In Search of Political Literacy : Teaching Philosophy of Education in a Freirean Mode

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Abstract

The paper describes and analyses one attempt to teach philosophy of education at pre-service level. The course is based on Freirean insights and methodology. It argues that this provides a framework for a philosophy of education which aims at education for political literacy.

There are many questions to ask about the appropriate place of philosophy courses in teacher education. In particular, how can one teach the theory of education in a way which demonstrates that theory in practice? Should philosophy of education courses be taught to undergraduates (pre-service) or to graduates (in-service)? The question arises as to whether eighteen and nineteen year olds are capable of engaging in what generally qualifies as philosophy of education. (After all, they have little experience of reflecting critically about their own lives, and virtually no teaching experience, and, further, they are generally denied critical discourse and social analysis in their secondary schooling).

I do not propose to address these questions directly, though they have been formative in my own attempts to find a fitting way to teach philosophy of education at pre-service level. The quest has led me to the development of a philosophy of education unit centred on the theory and approach of Paulo Freire. Furthermore, I maintain that his pedagogical approach and its philosophical and ideological assumptions fit the contemporary context in which educators operate.

What is that context? Globally we face the values of technocratic culture which, as Habermas (1971:122) has shown, cultivates the "depoliticization" of society. Locally we are confronted by the instrumentalism of the Dawkins education initiatives, rooted as they are in economic rationalism, and implicitly eschewing social and ethical criticism. In response I number myself with those who say that liberal progressivism is an inadequate answer to this challenge: a more sufficient response emerges from critical theory. By "critical theory" I mean that neo-Marxist tradition emerging under the influence of the Frankfurt school.

As educators, critical theorists redefine "critical thinking" in terms of praxis, a social criticism focussing on "the nexus of thought and action in the interest of the liberation of the community or society as a whole ... it contains a transcendent project in which individual freedom merges with social freedoms" (Giroux, 1983:19). Though not all critical pedagogists would source their approach in Freire, I find in his work of philosophy of education which critically identifies basic themes of a culturally transformative educational perspective and which fosters political literacy through what he terms "conscientisation".

A Brief Outline of Freirean Pedagogy

Freire's view of education as cultural action for freedom (shaped as it was in the development of literacy programmes), is essentially aimed at social transformation via political literacy. To Freire, political literacy is the capacity to exercise the human power of naming and renaming one's environment through a process of critical reflection and action (praxis) on the social world. Through this process, those educating and being educated together achieve an ever-deepening awareness of the socio-cultural and historical reality which shapes their lives. With that, they come to realise their capacity to know and transform that reality, and so make a commitment to act for that transformation. This is the process Freire calls "conscientisation" (Snook, 1981).

The act of knowing is crucial to this critically transformative perspective. Knowledge comes through this critical reflection on action (praxis). It is experiential. Banking education (as Freire terms teacher-centred, one-way communication) emphasises "second-hand knowledge", "knowing about". This approach is more likely to foster false consciousness, uncritical participation in society and a sense of personal political powerlessness generally. By contrast, education for liberation believes that knowing is an act performed by a human subject. When that subject comes "to know", a transformative transaction has taken place between the knower and the known. The knower experiences his or her power to be an agent of transformation - and this knowledge has cultural, societal and political implications. The epistemological assumptions within education for liberation give it potential to foster political literacy. In this framework literacy is much more than a technical skill. Literacy is viewed as a set of practices that either empowers or disempowers people. It is in these terms that critical pedagogy supercedes the challenge coming from right-wing sources which demands that educators pay more attention to literacy.

Central in any attempt to adopt a Freirean mode is the commitment to dialogue: the "we" (rather than the "us" and "them") of learning. It is also a pedagogy of the "question" or "the problem" rather than of the "the answer" or "the solution". Furthermore, it is an approach without ideological illusions: there is no neutral education.

