principle in the collaborative practice of gathering the data. This reciprocity was a crucial aspect of the collaborative approach. Goodley et al. (2004: 167) comment that:

> *Researching life stories offers opportunities for drawing on our own and others' narratives in ways that can illuminate key theoretical, policy and practice considerations.*

Listening to our life stories provided insights into how our lives were intertwined. It also exposed the transformative moments and ripples of impact on family and community.

## Our story

Our historical thread and geographical landscape linked Marie and me to each other through the sharing of location and history. Resistance, conformity and struggle that Marie and I face and, in some instances, continue to face, are threaded through our historical narrative into the fabric of our lives; shaping both myself and Marie's journey. Oldham is where we grew up. Marie grew up with seven brother and sisters in a council house; I grew up with three younger brothers in a council house fifteen minutes walk away We went to the local comprehensive schools and gave birth to our children at The Royal Oldham Infirmary. We met when I was teaching her at a literacy class based in a local Further Education College in the Northwest of England. Marie was a single

mum with three children and arrived at college after splitting up with her partner who had been violent and 'uncaring' to Marie.

> *I was devastated when he left. I loved him and he didn't care about anyone but himself. I felt broken in so many ways it made me feel sick. Some days I couldn't get out of bed I just felty so hopeless and a wreck*

Marie returned to education because she had struggled with reading and writing – her confidence and self-esteem was at rock bottom after the breakup of her relationship; the job centre had offered her an additional fifteen pounds (on top of her benefits) because she was a single mum, so she took the opportunity.

> *I really didn't know what to expect. I hadn't a clue, but I knew the extra fifteen quid would make a difference to the kids*

Returning to education was not an easy step though, she had experienced a negative time at school where she felt singled out and diminished because she came from a poor family and her family name had a reputation for being poor. Marie described how she was singled out for being poor

> *If you come from big families you were just pushed to the side. I remember being really good at badminton, but 'cos I was a McNamara, come from a big family I couldn't go on the team. Anyhow – we could do what we want the teachers weren't interested in the end . . . It was 'cos we were the ones who stood out 'cos of our clothes. Yer know they're looking down on yer 'cos yer wearin' hand-me-downs. Yer feel dirty somehow, daft really 'cos all our clothes has been washed, they were old that's all. Yer can't wash the tattiness out I suppose.*

We both shared how we experienced labelling at school. I described how to Marie how

> *I had been singled out because I would take Friday's off to help my mum with my three younger brothers and go to the wash house to do their washing. I loved being out of school and doing something useful to help my mam but that was not acceptable, I felt on the outside of school, I had mates, but my head was always somewhere else and often on the work I had to do at home and what was*

*happening at home. Which was a chaotic place to grow up in. At primary school I first felt the physical and symbolic violence from the teachers. I stood out at school because my mum would put me in coloured socks and my dad would cut my fringe short. I can remember a dinner lady saying, 'who's done that to your fringe?' That's how it was; you didn't go to the hairdressers. I felt the pain of physical violence when one of the male teachers threw a board duster at me for speaking, it hit my head hard. That memory is vivid because I felt humiliated and embarrassed. I also remember feeling confused and not knowing what the teacher wanted from me when she said I needed to 'pull up my socks'. I remember those words so well, because at nine I took them literally. I looked down at my socks and she laughed. When I arrived at secondary school, I was wearing a pair of shoes two sizes too big because they were in the sale and real leather. With a uniform from the market and Tib Street in town, I fitted in with the kids from the council estate like me. We stood out from those who lived in the private houses, with their leather modern shoes and matching bags. The divide was there for all to see from day one and we all knew it. It was a male teacher who called me to the front of the lesson when I was 13 and hit the back of my legs hard – they bruised. He'd do that to the girls. I was too frightened to tell my mum and dad in case they shouted at me for making him do it. That's the way it was, teachers were to be looked up to and if they hit you there must be a reason. The reason for me was talking to the girl next to me – as simple as that. When you're being hit at home and at school it begins to be the norm. I didn't question it, they had the power and I had none.*

My personal position as an 'insider' with 'insider knowledge' of marginalised communities was a key motivation to becoming a basic skills tutor; my own life-history has greatly influenced the commitment I have for finding opportunities to enable others to take agency and aspire to reach their potential.

Everything Marie and I had kept hidden was suddenly exposed. Everything we felt; shame was being challenged as we and other members of the class realised that we were not alone in our experiences made us feel like outsiders to the educational system. Our words and the emotions embedded in them provided us with a shared dialogue and wider context to turn this shame into shared liberation.

While Marie continued to work in a factory until their 30s, it was surrounded by the red brick of Danimac Mill that I found my great escape. At 16 I'd left behind the local comprehensive school where I'd spend most of the day staring out at the clueless sky. I couldn't wait to be grown up, working and earning. The school bell ringing for the last time sees me and my mates breaking free, as we run through the green gates. Full of laughter and screams, we chase one another across the school fields, egging4 each other's white shirts. Excited to be leaving the classroom behind, I didn't realise back then that I'd never see some of those kids that I'd grown up with again. Our lives would fork in different directions, like the signs that took us on bus routes in and out of town. On leaving school my first two jobs were at a local factory on a Youth Training Scheme paying 25 pounds a week. No more laughs with my classmates; no more promising skies to stare at, only the tapping away of time and hope. I was aware that certain people had power, which was usually male managers, and others (mainly women), appeased them and did the clerical work. Unlike the laughs and shouts I'd hear from the men on the factory floor, there was also an expectation that we women would work in silence and only speak to bosses when spoken to. I was no better or worse than any of the women around me, but I couldn't accept my lot without a fight. Rather than the factory becoming a way of life, it offered me resistance and a determination to challenge being unskilled and without qualifications. Starting at the local Further Education College was liberating and filled me with endless possibilities. When I reflect now on my own experiences as a young woman growing up in this environment, I realise how these fit with the analysis offered by Skeggs (1997, 2004); Walkerdine (1989, 2001) and the concepts of Bourdieu (1993). My move away from the workplace was collecting an initial identity and then when I went to college, a collective identity away from the men who managed the spaces in which I worked, and the women who were subservient to them. In many ways, the conditions of oppression and work (although manifesting in different forms) remains as it did in the Industrial Revolution, a model where there are those who give orders (have power) and those who obey (become powerless)

