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# The Contradiction of the Freirean Lecturer:  Bridging the Gap Between Educational Philosophy and Practice

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**Abstract:** *This paper describes the gap between educational philosophy and practice in a Freirean-inspired adult literacy program in El Salvador, explains the programmatic, pedagogical, and cultural reasons for this contradiction, and suggests ways that educators can enact their ideals while accommodating local conceptions of teaching and learning.*

Adult literacy educators commonly espouse a Freirean educational philosophy, yet in practice this liberating *philosophy* often slips into rote teaching *methods* (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Stromquist, 1997; van der Westen, 1994). Previous studies have found that in many volunteer-based, Freirean adult education programs (e.g., in Latin America), the volunteer facilitators tend to lecture, the dialogue on the generative theme (i.e., meaningful issues related to local experiences) is superficial, and the dialogue is disconnected from the teaching of literacy skills. This paper describes the gap between educational philosophy and practice in a Freirean-inspired adult literacy program in El Salvador, explains the programmatic, pedagogical, and cultural reasons for this contradiction, and suggests ways that educators can better enact their ideals while accommodating local conceptions of teaching and learning.

According to Freire's (1973; 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987) philosophy of problem-posing education, teachers and learners "problematize," or understand the root causes of, social problems by analyzing visual representations of generative themes (e.g., education, housing, land). Through collective reflection, learning, and analysis of these themes, learners understand local conditions and begin to see how local problems are linked to systemic issues such as poverty or land tenure. Participants then use the generative word (e.g., *basura* [trash]) and its syllabic family (e.g., ba be bi bo bu) to develop literacy skills, to form new words, and to read and write their own ideas about the topic. Ultimately, this process is supposed to lead to collective action in which people change the conditions that circumscribe their lives, creating a more just social order. Dialogue—a reciprocal relationship in which everyone teaches and learns—is central to problem-posing education, which assumes that everyone has valuable knowledge to share. Importantly, the *dialogue* and the *teaching* of literacy skills should be linked; that is, literacy exercises should enable learners to develop technical skills and to express their ideas about the generative theme.

Despite the widespread (rhetorical) adoption of Freire's *philosophy* in international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some studies suggest that this philosophy seldom translates into liberating teaching *practices* (Lind & Johnston, 1990; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Stromquist, 1997; van der Westen, 1994). Instead, stunted dialogue, lecturing, and rote learning often prevail. Neuman and Bekerman (2001) contend that "dominant cultural resources…may prevent the actualization" of critical pedagogy (abstract). Educators are often "trapped between an educational manifesto—a declared conscious ideology or theory that aims to guide practice— and cultural resources that are not necessarily coherent with the manifesto" (p. 471). Culturally accepted ideas about teaching and learning, then, unconsciously shape how educators teach, and what students expect. This helps explain why students often resist unfamiliar pedagogical practices (Kreisberg, 1992; Shor, 1992).

**Research Methods and Setting**

The data presented here were part of an ethnographic, participatory study which examined how adult literacy education enables or constrains women's and men's personal, relational, and collective empowerment (see Rowlands, 1997). This paper focuses on one of the findings: that the reliance on conventional teaching methods hindered learners' ability to question, analyze social problems, and act collectively. I conducted the study with Alfalit, a Salvadoran non-governmental organization, and the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, the North American partner agency that funded the literacy program. Alfalit sponsored literacy classes in two villages, Colima and Rosario de Mora. The larger study used methods such as interviews, focus groups, and participatory rural appraisal methods; this paper draws mainly on participant-observation of facilitator training sessions and of 30 class sessions with five literacy circles in both villages. I lived with a facilitator (Tatiana) and her family in Colima; the study focused on Tatiana's literacy class, which included nine women and two men. I analyzed the data inductively and deductively by recording in field notes insights about unanticipated themes, and identifying themes in field notes and transcripts. I used the measures Guba and Lincoln (1989) propose to ensure data quality and trustworthiness (i.e., prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, member checks, and thick description).