Of course, the Frierian perpective (which itself enshrines critical review as a key principle) is not above criticism[2]. It is noteworthy that attempts to apply

the Frierean mode in mainstream Western education appear to have been limited both in extent and in effective results[3]. In an Australian context the little Victorian handbook on school-to-work transition programs, *Towards the Socially-Critical School,* prepared by critical approach, even if it is not necessarily wedded to Friere. Similary Shirley Grundy's work on curriculum (1987) is a direct aid to implementation of the socially-critical perspective.

I turn now to describe my course.

The Pre-Service Course

For three semesters I have been developing a Philosophy of Education course "in the Freirean mode" offered to second and third year Diploma of Teaching (Secondary) students and in the second semester of a one year Graduate Diploma programme at the Brisbane College of Advanced Education. It is a core unit taught by several lecturers, in somewhat different styles. Each group has about 20 students.

I divide the course or unit into two sections. In the first section of the 13 week course I introduce general concepts within the philosophy of education gradually focussing more on a Freirean analysis. Through the use of both lecture and student-led seminars, this section (lasting only 5 weeks) raises the key issues for a theory of education: views of the person (human nature) and society; philosophical analyses of theories of learning and knowledge; and the core thematic question, what is "education". All this is done in conjunction with a brief introduction to major theorists, usually Plato, Rousseau, Dewey, Skinner and Illich. Finally at the end of this first part of the course students are introduced to Freire's philosophy of education.

As part of this introductory section of the course, students do a reflective exercise based on their own experiences of schooling and education. Stimulated by a common reading of Theodore Roszak's piece "Schooling: Letting Go, Letting Grow" (1979:ch.7) they write personal reflections in answering the following questions:

> "What have I learnt from my experience of education so far?"
> "What good/bad memories do I have about teaching/teachers?"
> "What are the strengths/weaknesses in this college course for me as a potential teacher?"
> "Why do I want to be a teacher?"
> "What are the major problems in "education" as I see it? What are the things that will need to change for me to achieve my goals as a teacher?"

This reflective writing is entered in a portfolio kept throughout the course as a record of various writings and reflections. The portfolio is assessable. I explain that the aim of this exercise is to identify a problem or question around which students can engage in action-research as a basis for the class discussion they will lead in the second part of the course.

Two audio visual resources are used in the transition between the first and second parts of the course. The first is the documentary film "Stirring" made in a NSW High School in the mid-70s in which a teacher works through strategies of empowerment and problem-solving in a Freirean praxis style with a Grade 10 class of boys. The second is the feature movie, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" which I find stimulates powerful understanding of the nature of institutions, and the process of conscientisation, leading to a discussion of education for liberation and empowerment.

The final weeks of the course, the second part, are the crucial part of the process when students (usually in pairs) lead mini-workshops or discussions on "problems in education" which have emerged from their own experience. Along with this they look at a set of readings mainly about attempts to implement Freire's pedagogical approach.

Students are encouraged to pursue an approach in their "presentations" which is "dialogical" (i.e. they are to refrain from "a banking style" of pedagogy and facilitate a learning process based on input from the whole group) and to deal with the material in as practical a context as they can. These mini-workshops follow a praxis style as far as possible. (This contrasts sharply with the kind of seminar they often present in other college courses where they "perform" for the rest of the students in the class). The agreed-upon process has three stages to it, and they understand this to be "in the Freirean mode".

1. *Name the problem*

Students choose their particular problem prior to the group meeting and negotiate it with the lecturer. Hopefully their choice arises from the reflective exercise about their own experience of education, or from some aspect of practice teaching experience, but a list of possible "problems" is also supplied by me. Usually when introducing the problem to the whole group they adopt some "experimental" approach to enable the group to identify with the problem - a case study, sharing of stories, role play, etc.

2. *Analyse the problem*

   This usually occupies the major section of dialogue "Why is this a problem?" "What are its causes?" The presenter's role is to help the group describe causes within a context of "social literacy" i.e. systemic, not just individualised, causes for the problem. Free-ranging discussion is the usual mode for this part, as opposed to "activities" directed by the presenters.

