

# Life experiences with Paulo and Nita

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## *Abstract*

In this article I share with the readers my life experiences with Paulo Freire's work and with Paulo and Nita Freire. Friendship, love, passion and rigorous work have transformed the life of thousands of people, opening for these people new opportunities and creating hopes for change. Along these lines I narrate through reflections, memories, anecdotes and historical events how Paulo has been and is present in our lives, and how his work is still a pillar for adult education and current pedagogy, as well as for the future developments in this field of study.

## *Resumo*

Neste artigo vou compartilhar com os leitores minhas experiências de vida com o trabalho de Freire e meu relacionamento com Paulo e Nita Freire. Amizade, amor, paixão e trabalho rigoroso têm transformado a vida de milhares de pessoas, abrindo-lhes novas oportunidades e criando esperanças de mudança. Ao longo destas linhas eu relato através de reflexões, memórias, histórias e acontecimentos históricos como era Paulo e como ele ainda se faz presente em nossas vidas assim como seu trabalho ainda é um pilar para a educação de adultos assim como para a pedagogia atual e também para os próximos desenvolvimentos nesta área de estudo.

I first encountered Paulo Freire's work, a long time ago in 1968, when I was a teenager. I enjoyed it to the astonishment of my classmates and family. First, because volunteering in the so-called poor and dangerous shanty-house neighborhoods in Bilbao was not expected of a boy my age; second, because, given the

political situation in Spain, conducting any activity out of the “normal” made your family fear for your safety, and daring to do social actions was seen as a dangerous political activity which can get you in trouble. Well, my volunteering activity, together with Goyo Asúa and other friends, was conducting literacy work in a couple of neighborhoods in Bilbao. There I met, among others, a Portuguese family which we helped to learn to read and write. We carried out this literacy work with Paulo Freire’s method developed in Recife and with other materials developed by the workers’ movement in the Spanish athenaeums. This is how I came to learn about Paulo’s work on literacy.

Later, in 1978, I moved to Catalonia. I settled in Barcelona, in a marginalized neighborhood with poor services and quite disconnected from the city center. Its residents were mainly migrants in their 60s from southern Spain. No public facilities were available for the neighborhood. In the district, a big building dedicated to women was closed after Franco’s regime. That was the perfect space for the neighborhood to provide people with public services. Many neighborhood assemblies were conducted and neighbors decided to fund a public library, a daycare center, a place for older people, and an adult school. We called it the School of La Verneda-Sant Marti.

Paulo Freire’s works took on a new dimension at the School of La Verneda-Sant Marti, located in a workers’ neighborhood in which there were also shanty houses, where I founded the School of Adult Education La Verneda following the same dialogic orientations of Freire. The aim was to first consolidate the center and from that reality relive the works and person of Freire in Spain as a key contribution to a transformative education that improves the situation of all the people. (Giner, 2011, p. 62)

The idea of creating this learning center was very well received and supported by the majority of grassroots organizations in the neighborhood, who shared the democratic, pluralistic and future vision that the proposal of the center, designed by learners and educators at the school, imagined. Adult learners of the School of Adult Education La Verneda had the opportunity to meet Paulo Freire, in addition to learning from his works, when he came in 1988 for the ceremony of receiving the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa.

I met Paulo Freire in December 1987 at the airport of Barcelona, where he started to ask about the persecution that the anarchist educator Ferrer i Guardia had suffered. He had really trouble trying to understand the passivity and complacency of the Catalan society and that of the intellectuals, first with respect to the closing of his school Escuela Moderna and then with his execution. In those days we had the opportunity to exchange ideas, dreams and experiences. These were passionate times. After several days together he told me that I should meet Henry Giroux and Donaldo Macedo, since he was sure that we would become good friends - and this is exactly what happened.

In Spain in the late 70s and early 80s few people were convinced that Paulo Freire's work was not outdated but could make important contributions to the future of education and society, contributions which are still useful today, up-to-date and needed. It took many years to prove with practice that Freire's work was valid and useful, that education provided with a Freirean perspective contributed to overcome school failure, which at the same time was being created by hegemonic perspectives. Then it was time in Spain to revitalize Freire's work and person. For that reason, in 1987, a year after I started to work as a professor at the University of Barcelona, I called Paulo to inform him that he was chosen to receive the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa.

The ceremonies that we conducted on Paulo's behalf were useful to demonstrate, as he stated, that "Paulo Freire was alive." While the official authorities tried that we forget about him, many people and organizations had great hopes in this works. Those following the postmodern tendency stated that nobody will attend the ceremony but, nevertheless, the Teachers College auditorium for ceremonies at the University of Barcelona was overcrowded and people still had to remain outside.

