

“Setting Fire to the Rain”: A reflection on the influence of Paulo Freire’s philosophy on seminar leadership in Higher Education

Mark Wilson, Cass School of Education and Communities, University of East London

Corresponding author: Mark Wilson

Email: M.S.Wilson@uel.ac.uk

Tel: 020 8223 2641

Abstract

During the last decade, the university ‘seminar’ has become recognised as an important part of the student experience. This paper aims to present a reflection on the influence of Paulo Freire’s philosophy on, and its relevance to, seminar leading in higher education. It will be argued in this paper that seminar leaders must reject rote learning and instead be concerned, and committed, to advancing egalitarian ideals and raising critical consciousness – i.e. an awareness of the learners’ social reality through reflection and action – in order to enable students to think critically about the world and to develop the confidence and capacities to transform it.

Learning is active; it’s experiential and experimental – based on dialogue, questioning, exploring and discovery. The purpose of higher education is to develop similar qualities in the learner (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1973). Rather than with teaching what to think, seminars should be concerned with the teaching of how to think through on-going Socratic dialogue.

Key Words

critical pedagogy, Freire, teaching, learning, higher education, seminars

Introduction

One morning a student walks, visibly distressed, into my seminar and tells me that she is feeling upset after seeing a homeless man taking crusts from the rubbish and eating them. Based on my Freirean view of the situation, I expect that a ‘traditional’ tutor would simply make sure the student is ok, encourage her to take a seat and move on to discuss the content of the seminar; additionally, I expect that a progressive tutor would build on the student’s concern, perhaps, by inviting the student to talk about what she saw. Instead, as a critical pedagogue, I endeavour to

do what the progressive tutor does but more: I ask the student to reflect upon her experience by using the homeless man as the object of enquiry. An example of the type of questions I encouraged her to pose was: “Why are there so many people who are homeless in our city?” “Why are there more here than in the rich suburbs?” “Why do people become homeless?” “Why doesn’t the city allocate enough money to feeding the homeless, caring for them and offering them shelter?” My concern is in engaging the student in reflective dialogue on topics of their interest: in this case the homeless man and the social injustice of homelessness. Not surprisingly, by applying this method – which could be considered as Freirean – my approach to seminar leading in higher education is markedly different from that of a traditional didactic seminar leader.

No one has recognised the important link between education and freedom in creating new pedagogical theory more than the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968 in Portuguese, is his most well-known work. In the context of the revolutionary struggle of the South American poor at the time, he combines, in his work, education with critical theory and thus develops an alternative approach to teaching and learning. His philosophy of education is now often considered the origin of *critical pedagogy* – now an overly used term that since the 1980s has expanded rapidly. Freire, who seldom used the term *critical pedagogy* himself, became one of the most influential thinkers on education of the late twentieth century by critiquing dominant models of educational thinking, which portray learners as simply passive in the teaching/learning process: in other words, learners appear as empty vessels just waiting to be filled by teachers who *preach* as if they were ‘all-knowing’. If I were to assume the position of one such ‘teacher’, I would simply lecture the objective truth and expect my students to memorise it or, otherwise, passively learn it. However, I believe that such a position threatens the principle of what education is and should be for: i.e. liberation.

In this paper, I shall reflect on Paulo Freire’s influence on my teaching in higher education. In doing so, readers may well find an inspiration to reflect – and a stimulus to act – upon their own teaching; some readers might even feel favourably towards critical pedagogy, few more may have a desire to explore further, delve deeper and might even like to share their own experiences, and others might certainly find themselves less receptive to this type of content. Many might find this form of self-exploration too inadequate to be considered academic work, because it only represents a descent into the abyss of my own teaching-Self. However, in the end, this is only one of the different ways I attempt to make meaning of and to inform

