

Born in Brazil, Paulo Freire (1921-1997) studied at Recife University to be a teacher of Portuguese. In 1959 he submitted a doctoral thesis on adult literacy and shortly afterwards became a faculty member in philosophy and history of education. Soon he began to experiment with new methods of teaching literacy skills in Recife. It was through this work that he developed a methodology that proved effective in literacy campaigns throughout northeast Brazil. These literacy accomplishments threatened the established social order and led to Freire's imprisonment and exile after a military coup in 1964. While in Chile where he was again involved in literacy work, Freire wrote about his Brazilian experiences. This work appeared in English in 1973 as the first part of *Education for Critical Consciousness*.

In 1969 Freire left Chile to become a visiting professor at Harvard University where he wrote and lectured on adult literacy and "conscientization." In 1970 he left for Geneva and a position as a special consultant to the World Council of Churches. In this role Freire participated in literacy programs throughout the world. After amnesty was granted to over five thousand Brazilian exiles, Freire returned to his homeland in 1980 where he taught at the public university UNICAMP in Sao Paulo. In 1990 the newly elected Marxist mayor of San Paulo invited Freire to become the secretary of education. In this capacity he worked to overhaul the curriculum, repair damaged school buildings, and find ways to increase teachers' salaries and empower teachers, children and parents. His recent books include *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (1984), *Reading the Word and the World* (1987, with D. Macedo), *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (1989, with A. Faundez), *Pedagogy of the City* (1993), and *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"* (1994).

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written in 1968 and appearing in English in 1970, is Freire's most important philosophical work. In it he examines the relationships between knowledge, action, and power; the essentially political nature of education; and the need for praxis-critical reflection and action. The following selection from Chapter 2 of this work presents Freire's famous argument against the "banking" concept of education. In its place, he advocates problem-posing education where students and teachers "dialogue" as "co-investigators."

### **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness.

The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration-contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity.

The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power. "For times four is sixteen; the capital of Para is Belem." The student records, memorizes, and repeats these phrases without perceiving what four times four really means, or realizing the true significance of "capital" in the affirmation "the capital of Para is Belem," that is, what Belem means for Para and what Para means for Brazil.

Narration (with the teacher as narrator) leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content. Worse yet, it turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher. The more completely he fills the receptacles, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better students they are.

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories

and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits. They do, it is true, have the opportunity to become collectors or cataloguers of the things they store. But in the last analysis, it is men themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, men cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher’s existence— but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.

The *raison d’être* of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.

This solution is not (nor can it be) found in the banking concept. On the contrary, banking education maintains and even stimulates the contradiction through the following attitudes and practices, which mirror oppressive society as a whole:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen-meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- (j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.

The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. The oppressors use their “humanitarianism” to

preserve a profitable situation. Thus they react almost instinctively against any experiment in education which stimulates the critical faculties and is not content with a partial view of reality but always seeks out the ties which link one point to another and one problem to another.

Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in “changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them”,<sup>1</sup> for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. To achieve this end, the oppressors use the banking concept of education in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus, within which the oppressed receive the euphemistic title of “welfare recipients.” They are treated as individual cases, as marginal men who deviate from the general configuration of a “good, organized, and just” society. The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these “incompetent and lazy” folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. These marginals need to be “integrated,” “incorporated” into the healthy society that they have “forsaken.”

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals,” are not men living “outside” society. They have always been “inside”-inside the structure which made them “beings for others.” The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves.” Such transformation, of course, would undermine the oppressors’ purposes; hence their utilization of the banking concept of education to avoid the threat of student *conscientização*.

The banking approach to adult education, for example, will never propose to students that they critically consider reality. It will deal instead with such vital questions as whether Roger gave green grass to the goat, and insist upon the importance of learning that, on the contrary, Roger gave green grass to the rabbit. The “humanism” of the banking approach masks the effort to turn men into automatons-the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human.

Those who use the banking approach, knowingly or unknowingly (for there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize), fail to perceive that the deposits themselves contain contradictions about reality. But, sooner or later, these contradictions may lead formerly passive students to turn against their domestication and the attempt to domesticate reality. They may discover through existential experience that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become fully human. They may perceive through their relations with reality that reality is really a *process*, undergoing constant transformation. If men are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation.

But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, his efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in men and their creative power. To achieve this, he must be a partner of the students in his relations with them.

The banking concept does not admit to such partnership – and necessarily so. To resolve the teacher-student contradiction, to exchange the role of depositor, prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression and

---

<sup>1</sup> *Simone de Beauvoir*, *La Pensee de Droite, Aujourd'hui* (Paris); *ST, El Pensamiento politico de la Derecha* (Buenos Aires, 1963), p. 34.

serve the cause of liberation.

Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between man and the world: man is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; man is spectator, not creator. In this view, man is not a conscious being (*corpo consciente*); he is rather the possessor of a consciousness: an empty “mind” passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside. For example, my desk, my books, my coffee cup, all the objects before me—as bits of the world which surrounds me—would be “inside” me, exactly as I am inside my study right now. This view makes no distinction between being accessible to consciousness and entering consciousness. The distinction, however, is essential: the objects which surround me are simply accessible to my consciousness, not located within it. I am aware of them, but they are not inside me.