Marie shared that going back into education after a negative experience of school had enabled her to make choices that were previously 'outside anything dreamed of' in life. Through this, literacy classes became a catalyst for big change in the opportunities and the educational and lifecourse trajectories of her family. As she stated:

> *I don't care if (my son) stays in education till he's thirty years old. I want him educated because education gives you power and that's what I want my children to have. I want them to be able to make choices. Definitely, I want them to be able to… you know… say, 'Well actually I don't want to do that, I want to do that. And I want to go and live there, I don't want to stay there and live there. And I want to have a car and I want to do this.' Just choices… I want them to be able to go to Costa and get a coffee. Something I could never do… that's what education will give him: choices.*

Marie –now a staff nurse – still lives on the same estate. For Marie then, returning to education was not about abandoning her background or turning her back on the community that she comes from. This is vital in exposing that literacy was much more than just the ability to read, it is the ability to 'read the world' and even though circumstances, which include remaining in the communities that have historical anchored down and been patholol gised, from the empowered position these communities become enriched. Marie is still the same person, it is her financial and economic security and her perspective on the world that has changed. In Marie's case, it also enhances social cohesion within her community: through enhancing the agency of the individual, it benefits the family and, beyond that the home community.

*I was able to relate to Marie and how they had transferred the caring capital accrued* in childhood to gain a job in adulthood. Having helped my mam with the cleaning and looking after younger brothers, I felt that I could be a nurse and care for patients. I did not see myself as academic, but I knew I was a hard worker and was not squeamish. I suppose I was also keen to realise my mum's dreams: she had always wanted to be a nurse. I must say that when I did my training I was not based at the university, I was based in the hospital – on the job training if you like. There was a sense that when I was training to become a nurse, I had become respectable. Gone was the girl who rarely went to school; here was a young woman who was committed and who was working towards a responsible job, a career that required three years training. I was ecstatic and couldn't believe my luck, me Vicky Duckworth, a nurse. Imagine if my old mates from school could see me, I was somebody now. At the age of 18 laying out my first dead body and washing it with dignity was a real wake up call to life and death and having respect for people in

both. Transitions My transition from midwife to teacher was mediated by a degree. I never imagined I'd do a degree: like many of the learners I never thought about it, let alone considered it a real possibility, but I had thought about travelling, a lot. So, after a year of working as a midwife and sister of a nursing home, whereby I was delivering babies at one end and laying out the elderly at the other, with four thousand pounds saved a friend and I went around the world. On my travels I met people from all walks of life, and through education and travel my world opened up. All walks of life merged together: the very wealthy who I'd called toffs, people who meditated early in the morning, waking me up with their chanting, people, all sorts who were, like me, looking for adventure. In the field of travel, we escaped the fields of our past and we were all on the same footing. For that time, we shared the same hopes and aspirations, to see the beauty of the Taj Mahal in India, the public field of work 127 Golden Palace in Bangkok, the Barrier Reef in Australia and the list goes on. This connection in time and space bonded us. We were young and wanted to grab the future together. Travelling and meeting so many different people inspired me to do a degree and voluntary work in literacy. I suppose after going into the world I wanted to help others to reach their potential and question their beliefs and assumptions just like I had. I wanted to make a difference to the lives of people who had been brought up in communities like mine. I still do. On listening to the learners' stories, many years after I travelled, I was reminded of how important the bonds of friendship are in shaping our journeys across different fields.

Our journeys highlight how educational journeys empower people by increasing their chances of getting jobs, staying healthy and participating fully in society (Duckworth and Smith, 2019). But more than improving the life chances of the family, the literacy classes changed the way Marie sees the world. For women who are marginalised and often silenced, access to literacy offers the tools which can enable them to transform their lives.

## Class still matters

The notion that class identities have diminished in significance over recent decades is also a key feature of contemporary social theory. This may be seen as a result of the cultural shifts aligned with individualisation, de-traditionalisation and post-modernisation (for examples, see Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Bauman 1987, 1998). The idea of class going out of fashion fitted with post-modern thought, which viewed the world as

transcending economic and social relations to life chances, and in turn educational success. Our research exposes that class is still relevant and challenges the trend of academic dismissal of class and labour to fix its oppressive state and thus attempt to surmount the situation of oppression critically with a view to facilitating its transformation (Freire 1996). that support this. Our stories reveal how teachers, even when constrained by performative curricula, can open up a space for critical reflection and dialogue that facilitates learners to challenge notions of what literacies are. In this space, through action and opposition, they offer resistance to passivising, knowledge-transmission approaches to education, instead catalysing hope, overturning the negative impact of a classificatory education system and allowing students to rearticulate the relationship between their education and their futures.

Marie describes how

> *I felt valued at college and heard, like my life and what I did mattered. You took me to the local market to get a new bag. We talked over a coffee and shared stories and that helped me realise you may have been the teacher, but you were no different than me. And if you had passed exams and was from a similar background as me then so could I. You believed in me by listening, talking and caring and that helped me believe in myself. I was broken but I started to heal and find me. I now can believe in my patients on the ward and make a difference in their lives. It's like the magic of the classroom you taught in goes on really in my role now as a nurse.*

The telling and sharing of stories is a way to share what has happened and make the connection with someone who will not judge, but who comes from a similar background. Freire's notion of a 'culture group', a discussion group in which educators and learners use codifications to engage in dialectic engagement for consciousness raising, liberation, empowerment and transformation is a powerful driver for this being for liberation provides a forum open to the empowerment of learners, teachers and the community, while also providing opportunities for the development of those skills and competencies without which empowerment would be impossible. Such emancipatory practices, driven by sharing histories enable us to recognise we are not alone, reclaim spoilt identities to ones of empowerment and hope and take agency over our lives.