my own practice, and, since it is a very personal affair, in order to avoid the monotony that the reading of some academic articles can induce, I have reflected here in a way that I hope exhibits the clarity and brevity of writing that I sought to accomplish. Whilst there is certainly a need for more comprehensive and systematic study of the implications for, and relevance of, Freirean theory on academic teaching practice today, particularly in European universities, through reflection I shall argue, instead, that seminar leaders must be concerned, and committed, to advancing egalitarian ideals and raising their students' *critical consciousness* – an awareness of their [learners'] social reality through reflection and action (praxis). Doing so enables students to think critically about their own position in the world and thus develop the confidence and capacities to transform it - if they chose to do so. Seminar leaders are not detached from this process of reflection: they are an inseparable part of it. It would be beneficial at this point to briefly define what is meant by a university seminar and seminar leader. In contrast to a lecture where traditionally a lecturer will present on a topic of study, a seminar remains a relatively informal space - at least compared to the lecture - whereby students are given the opportunity to discuss, question and debate topics and assigned readings in groups with fewer students. These discussions are guided by a seminar leader who tends to be more familiar with the content, this is a role often fulfilled by a professor, lecturer or doctoral student. Attendance at seminars is often, or at least vastly becoming, compulsory throughout UK universities.

One cannot attempt to understand the type of critical pedagogy professed by Freire (1968) without considering first the historical context that influenced its development and continues to shape the minds of its foremost thinkers. The terminology is ambiguous and equivocal, and it must be emphasised that while one cannot point to a single universal definition of the type of critical pedagogy Freire espoused, one can point to the shared attempts by contemporary critical educators (Giroux, 1983; McLaren and Leonard, 1993; Hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2007; Shor, 1993 and Greene, 1988) to suggest that when we take it upon ourselves to challenge oppressive ideologies in our seminars we are, at least in part, acting from a critical pedagogical position. The first use of the term critical pedagogy was not by Paulo Freire, but it is found in Giroux's *Theory and Resistance in Education* (1983); put simply, the term hints to learners asking difficult questions about our world and in particular their place within it.

Over the last year I have continued to develop my teaching practice through a much-needed process of constructive self-criticism and aligned questioning. Through this

process I have come to realise that the art of reflection is a vital prerequisite for 'good' sustainable teaching. When the mundane, often routine, incidents in teaching become subjects of analysis and reflection - for the purpose of personal learning, growth and development - they become known as 'critical incidents' (Tripp, 1993). Thinking about critical incidents in my teaching has – as Tripp (1993) and Schön (1987) intended – enabled me to continue to challenge my own practice, by discussing why things are happening the way they are and why other things may not be happening when they should. More importantly, this kind of exploration has made me aware of the nature that my own espoused professional values, attitudes and beliefs have in relation to my teaching.

Why? Challenge

The 'Why? Challenge' has been a practical tool for approaching the analysis of the influence and relevance of Freire on my seminar leading, by asking, and by continuing to ask the question, *Why?* and *Why does that matter?*, followed by a 'because...' response. According to Tripp (2012), when done properly, this task does not only aid us in understanding what values, beliefs, or assumptions are underlying our ideas, but it can also lead us to understand that "things are as they are because we [I] choose to make them that way" (p. 46). I began the exercise by asking myself: why is critical pedagogy so important?

My attempt at answering this question went as follows:

Why?

-Because it helps to understand more.

Why?

-Because it empowers students to identify the importance and relevance of knowledge and ideas.

Why?

-Because acquiring knowledge reveals unknown truths.

Why?

-Because learning how to regurgitate information is not learning.

Why?

-Because questioning is the best form of learning.

Why?

-Because it helps to see things from different perspectives.

Why does that matter?

-Because seeing different positions on the same topic helps to synthesise final decisions in a systematic and methodical way.

Why?

-Because logical connections between ideas can be made.

Why does that matter?

-Because it helps to come to justified conclusions and to reflect on students own values [and mine].

Why?

-Because that is the nature of higher education.

Why?

-Because to think critically, is to think clearly and rationally.

Why?

-Because it is a useful and powerful skill for career and life.

Why does that matter?

-Because it prevents one from being subjugated by dominant discourse, ideology and authority (which is the purpose of Freire's critical pedagogy).