Paulo told me that there were several details concerning the ceremony that he liked and from that moment I became a friend of Paulo. He liked that I gave my time to speak during the official presentation to a student from a literacy class, right before Paulo's lecture. If not, only academics would have spoken and we would have not heard the voice of the voiceless. From there, Paulo asked me to point out clearly who was being consequent in developing theories and practices of transformation and who was only using his name. At the end of the student's speech, Paulo hugged her, and through this symbolic action he supported the process of giving voice to the voiceless (Flecha, 2009, p. 336).

In the ceremony a vast majority of the academic faculty expected of Paulo to speak about his books. However, to the surprise of many, he spoke about love, the love he had had with Elza and the love he was having with Nita. Certain comments were made and Paulo responded: "if you know already my work, why do you want me to talk about it; if not, how come you are giving me the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa? I have preferred to speak about something important for the human being, and this is love." Love, as well as living, was an important element in Freire's life and relationships.

In July of 1994 I introduced Paulo and Nita to my good friend since childhood Jesús Gómez (Pato), who from that moment became Paulo's best friend in Spain. This was within the framework of the Congress on New Perspectives on Critical Education in which Donaldo Macedo, Manuel Castells and Paul Willis also participated. Nita is a direct witness of how much Paulo and Pato got to love each other; they even commented that they were planning to do a book together entitled "The Shine in the Eyes." They shared a commitment for scientific work

and a passion for people. We spent marvelous days, Paulo, Nita, Pato, Donald and I; unfortunately, Henry could not join us.

In 1995 Paulo, Nita, Bernstein, Donald, Pato, Lidia - Pato's wife - and myself spent some days together to participate in a congress. There the conversations with Paulo on his experiences in the schools of São Paulo helped a lot to further develop and set the basis for the Learning Communities Project in Spain. We also spoke about the adult education literacy conferences at which the same learners spoke their voices. This is how little by little we were conceiving the literacy conferences also in Spain, the democratic adult education, and the agreement between Verneda and Porto Alegre.

The friendship between Paulo, Nita and Pato is also reflected in Nita's words to Pato's son Aitor on the occasion of Pato's death:

(...) He was a little bit of father, a good amount of brother and a great amount of friend to all those who had the privilege to live with him. He was one of the men, and we do not know many in the history of humanity, that came to the world to make it more beautiful. His ethics, his love, and his capacity to be joyful put him next to Paulo as a visionary. (Giner, 2011, p. 159)

The adult education movements in which I have been involved - such as the democratic movement of adult education, with direct participation of learners in the definition and management of the educational projects in which they are involved - have had many influences from different authors around the world, but most certainly one of them is Paulo Freire. In fact, since I met Paulo Freire our friendship and our professional interactions were connected. Like Giner (2011) states, Paulo and I spoke about adult education actions in Spain "in 1988 and the enthusiasm of Paulo made him start a Literacy Conference in São Paulo. Pato collaborated directly in its development in Spain and Porto Alegre" (p. 109). This movement has two important references which are the Adult School of La Verneda and the Dialogic Literary Gatherings.

Freire loved that I and Jesús explained to him the experience with the School for Adults of La Verneda, and he used this basis to define the movement of adult education learners in São Paulo, where he later was Secretary of Education. (Giner, 2011, p. 83)

In 1996 I met Paulo and Nita again in their house in São Paulo. We both participated in a gathering on young and adult education. Shortly afterwards I went to Porto Alegre where we spoke about the analysis and opinions of Freire regarding the Centre of Adult Education of La Verneda. At this meeting the need became apparent to transform the adult education in Porto Alegre by getting inspiration from La Verneda and putting a very Freirean name to the MOVA movement.

Back in 1969 Freire already included in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* a theory of dialogic action; at that moment, Habermas was already writing his *Theory of Communicative Action* which was published in 1981. It was in 1997, after years of adult education experiences and inspiring interactions such as the ones with Paulo Freire, that I presented the theory of dialogic learning, the principles of which are followed by the Democratic Adult Education movement. Dialogic learning is composed of seven principles: egalitarian dialogue, cultural intelligence, instrumental dimension, transformation, meaning creation, equality of differences, and solidarity. The Freirian concept of dialogue not only means intersubjectivity, communication among people, but also dialogue with reality, that is relationships between theory and practice. Each of the seven principles of dialogic learning denotes the theoretical influences of Freire.