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# Paulo Freire: A necessary voice

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2021 marks the 100th anniversary of Paulo Freire's birth. Born on September 19, 1921, in Recife, a city in the northeast of Brazil, the educator is one of the most important Brazilian intellectuals, with enormous international repercussion.

Paulo was preparing a national literacy program to be implemented by the progressive government of President João Goulart when he was arrested and exiled by the protagonists of the civil-military coup of April 1964. The program would be launched, inspired by the result of the experience with about 400 youngsters and adults, carried out the previous year in the city of Angicos, also in the Northeast of the country, under the educator's coordination and inspiration. The experience ended up gaining national and international notoriety not only because the method used would accomplish the literacy process in forty hours, but also because it would contribute to forming citizens who would be more aware of their rights and willing to participate in order to defend them. The coup plotters intuited that the program could destabilize the established powers. It would be necessary, therefore, to ban and delegitimize the method, as well as its author.

A Christian, Paul and his family lived in poverty during the 1930s as a result of the economic crisis, especially after the death of his father in 1934. Thanks to his mother's efforts, he attended a good school as a scholarship student, which gave him the basis to become a lawyer (a profession he abandoned) and dedicate himself to the teaching profession. He worked with workers, in popular culture movements, in pastoral work and as a university professor at the University of Recife, when he began to assist literacy programs such as the one in Angicos. He married Elza in 1944, also an educator and, with her, he had five children.

He went into exile with his family for 16 years, passing through Bolivia, Chile, USA and Switzerland, returning to Brazil in 1980, recognized internationally as one of the most important educators in the world for his ideas and experiences. Among other works, in Chile, he supported the literacy campaign of the Frei government, besides working with peasants. It was there that he wrote his most famous book, Pedagogia do Oprimido (Pedagogy of the Oppressed). In the USA, as a guest professor at Harvard University, he followed several social movements and visited the universities' extension services; while in Geneva, he supported the governments of countries that had just emerged from the Portuguese colonial regime, starting in 1975. During the last ten years of his exile, at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Paulo had made more than 150 international trips to more than 30 countries.

Upon his return to Brazil, he became a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and the State University of Campinas. In late 1988 he was invited by Mayor Luiza Erundina of the Workers' Party to be her Secretary of Education in the first municipal elections after the new post-dictatorship Brazilian Constitution. He died on May 2, 1997.

Paulo Freire was awarded 48 honorary doctorates by universities in Brazil and abroad. He was honorary president of at least thirteen international organizations. Many other honors, titles and awards were given during his life and after his death. Schools throughout Brazil and abroad received his name, as well as directories and academic centers, student bodies, theaters, auditoriums, libraries, research centers, professorships, streets, avenues, squares, monuments. He inspired statues and paintings in his honor, as well as song lyrics and samba

school themes. Countless awards and decorations were created in his honor. In 1995, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed has been translated into more than twenty languages. There are translations into Valencian, Korean, Japanese, Hindi, Yiddish, Hebrew, Swedish, Dutch, Indonesian, Danish, Ukrainian, Finnish, Pakistani, and Basque. Pedagogy of Autonomy, his latest work, has sold more than a million copies. Several centers for the documentation and promotion of his thought can be found around the world.

In June 2016, Professor Elliott Green, of the London School of Economics, published a study showing that Pedagogy of the Oppressed was the third most cited work in the humanities, according to a Google Scholar survey, ahead of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Karl Marx. Pedagogy of the Oppressed is also the only Brazilian title to appear in the list of the 100 most requested books in the reading lists required by English-speaking universities. On April 13, 2012, Paulo was declared, by the Brazilian parliament, Patron of Brazilian Education. In December 2018, the renowned magazine Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres, in its last issue of the year, took stock of the main educators of humanity. There was Paulo Freire, accompanied, among others, by Rousseau, Condorcet, Vygotsky, Dewey, Montessori, and Grundtvig.

Paulo is recognized as one of the main voices of Critical Pedagogy, one that does not separate education from politics. For him there was no neutrality in education: being a product of society, it would reflect political projects in dispute. He believed in praxis as the engine of social transformation, not an empty praxis, an innocuous activism, but one guided by theory, by knowledge, which was refashioned in the daily struggle. He believed in dialogue as a method to apprehend and exchange knowledge and to increase citizen awareness. For him there was no more or less knowledge, there was different knowledge. Effective, critical, respectful dialog was at the center of his pedagogical thinking, therefore, coherent with what he wrote and thought he tried to treat his interlocutors, whether favorable or not to his ideas, with equal respect. He did this as a process of personal learning, modifying his thinking according to what he learned in the dialogues, debates, and polemics in which he was involved. Throughout his life, while developing his thinking, he used several theories to ground his ethical, aesthetic, and political values that were based on a deep belief in the human being's

capacity to educate and love to participate in the construction of a better world, more just and respectful of nature.

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# The critical power of Freire's work

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Why study Freire today? The main reason lies in the critical power of his work, which is seminal in relation to Critical Pedagogy. As a classic author, he will be able to resist the erosion of time because his work maintains the ability to dialogue with readers of each historical period about the problems of the human condition and its education. That is why Freire remains current, in addition to standing out as one of the greatest pedagogues of the last century, with a work that continues to be more relevant for its critical breathing on education and society, based on theories and analytical categories, than on occasional and purportedly timeless methodological or didactic prescriptions.

The critical power of Freire's work is based on a specific principle: the "politicity" of education. Education is political because it simply cannot be value-neutral. Nobody educates and educates themselves in a vacuum, outside of axiological, anthropological, ethical, political references and worldviews. That is why education does not only have political dimensions, it does not only interact with the political system, nor does it only comprise political variables; education, as a whole, is political, no matter how neutral someone intends to present it, or no matter how technical-didactic any project wants to reduce it. Consequently, Freire criticises the phenomena of depoliticization, or naturalisation, of education, as in a

text dated April 26, 1996, published posthumously, in 2000, in the book Pedagogy of Indignation: "Perhaps it has never been done so much for the depoliticization of education as today" (Freire, 2000: 95).