At this point, the 'cumulative interrogation' – so described by Ahluwalia (2009) for its difficult and confrontational nature - of the *Why?* and *Why does that matter?*

questioning ceases. There is not one particular path to the same conclusion and a different seminar leader reflecting on this question may arrive at a similar, or very different, destination using the same line of questioning. There are some themes that come out of my attempt:

- 1) The acquisition of knowledge;
- 2) The nature of learning;
- 3) Empowerment and liberation;
- 4) The ability to identify, analyse, synthesise and construct arguments;
- 5) The role of higher education;
- 6) Graduate skills.

By questioning my 'critical incident', using the *Why?* Challenge, and noting the themes arising, I have come closer to realise what I believe is the purpose of education, particularly higher education, and I have come to acknowledge that my concern about my students' lack of questioning – or lack of any sign of critical engagement – might be because I believe they are not thinking, or acquiring the skills to think, in a critical way that is appropriate for higher education. The more I reflect the more I have come, and continue to become, conscious of the personal theories inherent in, and values that influence, my professional judgement. The *Why?* Challenge is not just useful for the seminar leaders' own reflection: it is also a practical means of getting their students to develop their own infinite line of questioning.

Personal Theory Analysis

Taking time to think about what our values and beliefs are and how such values and beliefs inform how things are and how they should be has helped me to make sense of my philosophy of learning, and why I approach certain teaching practices in the classroom in the way that I do. Knowing, and entering into critical self-reflection upon, what personal theories inform and influence my professional judgement is another important tool in the critical incident analysis toolbox (Tripp, 2012). The following is not a 'public, empirically based theory': it is more a personally informed – but rational – web of ideas (Tripp, 2012).

When I was an undergraduate student in Education Studies, I was educated by an academic who did more than just deliver neatly packaged bundles of knowledge. She instead chose to present knowledge as it is, like "acres of tangled vines on the forest floor", she added, "knowledge is thorny, knotty, and by concealing unknown

challenges it threatens our survival”, by which she meant that only the most critical among us, those most willing to take risks and move ourselves from feelings of comfort to feelings of confusion, shall begin to make sense of, derive meaning from, see and begin to create a way through the forest of our own, and other people’s knowledge. Seminars were places of honest dialogue and discussion, where ‘didactic teaching’ was replaced by dialogical and dialectical thinking – guided by reasoned arguments. This has always been on my mind when I first came into teaching in higher education and, ever since then, I have tried to recreate, where possible, a similar ethos of learning in my classes.

I now try, where possible, to adopt a Freirean problem-posing approach to education in my seminars with students. The students in my classes are no longer simply listeners – they are critical co-investigators in dialogue with me (Freire, 1968). I want to help my students to engage in meaningful, exploratory dialogue, “proposing ideas, probing their roots, considering subject matter insights and evidence, testing ideas, and moving between various points of view” (Paul, 1993: p. 318), and in doing so, I also want them to make connections between their own lives, communities, and their previous knowledge. Students respect having the opportunity to question, listen, reflect and dialogue upon why they think the way that they do. Additionally, making learning meaningful, relevant, and interesting for my students not only gains their initial attention, but also sparks the passion inside of them to want to read, write, and think more about a particular issue, theory or concept. By doing so, students start to be more mindful in their reading, critical in their thinking, analytical in their writing and confident in their speaking. When asked how my students felt about my seminar leadership in the end-of-year module evaluations, students said for example:

“...I like the feeling of knowing that I know stuff now, and that by knowing stuff I can speak confidently about me knowing it, and that doing this makes me want to know more, and question more, I like seeing different perspectives on things that have always existed even if I don’t agree with them...”

(Male student, British of Arabic origin)

“...I really enjoy his style, it feels like setting fire to the rain – you know like seeing the impossible become possible, or seeing the impossible perspective become possible, you know what I mean...”

(Female student, of Irish origin)

In the latter, the student uses the metaphor of “setting fire to the rain” to describe her experience of my seminar leadership. In doing so she manages to capture an important aspect of critical pedagogy: that learning involves seeing things from different and unconventional perspectives. Therefore, it is the role of the seminar leader to help students to broaden their vision.