3. *Act on the problem*

   The discussion is aimed at pinpointing practical steps to be taken in addressing the problem. Usually this is done from the perspective of the beginning teacher in the classroom, but often the discussion points to actions which would be necessary in the total school and in a socio-political context. Understandably these are projected actions. An obvious weakness of the course is that the students do not

actually come to act though they reflect on their actions (at prac. for instance) and they project possible actions (as future teachers).

Occasionally the possibility of acting within the context of their life and work as student teachers in the college has been raised.

They are encouraged to conclude the sessions with a summary reference to the theory behind the practical discussion, usually with an explicit link to Freire's pedagogical approach. My role as lecturer is to have a discussion with each group prior to their presentation and then an evaluative, reflective discussion afterwards. During the class discussion I participate as member of the group, albeit a fairly forceful member of the group, while avoiding domination of the group; my inputs are usually in the form of questions, sometimes facilitating the process, and also making the occasional theoretical teaching point. Throughout the semester I attempt to review and evaluate with the students how they believe the process to be working, especially tying these evaluations to key features of Freire's pedagogical approach.

Each student writes a "report" on their dialogical session; I encourage them to think of it as a report of a workshop on the particular problem, outlining both process and content, and decisions about action. This is their considered "reflections" on the action or dialogue.

Numerous "problems" have been chosen for the workshops. There is a high degree of commonality in questions addressed from group to group. In several instances groups have shaped the problem in a very original way.

One student addressed the problem of "teaching a unit on soil conservation (in a Freirean way)". In fact he developed an elaborate role play in which students became aware of the political dynamics of the issues - his style was to play the part of a Geoffrey Robertson type figure from the ABC series "Hypotheticals". Another student led a discussion on how rules in schools are a problem, and for the occasion composed a song, "Rules of Thumb", which he sang accompanied by guitar as an aid to naming the problem. Another group focussed on "violence, language and the classroom". In very group there has been dialogue on the problem of "coping in a system" as a teacher who has a liberation outlook. The topics of "indoctrination" and "teaching controversial issues" and whether schooling is "for life or jobs" are treated by most groups. "Assessment" as a problem has been canvassed in each group.

A topic taken up in every group, is:

> "What are the dilemmas associated with discipline and punishment in the schooling context? How would they be dealt with in a Freirean context?"

Let me illustrate the process by describing one group's approach to this particular problem. The discussion was initiated or the problem was names, by simply moving around the group getting stories of actual discipline problems students had experienced in their practice teaching. The list was outstandingly illustrative and the conversation animated as students recalled the dynamics of so-called

classroom management problems. In analysing the reasons for discipline as a problem it was significant how quickly they moved from individualised explanation of behaviour problems to systemic analyses. Indeed this particular group identified two major causes of discipline problems, viz., the alienation experienced by students in our large high schools and a lack of sense of, and hope for, the future among students. They briefly addressed these two causes in small groups to identify actions that could be taken to remedy the situation. A lengthy list of action suggested ranged from emphasizing the need to know and address students by name, to the need for a course of social analysis at some point in every secondary student's curriculum. The following extract from the student's report on this discussion is illuminating:

> When it came time for Shona and I to prepared our seminar, we decided to follow the Frierean model outlined by Alschuler (1980) *(Classroom Discipline: A Socially Literate Approach)*. We would firstly situate the problem in the class's experience through a role-play and discussion. We would then build on the dialogue begun in the discussion to attempt to name the central conflict. Finally, groups modelled on the Social Literacy groups would form to arrive at solutions to the problem. We hoped to have the class examine discipline as a problem caused by systems rather than individuals and to see problem-posing education as at least part of the solution.