On the contrary, what the author proposes is a critical interpretation of education, a critique of traditional, bureaucratic, dehumanized education that reproduces social inequalities. For this reason, he defends an educational practice as a critical exercise, capable of countering the "opacitization of reality": seeing beyond appearances and ideology as "false conscience" that does not allow a critical reading of the social world and of power relations, which is limited to superficial views, to common sense and dominant ideas, whether from the party apparatus or the mass media, for example. And so Freire insists on the concept of "unveiling reality". Unveiling means removing the veil, lifting the superficial layer that covers social reality, going beyond the appearance of things, or, in popular language, "opening the eyes" and becoming critically aware.

All of Freire's work results in a contribution to a critical understanding of education and pedagogical action, among other elements by insisting that the educator is a decision maker who cannot abdicate his/her responsibilities. He criticizes the "bland neutrality" and being in the world "with gloves", with a "gray impartiality" posture, drawing our attention to the complementarity between freedom and authority and demanding dialogue with the other, not about the other, as an educational, ethical and political principle. His criticisms of "banking education", oligarchic and bureaucratic organizations, avant-garde and autocratic leaders, dogmatism and propaganda, the "commodification" of the masses, "basism" and "elitism" as forms of sectarianism, represent some of the most important principles of his democratic pedagogy. The epistemological and pedagogical consequences of that radicality permeate a large part of his work, articulated with certain conceptions of democracy, participation, citizenship, autonomy, permanent education. The critical power of Freire's work is not limited, however, to the denunciation of oppression and the reproduction of injustices. It sets out alternatives and a world of possibilities for transformation and announces, through words and actions, the power of dreams and utopia.

At least from his major work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Freire laid the foundations for a critique of all kinds of oppression, considering

the role of education. Are not the greatest breathing difficulties still clear today – in metaphorical as well as literal terms? And not only in the face of technocratic conceptions of education, but also considering the exercise of physical and symbolic violence, restrictions on freedom and democracy, environmental disaster at a global level, oppression with its new types and its new modalities, and even access to vaccines and oxygen by the current "ragged from the world" in the context of a pandemic?

In the commemoration of the centenary of the author's birth, it is best to study his work, even to avoid a paradoxical situation that often emerges before our eyes and which could be condensed in the following statement: from the much more celebrated or injured, cited or simply summoned, than rigorously studied, Paulo Freire.

The politicity inherent in his thought and work, which emerges from the very politics he recognized in education (e.g. Freire, 1996), is not to be confused, under any circumstances, with pure normativity, eventually unrestricted and irrepressible, and much less with political prescription. And even less with any action of ideological inculcation and indoctrination.

His work is not a political manifesto, as hasty and sectarian followers, as well as unscrupulous opponents without intellectual seriousness, may claim, under different ideological agendas. Freire shares with each reader his options but more doubts than certainties, being more important for the questions he poses and the problems he raises than for the more or less convincing answers that many are quick to extract from his texts. That is why his work remains open and capable of mobilizing new readers, requiring continuous study and questioning, disagreements and agreements, debates and controversies. Without this critical movement, Freire's work will remain in the history of pedagogical ideas, probably in the repertoire of some scholars and in the repository of certain political and social activists, but it will hardly be an active reading by professional educators and those who research the problems of present and future education.

The act of continuing to study and debate Freire, following his own reflections on what it means to study (Freire, 1976), is after all the only act that can free him from the law of death, that is, from oblivion.

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# Letters to those who dare teach: Another world is possible

Paul Gurton

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Dear Carmen,

It was great to meet you the other day at our university open day and I sincerely hope you will consider applying to take up a place to train to become a primary school teacher. I think you have much to offer the profession.

You said that you had struggled at school because the lessons always seemed to follow a set format with the teacher leading at the start of the lesson, maybe modelling a skill or teaching some facts from history or biology, but there had been little group work or whole class discussion. You felt that this had not worked for you. But your eyes lit up when you talked about the approach one teacher had taken. I think you said you were in year 6 at the time, and he had set lots of cooperative challenges. The class had to work in groups and share ideas. You also remembered that this involved class discussions, sometimes about things close to home, like peer pressure about how to behave, what clothes to wear and things like that. It seemed that this teacher had built strong relationships with the class.

After our chat, I went away feeling that I could have done more to allay your fears about the current state of primary education in England, and in particular, the culture which encourages 'teaching to the test'. But I

was very heartened to hear you talk about Paulo Freire and his ideas of dialogue in education. Not many in the world of primary schools refer to Freire. I found out about him when I was doing some further study after I became a teacher educator. My director of studies pointed me in his direction, and I must say, I was really engaged. Most people read his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. But you will find some of his lesser-known works, like 'Letters to Cristina', for example, give a real insight into the man and how he developed his thinking even from his childhood experiences when his family was thrown upon hard times. He explains how his parents never reprimanded him for asking questions, and a touching description of his father, who struggled with poverty, and who never forced discussion of a topic which did not interest his children but questioned and challenged and introduced them to new ideas. I wholeheartedly agree with you that we should not just be filling up children with facts. We should be developing the whole person and opening them up to ideas, like Paulo Freire's dad. That is why I think you will be interested in what I have to tell you in the rest of this letter.

I have been visiting a school recently whose approach is anything but teaching to the test. Some of what they do sounds like what you remember from your year 6 class. There is a good deal of group and class discussion, involving a lot of cooperation. St Luke's primary is an inner city school in the north of England. It is truly multi-cultural: children come from a range of ethnic, religious and language backgrounds. They tell me that at last count there were 32 languages spoken in the school! I got to know about it from a teacher who works there whom I met at a conference. She was proud of her teaching and what the school was achieving and invited me to visit to see for myself.

The school runs what they call a 'concept curriculum'. Each term children have a topic focussing on a key question such as 'Does adversity make you stronger?' or 'Are you ready to take your place in society?' These questions which, as you can see, have an overtly moral, philosophical or sociological slant, are led by Personal Social and Health Education and Religious Education, the subjects that the deputy head teacher says, 'really matter'. But they have been carefully planned to dovetail with national curriculum requirements for history, geography, art, design etc. I suppose you might say that the approach attempts to marry together an objectives-led model of curriculum design with an enquiry-based approach. It reminds me of an approach taken by a

famous educationalist named Lawrence Stenhouse in the 1970s with something called the Humanities Curriculum Project – HCR for short.

