Paulo Freire and 'Critical Literacy': Relevance for Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper has attempted to examine Paulo Freire's educational ideas – looking at the theoretical innovations of Freire, its impact on the development of educational practice and the development of critical pedeagogy and critical literacy. By discussing Freire's contribution to education, its relevance and the extent to which his ideas are still of value in the contemporary world are considered. The examination of these ideas shows that Freire's theories and their application in practice are more relevant to education and development in Bangladesh than ever before.

Key words: Critical Pedagogy, Critical Literacy, Freire and ICT, Relevance of Freire for Bangladesh

I. Background

As Freire saw it, literacy is about reading the world instead of reading the words only. The theoretical concept of empowerment that this statement embodies, can be traced back to the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), when he suggested a plan for empowering and liberating the oppressed people of the world through education. Freire (Paulo Regius Neves Freire) has been called "the greatest living educator, a master and a teacher" (Taylor, 1993) and was a cosmopolitan intellectual, who never overlooked the details in everyday life of ordinary people and the connections these had to the broader and global world. Known mostly for his literacy campaigns in Latin America and Africa, and for his seminal work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he was active in and influenced literacy campaigns and programs first in Brazil, then in Chile and later in other countries including Guinea Bissau, Nicaragua and Tanzania (Allman, 1994; Gadotti, 1994).

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II. Feire's continuing relevance

Freire's thinking continues to be rediscovered by generations of teachers, scholars, community activists and cultural workers, especially in Europe and North America. His revolutionary theory of pedagogy has influenced progressive educational practice and inspired educational activism around the world. Many contemporary non-formal educational efforts are deeply influenced by his work, which continues to exercise a strong influence on a variety of liberal and radical educators.

Freire's name has become synonymous with the very concept and practice of 'critical literacy.' The basic premise of critical literacy is that it requires the reader of a text to adopt a critical and questioning approach. It encourages readers to actively analyze texts and offers strategies so that the underlying messages can be uncovered. This concept is closely linked to the idea of critical pedagogy, also heavily influenced by the works of Freire. He strongly endorsed the learners' ability to think critically about their education situation and recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded. Realizing one's consciousness ("conscientization" in Freire's terminology) is a needed first step of "praxis," which is defined as the power and know-how to take action against oppression, empowered by liberating education.

In Latin America, approaches that draw on Freire's pedagogy are broadly known as 'popular education;' while in the United States these are more frequently described as 'critical pedagogy.' Freire's ideas on education contribute to an understanding of the processes of education and social change, and thus of worth and relevance to contemporary Bangladesh.

III. Objective of the paper

The broad objective of this paper is to explore the concept and relevance of Freirean approach to education. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To assess the role of 'critical literacy' for social change;
- To examine Freirean presence in the new information age; and
- To consider Freire's relevance from a Bangladesh perspective.

In looking at these objectives, it is necessary to comment briefly on the general contribution of Freire to educational thoughts. For Freire, all learning is relational and knowledge is produced in interaction. He put forth a pedagogy in which the individual learns to cultivate his own growth through situations from his daily life that provide useful learning experiences. He believed in the liberating potential of education. By employing visual aids based on local realities, his work helped illiterate people from marginalized communities to tell their personal histories and to claim their political rights. The subject should build his reality from the circumstances that give rise to the daily events of his life. The texts that the individual creates permit him to reflect upon and analyze the world in which he lives - not in an effort to adapt himself to this world, but rather as part of an effort to reform it and to make it conform to

his historical demands. The method of learning of Freire requires that learners do more than simply reproduce the words that already exist. It requires that they create their own words, words that allow them to become aware of reality in order to fight for their own emancipation.

Freire insisted that the function of education was to build on the language, experiences and skills of the 'educatees,' rather than imposing on them the culture of the 'educators.' He took education out of the classroom and created 'the culture circle.' where learners used their own ways of speaking to articulate their shared understanding of how their world came to be like it was and how to act to change their future. From being a monologue process, education should be a process of dialogue in which educatees and educators engaged in mutually respectful learning. Freire talks about the fallacy of looking at the education system like a bank, a repository where learners come to withdraw the knowledge they need for life. Knowledge is not a set commodity that is passed from the teachers to the learners. Learners must construct knowledge from knowledge they already possess. Teachers must learn how the students understand the world so that the teacher understands how the student can learn.