> The seminar was difficult to plan because we were to act as facilitators and, therefore, could do little more than assist the class to achieve objectives they outlined for themselves. It was hard to get into a seminar having fairly clear objectives in mind and then being prepared to adapt to the group's needs and wishes. In a sense, we probably tried too hard to allow the group to explore the problem and decide on how to solve it. The skills needed to guide the group and assist it in this process were not sufficiently developed in Shona or myself. I found it particularly frustrating when, during the discussion, the group was not perceiving the problem of discipline as a problem with the system and I didn't know how to guide them towards that perception without actually telling them. However, we were able to progress from this stage to name the central conflict.

> The class identified two major factors which caused discipline problems in school. One was the impersonal nature of the classroom and schools; the other was the insecurity students have about their place in the school and society. Two questions were formulated to be dialogued within two sub-groups: How can we create a more personal environment in the school/classroom? And how can be begin to enable students to feel more secure about their place in school/society? I worked with the group who dealt with the latter question. We discussed the problem quite freely and came up with a social analysis program within the school program and extra-curricula activities which involved students in the life of their

society outside school as possible solutions. The other group with Shona was able to come up with ways in which the classroom and schools in general can be made more personal places.

The seminar taught me a lot about the difficulties of conducting a socially literate learning experience. First of all, you must have faith in the ability of the people you are working with. I found it difficult to let members of the class talk about what they thought was relevant when I had firm ideas on where I wanted the discussion to go. In a small group, I had to check myself when I felt like telling the others in the group what I thought they should put forward as solutions to the problem. In a school context, it will be even more difficult to put my faith in the students. Despite the difficulties, I enjoyed the seminar. It was liberating for me to know I wasn't expected to know all the answers. It was good to see the little faith I had in the class was rewarded. They were able to, and willing to, discuss the problem and attempt to formulate solutions. This method of teaching frees the students and the teacher to learn together. This working together on something which answers the students' needs is also the key to solving the discipline problem. The co-operation which occurs as a result of working together towards a common goal alleviates many of the conflicts which cause discipline problems.

Within my overall philosophy of education there is a need for the socially literate approach to discipline. Problem-posing education which is essentially dialogic is incompatible with the traditional method of discipline. I would like to teach in a manner similar to the way we conducted our seminar. My success as a teacher is gauged as much by what I learn as by what my students learn. I also have an ambition to educate students so they will be aware and confident in their ability to transform their world. There will no doubt be conflict between myself and students along the road, but I would like to think this will be minimized if I can respond to their needs and convince them they are working towards their own liberation. When the conflicts do arise, I hope I have the courage to consistently deal with them in a dialogic fashion.

This report is evidence that the students have begun to grasp theoretical features of the Freirean mode. While there is a specific session on this theory around week five or six, theoretical insights are interwoven into all the problem-posing dialogues. By the end of the course students should be able to describe (and contrast it with other major philosophies of education) Freire's view of "the person", his view of learning and knowledge through praxis, the claim that education is never neutral and, the contrast between liberatory education and "banking education".

Discussion

One of my colleagues has paid this attempt the compliment of identifying its virtue as that it makes theory happen. However, an obvious inadequacy in this approach is its deficiency at the point of transformative action. In the end what does happen? The constraints of the institution, its course and the vocational/economic objectives controlling most student responses, work against much "happening". In fact, the most successful outcome in teaching this course was the semester when cuts were announced in the State education budget which directly and significantly affected the employment prospects of our students.

Given the praxis orientation of our learning together, this context provided an opportunity for some intense action as well as reflection. The semester ended with most of these students involved in letter writing, a street march and an action workshop around this educational issue. I am confident that the nature of our class-work predisposed many of the students (who had not been involved previously in such activism) to act, along with their lecturer, in action for change.

While I cannot present quantifiable research about the impact of this approach on students, and though it must be granted that for a variety of reasons some students choose not to respond to the challenge embodied in Freire's critique, feedback from students is encouraging. Frequently they claim to get a lot more from this course than other educational theory courses because they are potentially involved for a greater part of the course; they note how the process builds a powerful "esprit de corps" in the class; they appreciate the "practical" basis of the philosophical reflection; they acknowledge the value of "the dialogical" in contrast to the more "banking style" seminars in other courses.