It follows logically from the banking notion of consciousness that the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world “enters into” the students. His task is to organize a process which already occurs spontaneously, to “fill” the students by making deposits of information which he considers to constitute true knowledge.<sup>2</sup> And since men “receive” the world as passive entities, education should make them more passive still, and adapt them to the world. The educated man is the adapted man, because he is better “fit” for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well men fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it. . . .

Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of men in their relations with the world. “Problem-posing” education, responding to the essence of consciousness—*intentionality*—*rejects* communicated and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of*, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian “split”-consciousness as consciousness of consciousness.

Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transfers of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors—teacher on the one hand and students on the other. Accordingly, the practice of problem-posing education entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved. Dialogical relations—indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to cooperate in perceiving the same cognizable object—are otherwise impossible.

Indeed, problem-posing education, which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education, can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function, authority must be *on the side of* freedom, not *against* it. Here, no

---

<sup>2</sup> This concept corresponds to what Sartre calls the “digestive” or “nutritive” concept of education, in which knowledge is “fed” by the teacher to the students to “fill them out.” See Jean-Paul Sartre, “Une idee fondamentale de la phenomenologie de Husserl: intentionalite,” *Situations I* (Paris, 1947).

one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. Men teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are “owned” by the teacher.

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory; during the second, he expounds to his students about that object. The students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher. Nor do the students practice any act of cognition, since the object towards which that act should be directed is the property of the teacher rather than a medium evoking the crucial reflection of both teacher and students. Hence in the name of the “preservation of culture and knowledge” we have a system which achieves neither true knowledge nor true culture.

The problem-posing method does not dichotomize the activity of the teacher-student: he is not “cognitive” at one point and “narrative” at another. He is always “cognitive,” whether preparing a project or engaging in dialogue with the students. He does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students –no longer docile listeners– are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers his earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of the *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of the *logos*.

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.

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge. Because they apprehend the challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. .

..

Whereas the banking method directly or indirectly reinforces men’s fatalistic perception of their situation, the problem-posing method presents this very situation to them as a problem. As the situation becomes the object of their cognition, the naive or magical perception which produced their fatalism gives way to perception which is able to perceive itself even as it perceives reality, and can thus be critically objective about that reality.

A deepened consciousness of their situation leads men to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control. If men, as historical beings necessarily engaged with other men in a movement of inquiry, did not control that movement, it would be (and is) a violation of men’s humanity. Any situation in which some men prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate men from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.

This movement of inquiry must be directed towards humanization—man’s historical vocation. The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so. Attempting to be *more* human, individualistically, leads to *having more*, egotistically: a form of dehumanization. Not that it is not fundamental to *have* in order to *be* human. Precisely because it *is* necessary, some men’s *having* must not be allowed to constitute an obstacle to others; *having*, must not consolidate the power of the former to crush the latter.

Problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that men subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation. To that end, it enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism; it also enables men to overcome their false perception of reality. The world—no longer something to be described with deceptive words—becomes the object of that transforming action by men which results in their humanization.

Problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor. No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: Why? While only a revolutionary society can carry out this education in systematic terms, the revolutionary leaders need not take full power before they can employ the method. In the revolutionary process, the leaders cannot utilize the banking method as an interim measure, justified on grounds of expediency, with the intention of *later* behaving in a genuinely revolutionary fashion. They must be revolutionary— that is to say, dialogical— from the outset.

#### **Discussion questions:**

Chapter two is the heart of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Here are some questions that you should answer as completely and as fully as possible.

1. What does Freire mean when he says that the traditional student-teacher relationship is “fundamentally narrative [in] character”? What is your experience with this? Have you been in a learning relationship that was *not* fundamentally narrative in character? To what extent is the educational system in Kenya today, basically narrative in character? To what extent, if any, do you perceive this as problematic? When thinking about facilitating learning at the university level, how can you shift the learning context away from narrative (i.e., one-way communication) toward dialog?
2. Explain, in your own words, what Freire describes as the “banking concept of education.” What makes a good *banking* teacher? What makes a good *banking* student? How do you feel about this concept of education? Why do you feel this way? Think about the types of educational contexts, (high school, university, teaching, workshops, trainings, etc.) you have been a part of (as either a learner or facilitator or both). To what extent were these examples of banking? How does that make you feel? Why?
3. What are the results of banking education, according to Freire, in the lives of people? What is your experience with this in educational contexts? Where do you tend to disagree with Freire in this area? Why?
4. What is the source of knowledge according to Freire? What is your experience with this? In your life what have you been taught is/are the source(s) of knowledge? Is knowledge static or is it evolving? Is knowledge to be discovered or created, or both? How is knowledge discovered? How is it created? Have your understandings of such issues changed over time? If so, how and why?

5. To what extent do the 10 (items *a* to *j*) characteristics of banking education described on page 2, describe education at the university learning contexts where you have been a student or facilitator? How do you feel about this?
6. How, according to Freire, does banking education serve the interests of the oppressors in a society? How have you seen this work out with oppressed communities? How did this make you feel? Have your feelings and ideas about the role education plays in the oppression of people changed? If so, how and why?
7. How does liberating, problem-posing education differ from banking education? What obstacles do you see in implementing such education in universities?
8. Near the end of chapter 2, Freire says, banking education "... attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; [while problem-posing education] strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality." How does each paradigm accomplish these?
9. How is banking education related to the fatalism of the oppressed? Cite any examples of this from your experience. What do you think are some of the results of such fatalism in the lives of learners?