A core component of Freirean theory is that learning begins with action which is then shaped by reflection, which gives rise to further action. Learning is thus a continuous process, directed at enhancing the learners' capacity to act in the world and change it. This is not necessarily a materialistic understanding, but a cognitive one, whose importance is revealed in the liberation from oppression which is found in the interior of the consciousness of the individual who possesses it.

Freire endeavors that the individual, through systematic study, also learn to fight for the end of oppression and for constructive criticism of the status quo. So, this is not the pedagogy for the oppressed; rather the pedagogy of the oppressed. In fact, Freirean thought has been applied to a number of practical and theoretical contexts, such as liberation and social movements, academic disciplines such as anthropology, urban planning and gender, as well as in educational contexts in both the developed and developing worlds.

IV. About 'Critical Pedagogy'

Critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to make learners informed subjects and agents in their own change. In this instance, the issue of how identities, values and desires are shaped in the classroom is the grounds of politics. Critical pedagogy is thus concerned with the practice of self-criticism about the values that inform teaching. It is also a process of generating critical self-consciousness regarding what it means to be equipped with analytical skills to be self-reflective about the knowledge and values one finds in classrooms. Moreover, such a pedagogy attempts not only to provide the conditions for students to understand texts and different modes of intelligibility, but also opens up new avenues for them to make better moral judgments that will enable them to assume some sense of responsibility to the other in light of those judgments.

Freire was acutely aware that critical pedagogy is perceived as dangerous to ideological fundamentalists, the ruling elites, religious extremists and right-wing nationalists all over the world. Because, central to its very definition is the task of educating students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate the relationships between theory and practice, between critical analysis and common sense, and between learning and social change. Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critically engaged citizens. It provides a sphere where the unconditional freedom to question and assert is central to the purpose of public schooling and higher education, if not democracy itself.

Thus, for Freire literacy was not a means to prepare learners for the world of subordinated labor or mere 'careers,' but a preparation for a self-managed life. And self-management could only occur when people have fulfilled three goals of education: self-reflection, that is, realizing the famous poetic phrase, 'know thyself,' which is an understanding of the world in which they live, in its economic, political and, equally important, its psychological dimensions. Secondly, 'critical' pedagogy helps the learner become aware of the forces that have hitherto ruled their lives and especially shaped their consciousness. The third goal is to help set the conditions for producing a new life, a new set of arrangements where power has been, at least as a trend, transferred to those who literally reshape the social world by transforming nature and themselves.

Critical literacy, a largely overlapping concept with critical pedagogy, is an instructional approach that advocates the adoption of 'critical' perspectives toward text. It involves reading critically—thinking about the identity and intent of the writer, and the social and historical context in which the text was written. It encourages readers to actively analyze texts and offers strategies for what proponents describe as uncovering underlying messages. Critical literacy should be applied in local context through participatory approach. This has to be a bottom up process and it must empower the learners through knowledge. Critical literacy challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development. But how and how much we practice it in real classroom teaching-learning is the question.

V. Liberating Education

Freire (1970) has argued that educative processes are never neutral. They can either be an instrument of domination or liberation. Educative processes domesticate people where there exists a dominant culture of silence. In this culture people are taught to accept what is handed down to them by the ruling elite without questioning. Hence, the understanding of people of their social reality is limited to what they are taught and told to accept and believe. Freire (1970) points out that:

> In a culture of silence the masses are 'mute', that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformation of their society and therefore prohibited from being.

Even if they can occasionally read and write because they were 'taught' in humanitarian - but not humanist - literacy campaigns, they are nevertheless alienated from the power responsible for their silence (p. 30).