I have visited the school on several occasions, keen to see how the curriculum works in practice and what I can learn from it to impart to our student teachers. Each time I have come away really excited! Teachers use a more orthodox approach to teach core skills, such as number bonds in maths and the children actually do really well in national tests. But they frequently devote entire lessons to what they call 'enquiries' where the teacher and children discuss issues together. This approach, and a number of the pedagogic features, uses a thinking skills programme which you may have heard of called Philosophy for Children. It originated in America in the 1970s with a University lecturer named Matthew Lipman. The children work in pairs or groups to ask a question they would like to, derived, from their termly topic with links to RE, English, History, Geography or Art, for example. Then they vote on it and the whole class discusses the question. I have seen enquiries with questions such as 'Is life always in our control?'; 'When is it right to be selfless?'; and 'Terrorism: who or what is this violence and hatred targeted towards?' These are big questions, as you can see, and brave ones for a primary school to be taking on. But the children tackle them with enthusiasm and gusto, expressing their views and opinions and importantly using their everyday life experiences to draw upon in their discussions. They are really positive about these lessons. When I have talked to them, they have said things like 'It's good because everyone gets to express their opinions' and 'it helps us engage with others more and see how they think.'

The teachers are committed to developing children's ability to listen to each other respectfully and articulate their own ideas. The deputy head says that they have chosen themes that are very important to the children in this community. Some teachers say that this approach allows them to feel closer to the children and to talk about issues which children encounter in their lives, either through social media or other life experiences. They say that these themes are not covered in the national curriculum, but they feel that they would be doing the children a disservice if they did not talk about them. One teacher said to me that it allows them to explore concepts that are 'difficult and untouchable even using other approaches to learning'.

I find the whole thing amazing to watch, and bear in mind I have twenty years of classroom teaching behind me! In my career in primary schools, I only saw this kind of approach before in the Early Years. Further up the school, teachers would always be concerned about 'covering the curriculum'. Having time to discuss issues that children encountered in their daily lives never seemed to have a high priority, which is bizarre if you think about it. However, recently I have found that schools are using approaches that at least devote some time to class discussion. And approaches such as Philosophy for Children are becoming more widespread, even if they are often something tagged on to the end of the week. Not so at St Luke's! Here the approach permeates the curriculum. Children have learned a variety of techniques like making eye contact, using the previous speaker's name and using words and phrases to demonstrate their appreciation of each other's views. They are also encouraged to always give reasons for what they say. They use phrases like, 'When you say xxxx, what do you mean by that?' or 'I agree with that position' or 'building on what Naomi said…' They challenge each other and the teacher to clarify meanings. It's refreshing because it's like a classroom community at work. The teachers and children are on a journey together. And the teachers do not see themselves as 'the fount of all knowledge'. When I see teachers answering children's questions, sharing their own opinions, but seeking children's views too I feel that they show they are human, they can make mistakes and they are not sure about things. This forms respectful relationships between the teachers and the children.

I am telling you all this to show you that there certainly is another way of teaching, and it is alive and kicking in some schools in England and it is possible to take this approach. It may be that a didactic approach is more common – and encouraged by a curriculum that views education principally as passing on valued cultural knowledge. But the 'problem raising' approach that this school uses, where children and teacher use dialogue to discuss controversial issues together, can be successfully achieved. It does make me think of what Freire was talking about when he identified a dialogic approach like this as able to emancipate. These children are beginning to use language to interpret the world. They are developing their own agency by being critical of reality, emerging from what Freire called a naïve or magical consciousness to a critical awareness that not everything around them can be interpreted at face value.

I saw a powerful example of this in one of the class enquiries. It was what we in primary education call, rather cringely, a 'wow moment'!

A year six class was discussing terrorism, comparing the religion of Islam with what they knew and could find out about the terrorist group Isis. It was a good lesson on demystifying what the children might be hearing about in the news – what Stenhouse would have termed a 'controversial issue' and so really worth investigating with children. The teacher was not seeking to promote her views either. She was genuinely allowing them to collect the information they knew to make judgements and put forward views. The Manchester arena bombing had occurred only recently where 23 people died, some of the children and the school were not far from Manchester. At one point in the lesson a Moslem boy – we will call him Imran – began to talk about views promoted by the self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Bagdadi. The discussion had reached a summary conclusion that this man was proposing views that were at odds with the precepts of Islam. Imran suddenly said, 'Well in that case he is using his faith as an advantage. He is portraying himself as God.' He went on to say, 'That means he is disrespecting God. People will be ashamed.'There was a hush in the classroom as I think children all realised what a profound statement Imran had made, and what a critical moment this was for him.

Anyway, I hope that I have given you food for thought and that maybe you will consider applying to train to be a teacher with us, as I said at the start of the letter. If not, I wish you all the best in what you decide to do next.

Best regards,

Paul Gurton

## About the author

Paul Gurton is a Senior Lecturer in Primary Teacher Education at the University of Wolverhampton U.K. He was a primary school teacher for 20 years, ending his career as a head teacher of a rural primary school. His research interests are in dialogic teaching and classroom talk. He is in the final stages of a doctorate which focuses on how teachers and children use talk to think together.

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# A RED-letter day

Tony Davis

Dear Usma,

I very much appreciate you taking the time to contact me following the training session on formative assessment in adult learning.

The aim was to encourage teachers to have a go at trying something new – something other than the typical teacher-centred strategies we see all the time, such as questioning, observation, and marking ever more work. I wanted teachers to try out a handful of strategies that make them curious.

I do realise, though, that it's this experimentation that is at the heart of your concerns. I not only agree with your comment that trying new things is risky but would like to show you how you might embrace risk-taking rather than fear it.

