
e-MAN-ci-patory Literacy

An Essay Review of Literacy: Reading the Word and the World

I HAVE FOUND THE WORK OF FREIRE TO BE important to the development of more critical approaches to education; I don't want to lose this in my rage at the stagnation and closures within the work and the refusal of THE MAN (or his followers) to hear what feminists are saying. While he exposes a politics of listening to "the people", of "speaking with" rather than "speaking to," women are present as window dressing (the

foreword by Ann Berthoff) or as an afterthought (occasional references to women). Mad-dening, because the text has much to offer in constructing critical approaches to literacy which feminists can draw (and have drawn) upon in their practice.

The book consists of a collection of essays written by Freire since 1980 in which he reflects upon his work in various literacy campaigns, as well as several collaborative essays and dialogues written with Donaldo Macedo.¹ There is also a major, theoretical introduction by Henry Giroux. There are chap-

ters about (il)literacy in the USA, as well as in Africa, but distinctions between the two very different situations are sometimes blurred. This is most noticeable in the melding together of Giroux's analysis of literacy as cultural (re)production and resistance, particularly among school students in North America, with Freire's work among adults in villages within countries undergoing revolutionary change. Extensive excerpts from the literacy notebooks designed by Freire for use in the literacy campaigns São Tome and Príncipe form the longest chapter, providing a concrete sense of the pedagogical and ideological

**In writing this review
of *Literacy* by Paulo
Freire and Donaldo Macedo
(South Hadley, Massachu-
setts: Bergin & Garvey, 1987),
I struggle with my anger at the
sexism that implicitly defines
the text, as well as with my
continuing ambivalence
about the work itself.**

BY KATHLEEN ROCKHILL

approach of the program. Of special interest are the dialogues with Macedo. Rather than dialogues, I found these to be more like sympathetic interviews in which Macedo provides Freire with a space to answer his critics.

The most controversial aspect of the book and, to my mind, the most significant, is the dialogue about the literacy campaign in Guinea-Bissau. Freire reveals that he argued against the use of Portuguese as the language in which the literacy campaign should be conducted, but, once Mario Cabral decided that this was the only viable way to proceed, Freire suppressed his disagreement in the interests of unity, arguing that: "What I could not do in Guinea-Bissau is overstep the political limitations of the moment." A letter written by Freire to Mario Cabral in 1977 is published for the first time in the appendix (this letter was withheld from the collection, *Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, by Freire — a moment lasts ten years!). In this letter, Freire advocates the use of Creole rather than Portuguese, insightfully outlining the consequences of teaching literacy in the language of domination — namely the reproduction of the class structure and perpetuation of the colonialist mentality, as well as the failure of the literacy campaign for the "masses". That literacy cannot be taught in the language of the oppressor without perpetuating [his] hegemony is, at last, acknowledged not only in discourse, but in practice as well.

The issue of Guinea-Bissau is important, for it brings out the enormous problems with a mandate for political unity, one that has contributed to the perpetuation, world-wide, of literacy being taught, unproblematically, in languages of domination. This practice has raised severe problems for the teaching of literacy in formerly colonized countries, such as Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. I also observed the severity of this problem in my work among Spanish-speaking immigrants in Los Angeles who were attempting to become literate in English. The difficulty, as Freire points out, is that literacy must be an integral part of the social practices of people's everyday lives if it is to be meaningful, and if the necessary opportunities for practice are to be available. What Freire does not address is how literacy, as a social practice, is gendered. It is particularly problematic for women

to become literate in the dominant language as they tend to be denied access (sometimes forcefully by the men in their lives) to the public spheres of interaction where the dominant language is spoken; so practice becomes possible only in the classrooms (if they are "permitted" to attend), or in doing written work within the privacy of their homes. A related issue is that the form of the dominant language, as a "man-made language," eclipses women's presence, cuts out their discourses, and effectively silences their gender-specific experiences.

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However flawed, it is the attention given to language that is one of the key contributions of Freire's work. Language is not simply a tool, or a medium of communication; it is "packed with ideology" and reproduces the oppressor's world. Because literacy is also about learning a language, it involves more than the technical skills of reading and writing. As Freire puts it, one must learn to read the world, as well as the word. His project is to develop a literacy for emancipation; critical literacy is essential if the practices of the oppressor are not to be reproduced as [his] language is learned. Yes, the dominant language and the attendant discourses must be learned, eventually, but first one must begin from one's own language, one's history and experience. In literacy for emancipation, popular culture

is the starting point, but one must learn both to reclaim one's culture by naming the world, as well as critically to reflect upon the world as socially and politically constructed. Experience is the crucial point from which one works, but we must also learn to develop a critical attitude toward it by "questioning one's experience as well as the reasoning behind it." Also key is the idea of "illiteracy" as an act of resistance, that is, of refusal to take up the language of the oppressor. The challenge for the teacher is to use the few spaces available within education to build upon this resistance. To do this, the teacher must have "political clarity" — that is, know how to "properly" read the world — and respect the experiences and linguistic codes of the students. There are no "how-to's"; one must figure it out in the process of revolutionary practice.