Concluding Remarks

When I look into the eyes of my students – instead of merely glancing over their heads as I once did – I see stories, experiences, and values and, whilst they may be different from mine, they are also no less significant. In fact, they are more important, because it is these attributes that manifest how they see, feel and think about the world. We must take the time to encourage our students to share with each other and us, as early as possible in the academic year, who they really are. This is an attempt to create an ethos of honest dialogue: free from ill-informed assumptions and prejudicial views of who we *think* our students are, but rather aimed at understanding who they *actually* are. The proficiency to think critically – for those students who engage and respond to this type of critical pedagogy – is not a skill developed in isolation; it is rather a form of consciousness of thought that cannot be taught, but that can only be nurtured through ongoing dialogue, because “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking” (Freire, 1996: p. 73). As Freire said himself, without this dialogue “there is no communication, and without communication there is no education” (p. 74). It is important to see habitual situations in the class as more than just frequent and predictable occurrences, but encounters that upon reflection and questioning can reveal previously unknown values, perspectives, and ideological beliefs that do inform our professional and personal judgements. Students themselves need to become the subject, as opposed to the object, they must be able to reflect and act on their own position in the world. This only occurs when the student engages in dialogical action with me and with each other. Dialogical action has two basic dimensions, reflection and action. Reflection and action must harmonise. Knowledge alone will not affect change. We should help students to make connections between their own lives and communities. For example, students need to be aware that what they read in textbooks, in the newspapers, or watch on television is not always true. It is the disparity between myth and reality that is so central to the critical understanding of problem-posing education proposed by Freire. Yes, critical pedagogy can be controversial – and there are well documented criticisms – but we must help students to question, listen, reflect and dialogue upon why they think the way they do; they might then discover that knowledge is socially constructed, that

truth is relative not only to time and place but to class, race, and gender interests as well. Taking a critical pedagogical position in my classes has been very empowering for both my students and me, and as a consequence, it has renewed my commitment to higher education as a means of taking students from dependency (i.e. passive consumers of knowledge) towards autonomy (i.e. as active producers of knowledge).

The kind of critical pedagogy advocated in this article calls for a meaningful dialogue between students and seminar leaders. If you were to adopt the key tenets of a Freirean-style critical pedagogy, your students could develop a consciousness of the complex realities of injustices in society and, equally, learn about how knowledge is constructed and preserved to serve particular interests; in other words, such style of teaching can increase the likelihood that reality will be seen as it is, rather than the way others would like it to be seen. For my students, to be conscious means to develop what Freire called *conscientização*; in other words, a critical consciousness of the world. Treating students as passive subjects in the process of learning leads to blind conformists, which is like taking away the souls of our students, their consciousness, and replacing it with 'useful' knowledge that will make them more productive workers. Everyone – from Latin American *peasants* (in the context of Freire) to modern British students in today's context – has the capacity for critical thought. If I was to assume a position whereby I believed that my students were not able to think critically, it would be like believing that my students were less able, and possibly sub-standard, and destined for menial employment – analogous to conformity – upon graduation. That is why, having the belief that all our students can be liberated by education is so imperative to the reasoning behind critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy serves as a fundamental foundation for social justice education and action, and, with the huge inequalities that still exist in our world, the university is one of the last remaining places for us to challenge – and not passively accept – the seemingly overwhelming forces that maintain oppression and injustice. We are denying our students the opportunity to become authors of their own lives, and in its place we are leaving them vulnerable to becoming victims of determinism - if we were to simply ignore the kind of critical pedagogy advocated by Freire and other critical educators. Put simply, as Davis and Harrison (2013: p. 99) once said: "we can't change what we do not see is changeable"; therefore, it is the role of the seminar leader to shine the light upon the darkness of ignorance and illuminate what lies behind the masks of ideology. Like those chained to Plato's allegorical cave,

students need to embark upon a journey to understand that the shadows projected on the wall are just a figment of what lies beyond.

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