Some students express their doubts as to whether there is too much stress on one philosopher, and also that the liberatory approach is so alien to schooling practice as to be virtually irrelevant. (Indeed that latter point usually becomes "the problem" within "the problems" progressively addressed in the latter part of the course). My response is that the focussed approach causes students to clarify their own views and choices, especially as Freire's critique offers a criticism of the pedagogical styles which predominate in the students' schooling experiences. In addition, I believe that the dialogical process if faithfully followed, saves the liberatory approach from otherwise irrelevance to schooling: at worst, the dialogue encourages honesty about the incompatibility between liberatory education and schooling. This in turn raises further questions about what action is implied. In other words, this approach has potential to go beyond merely naming problems or charting ideals, which often becomes a difficult blockage in educational theory subjects. In this method students encounter truthful problem-solving. Admittedly, the process generally points to the need for costly actions for change, while at the same time being potentially empowering.

I do not deny that in the end my justification for this approach is somewhat ideological: I attempt to be explicitly honest with my students about my commitments while encouraging them to develop their own, which frequently differ from mine. In practice, the course would thereby mark the starting-point for students intentionally developing their own philosophy of education.

I must add that, while I clearly indicate to students my preference for the Freirean mode, I regard it as essential that students criticise Freire and criticise the suitability of this approach, especially its applicability to teaching in Queensland secondary schools. Indeed, any attempt to apply Freire's method should be tempered by Henry Giroux's caution (1985: xviii/xix) that it is not to be translated "in gridlike fashion" to any topic or pedagogical context. Rather,

> What Freire does provide is a metalanguage that generates a set of categories and social practices that have to be critically mediated by those who would use them for the insights they might provide in different historical settings and contexts. Freire's work is not meant to offer radical recipes for instant forms of critical pedagogy; rather, it is a series of theoretical sign posts that need to be decoded and critically appropriated within the specific contexts in which they might be useful.

The question arises as to whether it is possible to use "the dialogical/problem posting" approach but avoid what might be termed "ideological commitments". Clearly it is possible to do this: indeed, in an illuminating and helpful account of teaching philosophy at pre-service level at the University of New England Hobson and Moore claim to be doing just that (1987:10). However, while it may be possible to follow a process approach involving Freire's dialogical method, I would maintain that to be "in the Freirean mode" requires, at least, an appreciation of Freire's commitment to cultural transformation and a socio-political analysis which leads to a pedagogy which confronts what Ira Shor calls "the anti-critical forces". (1980"Ch.2)

In conclusion, what of this pre-service experiment as a step toward political literacy? Some of the students never actually make more than a stammering utterance of political awareness. Nevertheless, for some (usually social science, art, drama or english students) the course is a major breakthrough in ideological articulation. It would probably work better in an ongoing action-reflection in-service context with longer and more thorough workshops. At the pre-service level, however, given the limitations of the classroom situation within a CAE, it would certainly be more effective if it were part of a coherent cluster of courses (in curriculum, teaching strategies, sociology and whatever) committed to a socially-critical perspective, and all that within an activist socially-critical community of learning.

Despite its shortcomings and its experimental nature, it is an attempt which might commend itself to those who resist the pressure to form teachers as technicians and who are committed to being what Aronowitz and Giroux term "the transformative intellectual" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985:Ch.2).

Footnotes

1. This view has been thoroughly developed in a very recent publication by Freire and Macedo (1987) *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World,* Routledge and Kegan Paul.
2. See for example, Bowers (1985); Walker in Mackie (1980), Frankenstein (1983), Fiore and Elsasser (1982), Shor (1980), and Macklin (1978). Macklin's Ph.D. dissertation drew on parallels between Habermas and Freire to lay the foundations for a pre-service "reflexive curriculum" in philosophy of education.

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