I understand that your college is running 'spot check' observation inspections to improve quality. This is really about accountability rather than learning. The observation team are expecting high-quality teaching performance from you – but I wonder if they realise the impact that they are having on your willingness to take risks with your practice? The irony is that I'm guessing they would love to see you getting your adult students to take risks with their learning but fail to realise that their approach is stopping you from doing the same. After all, if we are working inside our comfort zones, we're just rehearsing what we already know. It's only when we touch the 'hot edge' of our comfort zones and

push through that we begin to learn new things. Observers love to see this, and yet…

Before I offer you a simple solution to being, as you say, 'caught out' by no-notice observation, I'd like to tell you about a college that was similar to yours but decided their accountability-style observation system wasn't having the impact they wanted - it wasn't improving the impact of teaching and assessment on learning.

A College in the East of England 'failed' every inspection for 21 years straight. Can you imagine how it must have felt to be a teacher there? Inspectors constantly looking over the shoulders of the managers, who in turn were evermore determined to micromanage what teachers did in their classrooms? A few years ago, however, the principal announced he wanted to take a radically different approach to observation. He wanted an approach that actively promoted risk-taking rather than one that made teachers play safe. He found what he was looking for in *The RED System*.

The acronym stands for *Research into Education and Development*. The idea is that every teacher becomes a pedagogy researcher. This means that rather than the quality managers being seen as the 'quality police' – a quality gate-keeper – they become enablers – legitimising risk-taking. At the heart of this learning-based replacement for traditional observation work, is the *Creative Learning Team* (CLT) day. During the year every teacher joins at least one Creative Learning Team.

The CLT day is designed to be a wonderful, if exhausting experience in which four teachers take turns to be observed throughout the day. Its intensive nature contributes to the sense of having lived through a transformational, shared experience. The day begins with a couple of important questions from the *CLT Team Leader*. The first is: 'What are you most worried about today?' A typical answer to this question is that teachers are concerned about feeding back on their colleagues' work. This fear is very easy to mitigate as they're simply told that in *The RED System* you are not allowed to feedback on a teacher's work. The second question is: 'What would you like the team to look at in your session?' The impact of this question is that each CLT member gives themselves permission to expose their vulnerabilities, and also gives permission for these to be discussed. Following a little training on how to complete a *Lesson Reflection Form*, everyone gets ready for the first lesson at 9 am.

Students are told that the observations are part of a research project looking at improving teachers' practice. At the end of the first observation, the teacher spends 15 minutes setting out how they feel their learners are different as a result of the lesson. At the same time, the *CLT Team Leader* discusses with the three peer observers the impacts they've seen. These discussions aren't to prepare for feedback, though. The peer observers use their notes to help ask the right questions or simply present scenarios so that the teacher can make the judgement of impact on learning.

When the chemistry of the CLT works well, all the *CLT Team Leader* has to say to start the evaluative conversation is something like: 'I'm really curious to know what you've written on your reflection form'. And that's it. The teacher then deconstructs the lesson and tells everyone how they feel their learners are, or are not, different as a result.

I know that all sounds a little too easy, but there is one small key that's needed to unlock the whole approach – and that's the link to the capability system.

If a teacher feels that exposing their areas for development is going to set them off on a slippery slope to capability, and potentially the sack, then their contribution to the conversation will be stilted, defensive, and pretty much useless. The link to capability must avoid this: 'Every teacher should embrace the evaluation of the impact of their work on learning. If they are unable or unwilling to evaluate their work, then the capability system will be triggered.'

In other words, it doesn't matter at all if a lesson doesn't work. The only thing that matters is that the teacher can learn from their analysis and move on.

As I'm sure you can now see, this makes risk-taking risk free. It encourages creativity. And as the teachers are a member of a peer quality circle – the *Creative Learning Team* – they feel supported not only to experiment during a CLT day, but every day after that.

So how does all this help you with your concern? It would be ideal if you could singlehandedly approach your senior leadership team and convince them to institute *The RED System*, but there's a much easier way to gain the confidence to take risks within your own system. All you have to do is type, in large red letters, at the top of your lesson plan:

‘This is a research lesson. Some of these strategies are new and may not work. My post-lesson review will help me perfect these new techniques. I would welcome the opportunity to share my review with any observer who happens to drop in".

Interestingly, students say they love the idea of research lessons, as they see that their teachers are keen to improve things for their benefit. This leads me to a great phrase I commend to you for consideration: 'Quality happens when people care'. Part of managing quality, then, is to get teachers to care; and of course, part of teaching is to get students to care.

What do you think? You could even share this strategy with your line manager, which may encourage them to leave that lesson undisturbed, or better still, to come in and act as a resource to help you review how it went. The line manager might then spread your idea to other managers. And before you know it, your original lesson might end up being referred to as *The Red-Letter Day* – the day your college moved from accountability-based quality to *Research into Education and Development* - RED.

Pedagogy research keeps teaching and learning fresh and unpredictable for teachers and students alike. Paulo Freire argued in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that there were five key ideas, not only fundamental for dialogue between teacher and student, but for learning in its broadest sense. They are teaching with humility; believing in students; faith in people; critical thinking; and love. Our job as teachers is to help adult learners to be curious, excited about the learning they do, to grow as individuals, and to care. It’s a great privilege and responsibility and we can’t do it without a little risk now and then.

I’d be very keen to hear how you get on, so do please drop me a line, and do feel free to ask any questions.

Very best wishes

Tony Davis

Centre for Creative Quality Improvement, UK

## About the author

Working for almost 35 years in the further education and skills sector as a teacher, manager, lead inspector, researcher, writer and consultant has given me privileged access to some wonderful people to learn from. The countless observations and many hundreds of case studies I've written continually inform my work at The Centre for Creative Quality Improvement – finding creative solutions to our perennial issues.

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**Book Review**

# Socially just pedagogies:

# Posthumanist, feminist and materialist perspectives in higher education

Vivienne Bozalek, Rosi Braidotti, Tamara Shefer and Michalinos Zembylas (eds.)
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018
231 pp

Reviewed by Natalie Purves
PhD Candidate
Faculty of Arts and Education
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I stumbled upon this book when I was in the early stages of my PhD and embarking on a journey to engage with posthumanist and new materialist theories that would speak to my social justice research context. The book was able to open up new possibilities and provocations and provide insights into ways of thinking about and enacting socially just pedagogies.