Approximately 695 and 65 families lived in Colima and the outskirts of Rosario de Mora, respectively. Ten volunteer facilitators (7 men and 3 women) attended approximately nine hours of Alfalit training. Aged 16 to 37, the facilitators had completed between three and eleven years of schooling (two women had high school diplomas). The facilitators had no prior classroom teaching experience. The facilitators formed ten literacy classes and recruited 53 learners (27 women and 26 men) to participate in the four-month program. The program used a Freirean-inspired curriculum to develop literacy skills and to discuss social problems. Literacy participants had studied, on average, through second grade, and worked in subsistence agriculture, the informal economy, or unpaid domestic labor.

Former Alfalit staff had designed the workbook, which included pre-selected generative themes (education, community, *chilate* [a typical drink], trash, land, cooperative, *cipote* [child], rights, housing, and women), drawings or photos accompanying each theme, and literacy exercises. The facilitators used a manual to guide the learners through four steps: discussion of the theme, writing the generative word and syllabic family, practice exercises (e.g., fill-in-the-blank, copying), and a dictation. The two Alfalit staff who oversaw the program espoused a Freirean philosophy of education and believed that the workbook illustrated that philosophy. Their goals were not only to reduce illiteracy rates, but also to aid communities' "holistic development" and to foster community organization. The volunteer facilitators also expressed a desire to equip *campesinos* to work together to improve their lives.

**Findings**

This section discusses how the teaching practices employed in the program contradicted program planners' liberating goals. In short, facilitators tended to reproduce the rote teaching methods prevalent in Salvadoran schools and adult education programs (Orrellana, Foroni, & Nochez, 1998).

*Lecturing and Superficial Dialogue*

Dialogue and collective analysis of social problems are central to a Freirean educational philosophy. However, in most of the classes I observed, the dialogue stayed on a superficial level

and seldom led to deeper socio-political analysis of local problems or their underlying causes. In one class, learners initially resisted the discussion of the generative theme because they wanted to learn to read and write immediately and did not see what *talking* about a picture had to do with *reading and writing*. For instance, on the second day of class the learners in Tatiana's class were anxious to get to work, so she skipped the discussion of the photo and taught vowels using the word "*educación*," but did not ask learners to analyze any educational issues. In private, she commented that the flipchart with photos was *inutil* (useless). She and the learners viewed the pictures and discussion as separate from "real" learning. Later, she started to use the flipchart more often and learners participated more in the discussion, but in general, the learners and facilitators in the program seemed to view the discussion as something to get out of the way before "really" getting to work.

In a typical class the facilitator asked learners a series of questions—often verbatim from the manual—about the photo or drawing (e.g., "What do we observe?"). Although people responded to the questions and often had insightful comments, these were not kinds of discussions that much of the literature on Freirean pedagogy romanticizes—that is, deep, analytical discussions that eventually leads people to solve collective problems. In addition, facilitators occasionally read from the manual the paragraph about the lesson's theme. Although these paragraphs usually offered a critical perspective (e.g., of unequal land ownership) and encouraged collective action (e.g., "We should come together to work for the good of the community"), the *act* of reading it told learners what to think rather eliciting their ideas or helping them to analyze the issue. Moreover, the facilitators often added their own thoughts, which sometimes slipped into lecturing.

A self-study by a Salvadoran NGO (Orrellana et al., 1998) mirrors what I observed in most Alfalit classes: "After a nominal discussion on the surface of each topic, our literacy facilitators were likely either to move to the technical teaching of reading, or shift into lecture mode to tell participants more about what to think on each theme" (p. 78). Lecturing, then, was a dominant cultural resource that shaped how facilitators and learners defined "good teaching."

*Disconnect between Discussion and Literacy Exercises*

A gap also existed between the *dialogue* on the theme and the *teaching* of reading and writing. Facilitators tended to teach the way that they were taught in school. That is, they relied on copying, memorizing, dictation, and *planas* (repetitive exercises that involve copying scribbles, syllabic families, words, or sentences supplied by the teacher). The workbook included exercises such as copying, fill-in-the-blank, dictation, and forming new words, but provided few opportunities for learners to write their thoughts about the generative theme. The words and sentences that learners did form seldom had any political content (unlike the class that Purcell-Gates and Waterman [2000] describe, where the learners were politically organized and used leftist political discourse). The structure of the workbook and the kinds of exercises it contained limited learners' ability to think and write on their own.