In his analysis of the dynamics of power, Freire reserves the term 'oppressed' for those whose own voices are silenced because they are forced to speak with a voice that is not their own:

The oppressed are not only powerless, but reconciled to their powerlessness, perceiving it fatalistically, as a consequence of personal inadequacy or failure. The ultimate product of highly unequal power relationships is a class unable to articulate its own interests or perceive the existence of social conflict (ibid.)

Freire contributed a philosophy of education that came not only from the more classical approaches stemming from Plato, but also from modern Marxist and anti-colonialist thinkers. He emphasized the need to provide native populations with an education which was simultaneously new and modern (rather than traditional) and anti-colonial (not simply an extension of the culture of the colonizer). According to him, education should allow the oppressed to regain their sense of humanity, in turn overcoming their condition. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that in order for this to occur, the oppressed individual must play a role in their liberation. As he states:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption (Freire, 1970, p. 54).

Freire believed education to be a political act that could not be divorced from pedagogy. He defined this as a main tenet of critical pedagogy. Teachers and students must be made aware of the 'politics' that surround education. The way students are taught and what they are taught serves a political agenda. Teachers, themselves, have political notions they bring into the classroom (Kincheloe, 2008).

VI. Concept of 'Education' in the New Information Age

Socrates declared 'knowledge is virtue' and for Francis Bacon 'knowledge is power.' Education is the fountain-head of sustainable development, which propels individuals to luminous height. The social purposes of education are located in the long term, and oriented towards the construction and maintenance of a sustainable future. The philosophical end-point of education is the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge and thus the horizon for people. Education upholds self-development, rekindles self identify and ignite the environment with sparks of change and progress.

Education, therefore, is a process of socialization that equips members of a society for not just the reproduction of existing structures and patterns, but for forging new paths in facing social challenges. We can observe markers of a paradigm shift in learning – manifested in the movement from learning in classroom to learning anywhere, lecture-centric to learner-

centric approach, teachers delivering instruction to being a facilitator of learning as discovery, oral strategy of instruction to technology supported learning, fixed time to any time for learning, and time-bound education to lifelong learning.

The digital era introduces new concepts for literacy, such as 'computer literacy,' 'technological literacy,' 'electronic literacy' and 'critical media literacy.' These new texts constitute new structures for the way we construct knowledge, define and redefine representations and language use, and produce new discourses and discursive practices at the crossroads of a new information age. It is crucial in the current era of technological hype and cyber culture, where virtual worlds meet real worlds, to open up a space where we can raise questions about the meaning, usefulness and ways these new texts redefine space, time, knowledge, information, and politics.

VII. Neoliberal Economy and Corporate Domination

Under the umbrella of neoliberal economy, both public and higher education of our country are largely defined through the corporate demand that they provide the skills, knowledge and credentials that will supply the workforce necessary for the country to achieve higher economic growth. As schooling is increasingly subordinated to a corporate order, any vestige of critical education is replaced by training and the promise of economic security. Similarly, pedagogy is now subordinated to the narrow regime of teaching to the test coupled with an often harsh model of disciplinary control in classroom, both of which mutually reinforce each other.

In addition, teachers are increasingly reduced to the status of technicians and deskilled as they are removed from control over process and content of pedagogy or school governance structures. Teaching to the test and the corporatization of education become a way of 'taming' learners. It invokes modes of corporate governance in which public school teachers become deskilled and higher education faculty are reduced to part-time employees, constituting the new subaltern class of academic labor.

But there is more at stake here than a crisis of authority and the repression of critical thought. Under such circumstances, rarely do educators ask questions about how schools can prepare students to be informed citizens, nurture a civic imagination in them, or teach them to be self-reflective about public issues and the world in which they live.

VIII. Rethinking Critical Literacy in the 'New Information Age'

Pedagogy must constitute a broader category beyond classroom practices, official curricula, and educational canons, extending to all spheres of human life, including virtual spaces. Freire (2004, p. 85) advocated this critical understanding of technology, with which the education must be infused. This understanding can promote a growing capacity for intervention by the learner in his or her world, which must necessarily be subjected to the political and ethical test.