The edited collection, foregrounded by several chapters from the Global South context, brings together ideas that consider how social

justice from a critical posthumanist, new feminist materialist and affective turn can be put to work in higher education institutions and pedagogies. Bozalek, Braidotti, Shefer and Zembylas's motivation for this edition arose as a response to neoliberal development and the current global context of "inequality and injustice in higher education… there is an impetus for finding imaginative ways of engaging with the current dissatisfaction" (p.1). The chapters generate fresh empirical and theoretical tools that "envision and enact socially just pedagogies in various context" (p.9).

The chapters are divided into three parts: (1) Theoretical Perspectives; (2) Ethics and Response-ability in Pedagogical Practices; and (3) Locating Social Justice Pedagogies in Diverse Contexts. A range of theorists and empirical and theoretical tools are used to open up new possibilities, responsibilities and potential challenges, dangers and new questions, including, but not limited to, Deleuze and Guattari, Barad, Braidotti and Haraway's work, feminist (new) materialist/ critical posthuman(ist), diffractive methodologies, vibrant materialisms, ethico-onto-epistemologies, relational ontology, and embodied activism.

The three parts offer the symbiosis of inter-connections between theory-ethics-praxis. A "transversal composition of multiple assemblages of active minoritarian subjects" (p.xxii) who collaborate within a posthuman knowledge production in the process of becoming. This process of becoming in the chapters affords an alternative collective assemblage, that is made up of subjects that are "embedded and embodied, relational and affective" (p.xvii), a relational community, defined as a nomadic, transversal assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Braidotti, 1994).

Ideas from the affective turn, posthumanism, and new feminist materialism can have similar perspectives, which can make learning about them seem like moving through a maze; when you think you know the way forward…there is another t-intersection. However, I was drawn to each narrative, as a way of showing me how the contributors navigated the maze. More importantly, each narrative showed me that these ideas and their performativity in their socially just pedagogies, is a way of reaching towards history to address social injustices and reaching forward into the future "calling forth 'a people to come'" (p.24).

Two chapters particularly resonated for my PhD, significantly on research methodologies in theory and in practice: Vivienne Bozalek and

Michalinos Zembylas's Chapter 3 'Practicing Reflection or Diffraction? Implications for Research Methodologies in Education'; and Chapter 12 'Thebuwa and a Pedagogy of Social Justice: Diffracting Multimodality Through Posthumanism' by Denise Newfield.

Bozalek and Zembylas's (2018) provide an alternative methodology in education from reflexivity, suggesting instead Haraway's (1997) and Barad's (2007) diffraction predicated on a relational ontology. They point out that reflexivity is reductionist and grounded in representation, mirroring and reflecting sameness, while diffraction, is attuned to differences and how they matter in knowledge-making practices. Their analysis focuses on how reflection and diffraction differ from each other and/or intersect.

Using Brad, Haraway and illustrations from educational scholars, Bozalek and Zembylas propose a diffractive methodology as a break from reflectivity. Notably, they discuss how diffraction is a way of "troubling dualisms: me and not me, discourse and matter, words and things" and "while reflection can document difference, diffraction, on the other hand, is a process of producing difference" (pp.53-54).

Bozalek and Zembylas discuss both the meaning of and the practice of reflexivity and diffraction in research methodologies. This resonates with my research, as I come to see/read/think about the criticisms of reflexivity and alternative methods and practice that are attentive to "how differences get made and what the effects of these differences are" (p.47) and the inclusivity of non-humans. This material-discursive entanglement, as Bozalek and Zembylas eloquently write using Barad and Haraway, is both head and heart scholarly engagement, a response-ability, a yearning for social justice and seeing oneself as part of the world…towards possible worlds.

While Bozalek and Zembylas do focus on the particularly useful aspects of diffractive analysis, they are conscious of creating binaries between reflection and diffraction, acknowledging the contributions made, specifically on critical reflection. This is important for researchers like me, who come to their PhD with a heavy reliance on critical reflection through their previous studies, and a new entanglement with diffraction through posthumanist and new materialist theories.

An interesting and practical aspect of Bozalek and Zembylas's work is their attention to articulating the break made in diffractive analysis from interpretative reading of data. Interpretivism is often used in educational research methodology, and they make a strong case for a diffractive analysis as an "ethical and socially just practice" that:

> *produces new entangled ways of theorising and performing research practices, co-constituting new possibilities of strengthening and challenging knowledges…(which) explore the ethico-onto-epistemological potentiality of diffraction (p.57)*

Newfield (2018), a white, female university lecturer, returns to data from South Africa assembled during a multimodal social semiotics analysis of a case study research undertaken in 2002, referred to as the Thebuwa case study. 'Thebuwa' (which means 'To Speak') (p.210) employed a multimodal approach to the teaching of poetry in pursuit of social justice. Newfield along with Robert Maungedzo, a young black, male teacher, worked with English Additional Language (EAL) Grade 10 students, from Soweto, to transform the classroom from lethargy to creativity. The students participated in different modes of poetry (print to oral to visual to multimodal) and Newfield analysed these passages from one mode to the next. As a participant-researcher Newfield drew on African cultural studies to explore the choices made by the participants using local semiotics and the learning that occurred. She found that each mode communicated aspects of the participants' multi-layered identity and that the learners were "agentive meaning-makers who engaged in semiosis through reshaping resources" (p.212).

In her return to and re-investigation of the data, Newfield diffracts the previous multimodal social semiotics analysis through posthumanism. Using Barad (2007) and Haraway's (1997) diffractive approach to read and re-read the entangled phenomenon of issues, principles and practices that pertain to socially just pedagogies from a particular moment in history as well as the present time, in the hope of transforming higher education. Newfield acknowledges that multimodal social semiotics and posthumanism may not be "amiable to being diffracted" (p. 212). The former theory is human-centered and the latter philosophy is anti-anthropocentric. However, for Newfield, this opportunity is "provocative and welcome" with possibilities for new understandings of the data relating to present socially just pedagogies (p.212).