In this case, facilitators drew on *dictados* (dictations) and *planas* as cultural resources that defined good teaching; these exercises also signaled to participants that they were "really learning." On their own initiative, every facilitator assigned *planas* for homework. (The workbook did not mention *planas*, nor did the program planners recommend them. The staff had so little time that they did not even know that *planas* were being assigned.) For example, learners copied scribbles, syllabic families (e.g., bla ble bli blo blu), or sentences. Teachers in Salvadoran schools routinely assign *planas* for homework; naturally, facilitators used the same approach in

the literacy classes. Learners also came to *expect planas*: in their minds, this meant they were learning. For instance, when I substituted for Tatiana or led research activities with learners (i.e., focus groups involving drawing, mapping, and other creative methods) they always asked me to give them *planas*. Because I believed that *planas* perpetuated rote learning, I gave them assignments in which they wrote their own thoughts about a question or theme related to the class. For example, three women wrote letters (two of them with my help) to an imaginary friend in which they described the lives of Salvadoran women.

The teaching methods seldom reflected Freirean principles: that people reflect and read and write *their own words* and use *authentic texts* such as poems and songs. (An exception was a popular education booklet about children's rights that Tatiana brought to class.)

*Explaining the Gap*

Several factors help explain the gap between educators' ideals and practice. First, facilitators had no prior teaching experience and little or no experience in leading analytical discussions that probed the root causes of a problem. It is unreasonable to expect a few hours of training to turn teenagers and adults with no teaching experience (and, in some cases, little formal education) into skilled teachers who can lead discussions about complex social issues *and* connect this discussion to constructivist literacy instruction. I do not wish to diminish the facilitators' abilities or knowledge about their own communities, but rather to emphasize the unrealistic expectations that planners often place on volunteers, particularly those who cannot afford the time or expense to pursue further training.

The second explanation for the gap between philosophy and practice has to do with culturally specific ideas about teaching and learning. The facilitators supported *campesinos*' self-determination and collective action, yet still reproduced the teaching methods prevalent in Salvadoran schools and NGOs. Clearly, political awareness did not lead to the adoption of non-traditional teaching methods. Nor did a few hours of training undo years of socialization. Rather, culturally specific ideas about teaching and learning led facilitators to assign—and participants to request—dictations and *planas*.

Purcell-Gates and Waterman's (2000) study indicates that these findings are not limited to the Alfalit program. Waterman discovered that in El Salvador "there were no literacy texts [at that time] that included any component of student writing: The dictation component was…considered writing" (p. 151). The women in her class also requested *planas*. Furthermore, despite repeatedly training volunteer facilitators to let learners supply new words, "it was nearly a year before Robin did not observe, in virtually every literacy class in her district, the [facilitator] listing words on the board for the students and instructing them to copy them in their notebooks" (p. 126). Along with Purcell-Gates and Waterman, I conclude that in El Salvador, dictations, *planas*, and similar methods are deeply ingrained in the dominant teaching and learning repertoire. In general, these cultural resources worked against Freirean principles such as critical reflection and reading and writing one's own words.

The third explanation is that Alfalit staff did not fully model participatory methods in the facilitator training sessions; instead, they typically talked while facilitators listened. The volunteers reported that the trainings were helpful and interesting, but some wished they were "more dynamic" with "less talking" by the trainers and more "sharing." Staff encouraged participation by using icebreakers, asking questions, and creating a friendly atmosphere, but they sometimes talked for 15 minutes or more with *no questions or discussion*. Moreover, staff urged

facilitators to "be creative" but did not provide them with specific tools or methods that they could use to implement a participatory pedagogy (e.g., language experience approach).