The idea of connecting scientificity and utopia was stated by Paulo Freire (1997) on education, “education needs both technical, scientific and professional education as well as dreams and utopia” (p. 34). Similarly, to the connection between scientificity and utopia on education, Pato explains (2004a) that:

We cannot expect happiness and we won't change nothing socially important, because I don't believe that you will be changing something important while with your family, with your partner, with your intimate world, thrill has gone, life has gone, what are we going to change thoroughly, really ... It is very difficult to change something when with the one you are near with, you don't have solidarity, you don't have passion; when you don't treat well the one you're with what will you do with those you have a thousand kilometers away? (video podcast)

Pato initiated a line of research on love (Gómez, 2004b), which was a topic that seriously interested Paulo Freire, and the one about which he spoke immensely. Pato and Paulo Freire connected at a high level on this topic. Pato (Gómez, 2004b) stated that an alternative model of love is the one which “unites the personal and social transformation, discussing and negotiating love not only as a dream, but also as a work that has to be done in the communication and the daily conquest of equality and freedom” (p. 90). He also claimed for better affective-sexual relationships the “union in the same person of tenderness and excitement, friendship and passion, stability and madness” (p. 99). Pato was convinced that if a person has a desired personal relationship, with all these above mentioned elements, his/her scientific production and other actions in life were definitely more committed and transformational. In that sense I was a first-person witness of the love between Paulo and Nita and the devoted work and immense accomplishments that they were and have been able to realize with the support of and the love for each other and life.

Pato and Paulo spoke continuously about social inequalities of humanity and how to overcome them, about education and how to transform it. Within those

conversations they also spoke about love transformation, overcoming sexism and gender violence.

The connections between the intimate world and the compromises that we make as scientists, academics or citizens are deeply intertwined. Pato experienced this reality in his own life. He experienced a deep change in his personal relationships which lead him to meet his wife Lidia with whom he shared mutual devotion, passion and attraction, besides dedication to social causes and the fight for a better world. Equally, the devotion between Paulo and Nita has been presented through many years in their publications, in academic presentations, and their actions.

Nita and Paulo Freire continuously demonstrated their friendship and love when they collaborated for publications or in academic presentations. It is in their works that their love, friendship and devotion for each other are present, the one Paulo had with Nita and the one Nita had and still has for Paulo. Paulo Freire's work has been always aimed to promote hope, and the possibility of change and transformation. His work does not try to find recognition, nor status, but universal values and trust in humankind's will for improvement. This he demonstrated (Freire, 1997) when

He told Pato that he wanted to publish in "Roure" the book he was writing (or when he asked me to write the introduction), he did not seek obviously power and money, but a group that works from a critical perspective and a group of people for whom he had personal esteem. (p. 11)

Paulo Freire himself in life encountered people who wanted to be with him just because he was a well-known person and not because they wanted to do critical pedagogy or find a way to transform difficulties. And once he died, this same situation was transferred to the use of Paulo Freire's name for different kinds of causes, some of which most certainly would not have met with Paulo's approval. In that sense, I recall how in July of 1997 at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education CONFINTEA V, a group of colleagues and myself gave our support to Nita in solidarity and friendship to claim that Freire's name should not be used for vanity or to gain power.

Other organizations are characterized by respect for and faithfulness to Paulo and Nita Freire's work. For instance The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University in Canada or the Asociación de Amigas y Amigos de Paulo y Nita Freire para el Desarrollo de la Educación Crítica at the University of Barcelona in Spain both enjoy the support of Nita Freire.

In 2002 Joe Kincheloe came to Barcelona where he met Pato. Just as it happened with Paulo, Joe got along with Pato, sharing long conversations on radical love; day after day, they demonstrated how it was possible to love in a radical way and this was something that joined them together for life. Years later, in 2009, The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy together

with the Asociación de Amigos y Amigas de Paulo y Nita Freire, with the lead of Nita, Shirley and Lidia, organized a seminar on radical love in Baeza, Spain. In that seminar, in which I had the opportunity to participate, the spirit of the conversations that Pato, Paulo and Joe have had on radical love was collected; in the spirit of reflection and in their memories, it was decided to issue a declaration on radical love<sup>1</sup> for a better education and a better world (The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy [n.d.]).

From my point of view, everyone who fights for equality and against oppression will continuously reference Paulo Freire's works, searching for contributions like the one in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical" (Freire, 1970, p. 89).

## **<sup>1</sup>THE BAEZA LETTER: RADICAL LOVE FOR A BETTER EDUCATION AND WORLD**

Paulo, Pato and Joe have brought us together in Baeza, a place that has been historically a meeting point for different cultures. For four days, critical educators from all around the world have engaged in dialogue about the importance of the Radical Love that Paulo, Pato and Joe lived and spread. The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy and the City of Baeza offered us this common space.

Radical Love is at the basis of the real transformation of education, societies and individuals. This will only be possible if critical educators dialogue with the people whose voices have been silenced, marginalized, disenfranchised; and this is an act of Radical Love. This will only be possible with ethics, courage, solidarity, hope and passion in our lives and work; and this is an act of Radical Love.

Baeza has been the first step to the creation of a global community network of critical educators who take the stance that another education and world are possible. We all know that this entails struggles that will be only overcome through global solidarity. Paulo, Pato and Joe have opened up a shared road of Radical Love for us. Now is our turn to continue by following Machado's words:

*Caminante, no hay camino,  
Se hace camino al andar.  
Traveler, there is no road,  
The road is made by walking.*

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