Newfield is under no illusion of the difficulty in investigating the entangled, dynamic, and complex Thebuwa assemblage, as more than text. However, she uses the concept of intra-active entanglement between time, place, matter, teacher, students, researcher, journeys, histories, circumstances, semiotic modes, affect and aspirations to re-form or transform. She beautifully articulates this as "marks of the intra-actions are made on their bodies" (p.218). Further, that a posthuman diffractive approach shows the Thebuwa students as an "agentive, intra-active process of becoming…a becoming-other" (p.219), a transformative becoming (Braidotti, 2011) of 'potentia' (Braidotti, 2013) of life's force becoming.

All of the chapters in this book convey rich narratives of socially just pedagogies, both discursive and material. The personal narratives explore the participants and researchers becoming-other as agents of meaning and culture, through their lived experiences and knowledge, as embodied encounters within intra-actions.

Rosi Braidotti's foreword is a succinctly articulated argument for socially just pedagogies in posthuman times. She describes two basic requirements, first, the need for a posthuman ontology and a new ethics, second, the socio-political dimension of social justice. She describes these features of the posthuman scholarship in the edited collection as "materially embodied and embedded in a radical and non-reductive form of vital empiricism", "building on the post-Foucauldian vision of power as multi-layered (potestas and potentia)" and multidirectional (the actual and virtual), de-familiarisation and dis-identification, and collaborative.

Rosi Braidotti asks the question; can philosophy and the Humanities rise to the post-anthropocentric shift:

The answer can only be ethical…the awareness of 'our' being in this together; that is to say: environmentally-based, embodied, and embedded and in symbiosis with each other…It is an act of unfolding of the self onto the world and the enfolding within the world…an adequate measure of what we are actually in the process of becoming. The rest is life's work (p.xxiv).

I believe this book is an excellent resource for those just entering the journey of posthumanism, new materialism and the affective turn, together with those already embodied and embedded in these ideas. It is not limited to the higher education context, as it engages the reader with

important questions regarding socially just pedagogies: how would a socially just pedagogy work in theory and practice; what can be explored through the theoretical approaches; what are the potentialities for re-imagining research methodologies, practices and new ways of being and doing afforded; and how are the theoretical perspectives weaved through ethic-onto-epistemological and affective configurations?

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# Call for papers
# Special Edition – Australian Journal of Adult Learning
# Adult learning education for climate action

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***Guest editors: Hilary Whitehouse and Robert B. Stevenson, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Queensland, Australia.*** ***Publication Date: November 2022***

The city of Glasgow hosted the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties, known as COP 26, October 31 to November 12, 2021. Governments, corporations, businesses, policy makers, non-government organisations, and many groups of concerned citizens met in a global attempt to agree to arrest dangerous climate change.

In this and the next decade of the 21st century, the dominant means of human organisation left unchecked are poised to undo the life-giving systems of an entire planet. This existential crisis is largely caused by reckless carbon pollution of the oceans and atmosphere without care or responsibility for the effects. The solutions to this crisis places multiple demands on our collective and individual capacity to learn and to educate about the importance of sustainability, environmental education, justice and action.

Adult learning education has long been at the forefront of promulgating our collective understanding of the importance of environmental justice movements. Highly-informed adult education practices promote a world in which we equally meet the needs of the planet, peoples, and multi-species flourishing.

This Special Issue of the AJAL is devoted to Adult Learning Education for Climate Action. We chose the emphasis on action because the time is long past for simply learning about the climate crisis. 'Knowledge about' is no longer sufficient and material actions are immediately required. Scientific enterprise reveals the dangers of the accelerating, threshold feedbacks of global heating, therefore there is a real sense of urgency to our collective responses across all scales of action.

For this Special Issue we invite research work, thoughts and provocations on these and related topics

- Adult learning for climate justice includes methodological and theoretical approaches to explore, inform and enact climate change education and educators' roles in complex, uncertain futures
- Culture and climate action learning, including Indigenous knowledges, perspectives and actions
- Axiological, ontological, epistemological and material considerations in adult climate learning
- Adult learning for multi-species justice
- Critical pedagogy and scales of engagement for adult climate learning
- Climate justice education in activist work including social movement learning (SML),
- community-based learning and knowledge action networks (KANs)
- Adult learning in formal educational settings including climate learning pedagogy and curriculum in early childhood, schools, adult, and higher educational settings.
- Learning within government, business, non-government, and not-for-profit organisations including learning for policy change and strategy implementation
- Craftivism and arts-based practices for adult learning for climate
- Family, older, elder and intergenerational learning for climate and action
- Place-based and multi-disciplinary forms of adult learning for climate
- Understanding the climate crisis - causes, learnings and cognitive disruptions

- Re/learning for transformations, including missteps, displacements, barriers and obduracies

If we have missed something important you wish to contribute, please get in touch with us.

We envision this Special Issue will showcase recent scholarship, both practical and theoretical, to provide insight into adult climate learning and education at this critical time.

***Types of contributions welcome:***

Academic papers of 6000 to 8000 words in length including references, tables, data and figures, blind double, external peer reviewed.

Stories of practice of up to 3,000 words in length including references, tables, data and figures, reviewed by editors.

***AJAL submission and author guidelines:***

https://www.ajal.net.au/peerreview/index.php/ajal/about/submissions

***Timeline:***

Call for Papers November 2021; Expressions of Intent due to SI editors by March 30, 2022, by email. Please include a detailed abstract (300-500 words). Manuscripts due by June 30, 2022. Review period July – August 2022. Revisions August – September 2022. Finalisation of manuscripts by October 3, 2022. Publication early November 2022

***SE Editors:***

Hilary Whitehouse and Bob Stevenson are internationally known for their respective writing and research on climate change education, action learning, and education for sustainability. Both are experienced journal editors and reviewers. Please get in touch with us if you are interested in contributing to this Special Issues of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning.

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