While I agree with the points about language, experience, critical literacy and resistance, I strongly disagree with the facile treatment of the teaching situation. There is an underlying assumption of unity in Freire's work which I find disturbing; I find it even more disturbing when unity is raised to the level of a "first principle" for "proper" political practice. We see this reflected in the literacy notebooks where students learn; "The national reconstruction demands of us: *Unity, Discipline, Work, Vigilance*. And "unity" kept Freire from publicly disagreeing with Cabral. And "unity" is used against feminists throughout Latin America; it has long been used by the "left" in oppositional political situations (including in the USA and Canada) to silence feminist concerns. In the "politics of possibility" which Freire advocates, is it not possible to imagine a world in which political solidarity does not require the silencing of differences; a world in which Freire might have supported the work in Guinea-Bissau, but maintained his difference with respect to the language issue? Might have "saved" the literacy campaign? And isn't the attention to difference, to disagreement, essential to a critical politics of transformation?

Along with the emphasis upon unity comes a penchant for orthodoxy and the assumed authority of the "proper" political perspective. Thus, the work stagnates; it cannot handle critique — ironic, when this is what the approach is about. While Freire, Macedo and Giroux raise the ques-

tion of differences and the need to respect them, these are not developed. Apparently, all teaching situations abound with the unity of teacher and students against a common oppressor, variously named as capitalism or colonialism. The only exception, named by Giroux, is the example he gives of a *feminist* teacher (the most lengthy reference to feminism in the book) in which the teacher engaged in the “wrong” practice of inciting the “scorn and resistance” of the students when she showed them “a variety of feminist articles, films, and other curriculum materials.” Clearly the teacher’s error is assuming an authoritative stance, yet there is no analysis of how the raising of gender might create this dynamic in a way that raising issues of class does not. Issues of authority, power, and value differences within the classroom, differences among students, as well as between students and teacher, are ignored. Not only am I angered by Giroux’s example, but I find the work in general glosses over serious teaching and learning issues. I don’t want a “how-to” manual; I would like to see serious analysis of the problems faced, especially of power dynamics within various educational situations. Orthodoxy brings with it a deification of Freire, as well as a didacticism in textual materials that leads to precisely what Freire talks against — the lack of coherence between discourse and practice.

Nowhere is this lack of coherence between discourse and practice more evident than in the treatment — or non-treatment — of feminism. Yes, there are a few references to feminism as an important movement of resistance, which is popular these days, but nowhere is the challenge of feminism addressed, let alone taken seriously. Even the simplest tenet of feminism — the use of non-sexist language — is not adhered to. Especially ironic is that Freire is “the one” who pointed out the power of naming, of voicing, of fighting the oppressor’s language by naming the world from the perspective of the oppressed. Not only is the generic “he” used throughout, but there is also the ‘invisibilisation’ of women in the reference structure and content of the text. This comes home in the literacy notebooks where work is presented as man’s work, the only productive spheres being the farms, factories and schools as experienced through the eyes of Pedro and

Antonio. When Macedo directly questions Freire about feminism, Freire answers that all “factors” have to be understood in terms of a class analysis. I agree that class is central, but, what about gender? What is troublesome is the systematic non-reference to feminism; even indirect questioning about “differences”, Freire typically turns to other oppressed groups, never women, to illustrate his points. Apparently, patriarchy does not exist. When Freire refers to oppression by elites, he includes women, as well as men, as oppressors, making no references to

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the difference in women’s access to elite circles. While he argues that the critical educator should make the “inherent theory” in practices of resistance by feminists and other oppositional movements “flourish so that people can appropriate the theories of their own practice,” he does not do this himself in the case of feminism.

While the text incites my anger, it is also well worth reading for the clarity that Freire, Macedo and Giroux bring to critical educational practice and theory. Vital to feminist practice in education is their analysis of language, experience and resistance. As to the difficult and conflict-ridden issues of difference, power and authority, we need to continue to forge our own way. While class, gender and race are crucial to critical analysis and

practice, they don’t work in the same ways. Consciousness raising may be a feminist variation of critical consciousness, but to work we cannot assume unity, either among women or between men and women. Politics — that is, struggles of power and difference — pervade not only our classrooms, but the most intimate corners of our lives. Discourses of optimism and revolutionary transformation need to be tempered by a hard, and often painful, look at the contradictions, conflicts and chaos within and among us. This is especially true in literacy work where issues of gender, class and race are deeply structured, pervading theory and practice. However painfully and haltingly, we are learning to confront these issues, as well as each other and ourselves. Emancipatory literacy is borne out of a politics of anger, as well as hope; confrontation as well as love; conflict as well as unity; chaos as well as discipline.

¹ Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, was exiled from his home country for his radical approaches to teaching literacy among the peasants. He wrote about this work in the classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which captured the imaginations of radical, progressive and liberal educators around the world.

While in exile, Freire, through the World Council of Churches, was influential in the design of literacy campaigns in socialist revolutionary countries, especially in Africa, but in Latin America as well. The premise of his work, that learning to read “the word” must not be separated from learning to read “the world” critically — that is, with attention to the engineering of oppression through capitalism — has been fundamental to the development of critical approaches to education, as well as the teaching of literacy, around the world.

Freire stresses the contradictory nature of education. True, education is a tool of domination, but it can also be used as a tool for liberation. It is his emphasis upon the political uses of education for liberation which has provided an important platform for revolutionary educators, a politics of hope replacing the pessimism of other Marxist approaches to educational analysis.