With the rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs), virtual space is slowly becoming the natural habitat of human beings in a rapidly globalizing world of networks free from the bounds of time and space. Technological development is offering new and diverse opportunities in the field of education. Teachers have found that technology is an exciting tool for developing their own teaching techniques as well as empowering their students to become more skilled learners. There is a need for acquiring techniques of using technology properly to improve skills in any discipline in the context of the globalised world and its virtual extensions.

It is imperative that we develop a deeper comprehension of the transformation in multiple realms of human life including communication, human relations, labor relations, and of course, pedagogy due to the advent of new technologies. Therefore, a global critical reading of virtual spaces as sites of public pedagogy with emerging new literacy perspectives is important. This critical reading could shed light on both the limitations and the possibilities concerning agency, meaning-making, and enormous contradictions in globalization of virtual and real cultures. A critical perspective on new ICT and Web hype would mean that we create pedagogical spaces where the learners can sharpen their critical skills and raise questions about content, authority and canons.

IX. Relevance of Freirean Thoughts in Bangladesh

The education system in the country now faces a wide range of challenges, the bulk of which can be attributed to inadequacies related to quality, partly due to limited resources. A quarter of young Bangladeshis does not complete primary schooling and is left without the required skills to succeed in the world of work, revealed a UNESCO report (2012). It said the country has over eight million such people aged between 15 and 24 years. The figure has put the country among the top five nations in the world which have most young people not completing primary school.

In terms of pedagogy, there is excessive use of lecturing and memorization, with little understanding of what is being memorized. Freire describes this situation as one in which the learners are seen as receptacles into which knowledge can be deposited.

This bank concept of education takes the learner as passive minds – a mere container- which can be adapted to the existing order of things and controlled and dominated with ease. The more passive people are, the more they will adapt, the more their creativity will diminish and their naiveté increase, which creates the conditions necessary for the oppressors to look like generous benefactors. The existing education system is designed to serve the interest of the elite and encourage people to adjust to existing state of society rather than transform it. If the value and full potential of the people and their democratic and human rights are recognized, the country needs to build an education system in which people are not treated as objects but subjects who are capable of working to change their social reality.

X. CONCLUSION

The role of education is to build the nation in which knowledge enhances empowerment of people. Paulo Freire wanted the individual to form himself rather than be formed. To this end, he proposed that educational content be derived from the daily experiences the individual encounters. He proposed that one 'problematize' his/her own life in a way to realize change to a different status. Freire recognized that the practices he suggests can encounter 'limiting situations' that block them, and that these situations are the product of resistance on the part of the oppressing classes to any change in the status they so closely guard.

The ideas of Freire on education reveal a new way of looking at education and social change. He has given literacy and education in general the mission of awakening in people a critical conscience which enables them not only to know what needs changing but 'be fully human,' which is the right of every person and not only of the privileged few. It is this consciousness that creates the will and the motivation in people to struggle for social change. Therefore, the education system as a whole has to follow the philosophy of 'openness' – open to the people, place, methods and ideas. To realize this potential of openness in learning, the advances in communication and learning technologies, which Freire did not have at his disposal in his time, open new possibilities for learners, teachers and the educational system.

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All of these approaches share the basic premise that literacy requires the literate consumers of text to adopt a critical and questioning approach.

Critical literacy encourages readers to actively analyze texts and offers strategies for what proponents describe as uncovering underlying messages.

Critical pedagogue Ira Shor defines critical pedagogy as:

"Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse." (Empowering Education, 129)

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Critical pedagogy was heavily influenced by the works of Paulo Freire, arguably the most celebrated critical educator. According to his writings, Freire heavily endorses students' ability to think critically about their education situation; this way of thinking allows them to "recognize connections between their individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded."[4] Realizing one's consciousness ("conscientization") is a needed first step of "praxis," which is defined as the power and know-how to take action against oppression while stressing the importance of liberating education. "Praxis involves engaging in a cycle of theory, application, evaluation, reflection, and then back to theory. Social transformation is the product of praxis at the collective level."[4]