Despite the discourse of Freirean and popular education, the lecture model of training (both for volunteer facilitators and for staff) was commonplace in Alfalit. Volunteer facilitators simply mirrored this practice when they read the "ideas on the theme" paragraph from the manual, thereby telling learners what to think. Trainings that modeled participatory teaching methods would have better equipped facilitators to educe learners' knowledge.

Finally, the curriculum contradicted Freirean principles in that all of the themes were pre-selected; some themes had little or no political content; many of the questions suggested in the manual did not lead to deeper analysis or discussion; and the workbook included few places for learners to write their own words and *none* to write their thoughts on the theme. Instead, the workbook emphasized copying and dictation exercises. Furthermore, the curriculum did not include any suggestions for using authentic texts or other methods not included in the workbook.

In sum, the pervasiveness and acceptance of rote teaching and learning methods, coupled with the facilitators' lack of experience and the contradictory messages of the curriculum and facilitator training, hindered the actualization of a Freirean educational philosophy.

## Discussion and Implications

Although literacy staff knew Freirean rhetoric by heart, the teaching methods, curriculum, and facilitator training in some ways undermined the program's goal of fostering conscientization. The gap between intentions and outcomes reminds us that practitioners often adopt a form, but miss its substance. The philosophy-practice gap matters because rote learning hinders people's capacity to question, to choose topics, to write and read their own ideas, to understand the structural causes of local problems, and to work with others to solve them.

This study confirms previous research showing that superficial dialogue and conventional instructional practices are common in Freirean-inspired literacy programs (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Stromquist, 1997; van der Westen, 1994). The findings support Neuman and Bekerman's (2001) argument that dominant cultural resources can prevent educators from enacting their educational ideals. In regions where people equate "real" teaching and learning with lecturing or copying, educators can expect resistance to alternative methods.

This research suggests that educational planners cannot expect volunteers who were socialized in rote methods magically to adopt new practices. Rather, planners should provide intensive, subsidized training in leading discussions (e.g., questioning methods) and using participatory methods (e.g., building lessons based on themes selected by learners). Trainings must equip facilitators with a repertoire of teaching methods that *explicitly link discussions of social issues with literacy exercises*. For instance, rather than using workbooks and manuals, the REFLECT approach (Orrellana et al., 1998) trains facilitators to create literacy materials *with* learners, using participatory rural appraisal tools such as mapping and matrices. This approach has been successful in fostering both literacy skills and collective action, in part because it makes explicit the link between *dialogue* and *literacy*.

When I substituted for Tatiana or led research-related focus groups, I designed literacy exercises that built on discussions of local issues. For instance, learners became very animated and began telling stories about the Salvadoran civil war when we read a book of *testimonios* (stories) by refugees and war-displaced persons. For homework, I asked learners to write about their war-time experiences. On another occasion, learners drew a map of their community as part of this research. I then asked them to suggest several words that they wanted to learn. They chose

Potrerito, Lempa (a river), Telecom, *puente* [bridge], *bomba* [water pump], and *mesón* [low-income housing]. After we practiced reading, they asked if they should do *planas*. I suggested that they write some sentences, a paragraph, or a short story using these words.

Planners and educators should recognize how cultural ideas about learning may support or constrain their educational practices (Neuman & Bekerman 2001). However, rigid insistence on critical pedagogy—which is also embedded in a particular set of cultural values and assumptions that may be at odds with participants' views of learning—may be just as damaging as using rote teaching methods. As Purcell-Gates and Waterman (2000) suggest, educators should balance their educational ideals with students' need for familiar learning formats such as dictations. Waterman's response to this problem is instructive. She believed that dictations and *planas* "were not reflective of Freirean philosophies," but she also recognized "the power that these familiar activities had for the women" (p. 151). Thus, she modified these formats so that learners, for example, copied words related to that day's discussion or created new words from the assigned syllables. This kind of accommodation underscores the educator's role as an "active teacher-subject" (p. 154) rather than a "laissez-faire facilitator."

In conclusion, educators need to understand how local conceptions of learning may lead to resistance or acceptance of alternative teaching methods, and to envision ways that they can simultaneously adapt familiar learning formats for more liberating purposes while introducing new (and potentially uncomfortable) ways of learning.

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