

Freirean Critical Pedagogy and the Decolonization of Minds: Importance for Community Colleges in the U.S. Higher Education System

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Abstract As an important part of U.S. higher education, community colleges provide access to post-secondary education for students commonly underrepresented in higher education and from marginalized segments of U.S. society. These students also carry with them a long history of colonization resulting in domination, oppression and exploitation. They are susceptible to conform to workforce vocational training that emphasizes rote skills acquisition and to fitting into the corporatized society as ‘obedient’ workers. A Freirean critical pedagogy with concepts of *conscientização*, *praxis*, and *questioning* can constitute an avenue for students to decolonize their minds leading to awareness of possibilities and realization of potentials. Employing a Freirean critical pedagogy can also counter this kind of workforce vocational training by developing a *critical pedagogy of work education* as envisioned by Simon, Dippo & Schenke (1991) or a *democratic vocational education* as articulated by Kincheloe (1999).

Keywords: U.S. higher education; community colleges; Paulo Freire; Freirean critical pedagogy; decolonization of minds; critical pedagogy of work, democratic vocational education

Introduction

There is still a common belief in U.S. American society that the American dream is within reach for all those who ‘work hard.’ What sometimes is not clear is how education, particularly higher education, fits within the context of achieving this dream. Throughout U.S. American history, higher education appears to be predominantly associated with the ‘well-to-do’ and privileged segments of U.S. society making higher education to be perceived by many as a realm for those who can financially afford it. In this way, higher education can be seen as a vehicle for perpetuating white privilege (e.g., Carnevale & Strohl, 2013).

The colonizer mentality, employed to dominate and conquer those who are ‘different,’ spares no effort to continue the colonization in order to perpetuate status and privilege. The colonization of those who are ‘different’ emphasizes the need to maintain social stratification, and school settings are prime agents to colonize the mind (e.g., Fanon, 1963/2004; Memmi, 1965/1991; Freire, 1970/1994; 1977/1978). Privilege and status are learned to be respected by those who are ‘different’ to the benefit of those in power who in turn wield their power to make decisions about schooling, curricula, standards, and educational policies. Schools streamline students through a language that teaches obedience, conformity, docility, compliance with established rules, and acceptance of preordained roles in society. Illich (1971) posits “[s]chool is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is.” (p.113) Language, therefore, becomes the tool to colonize the mind, making all those progressing through school encapsulated within the designs and desires of those in control and power. It should be noted that the reference

to language in this context is not centered on the national and/or official language(s) spoken in a nation, or yet any languages spoken by immigrant groups, but a new form of language developed to control, intimidate and dominate. It is an oppressive mind-colonizing language that disavows dissent, a language that treats respectful disagreement as uncivility, pitting the ‘civilized’ against the ‘uncivilized,’ while creating a compliant milieu and a disengaged culture.

Paulo Freire and the critical pedagogy rooted in his work continue to be of relevance and importance, even more so today in our time of the tendency of neoliberalism morphing into authoritarianism. During this year’s remembrance of the 100th anniversary of Paulo Freire’s birth, celebrated with this special issue of *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, it is fitting to recall Giroux’s (1992) statement of Freire’s work and its political insights “[...] the profound and radical nature of its theory and practice as an anti-colonial and postcolonial discourse.” (p. 15)

The title of this paper borrows the phrase ‘Decolonization of Minds’ from Paulo Freire (1977/1978, p. 20), referencing the phrase of Aristides Pereira¹ “descolonização das mentes” (translated as *decolonization of minds*; see also Freire, 1985, p. 187). Paulo Freire, being from Brazil - colonized by the Portuguese - and based on his extensive educational work in Lusophone Africa, was very aware from personal experience of colonization and its effect on people. The work of Frantz Fanon (1963/2004) and Albert Memmi (1965/1991) on colonizer and colonized already features prominently in

¹ Aristides Pereira (1923-2011), member of the leadership (joining Amilcar Cabral) of the Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde independence movement from Portuguese rule and President of Cape Verde from 1975-1991.

his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1994)² and his development of the oppressor/oppressed relationship. A Freirean critical pedagogy is fittingly suited to address the effects of colonization and to decolonize the minds of those exposed to long-lasting subordination, domination and oppression (e.g., Mayo, 2017).

In his book *Decolonizing the Mind* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o uses the image of the cultural bomb to describe the impact of colonization on the minds of those who experience this colonization. According to Thiong'o (1986)

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves ... [to] see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement [...]. (p. 3)

Within U.S. higher education, specifically, it is crucial for a large number of students to shed imprinted notions of inferiority -- of having nowhere to go within society -- which were/are imparted over centuries, continuing to the present. These students from marginalized segments of U.S. society, if provided with an opportunity for higher education, predominantly attend community colleges. It is vital for these students and their families to break the cycle of colonization and, not the least, it is critical for the survival of a substantive democracy.

The first part of this paper provides an overview of the U.S. community college, its students and its place within

² Freire apparently worked with a Spanish translation of *The Wretched of the Earth* (published in Mexico, 1965; original 1961 *Les Damnés de la Terre*) and the English translation of *Portrait du Colonisé, précédé par Portrait du Colonisateur* (1957): *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1967; Beacon Press).

U.S. higher education. This is followed by a brief overview of some concepts of Freirean critical pedagogy. The last part of the paper shows the importance of applying tenets of Freirean critical pedagogy for (a) the decolonization of community college students' minds – a process that will lead to the recognition of their right to choose their educational path while fulfilling their potential – countering the legacy of subordination and sense of inferiority brought about by colonization, and (b) to develop a critical and holistic democratic vocational education, in contrast to vocational training and rote skills acquisition as emphasized in neoliberal workforce development schemes promoted by local, state and federal legislative initiatives.

The Community College within U.S. Higher Education

Higher education in the U.S. has a long history and with time there has been a continuous expansion in the number of institutions in response to societal, economic, and national security demands (historical overview provided, for example, by Thelin, 2019; Hutcheson, 2020). One major development was the growing importance of 'practical' higher education and the introduction of widespread 'agricultural' and 'mechanical' arts; this coincided with the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1890 that led to the establishment of state flagship universities and the expansion of public college/university systems. The development of modern professional education (for example for law and medicine) and the demand for education of the developing middle class were other drivers in the growth of U.S. higher education. What is sometimes referred to as mass higher education started with the G.I. Bill at the end and following World War II.

A persistent theme throughout the history of U.S. higher education is exclusion and stratification. Segments of society were excluded from higher education starting with gender-based exclusion, with women not able to attain a post-secondary education; exclusion based on socio-economic status; and exclusion based on race. Separation of races, in fact, was still encoded in the Morrill Land Grant Acts (Hutcheson 2020). Exclusionary practices also led to the founding of separate institutions (e.g., women colleges; today's HBCUs -- Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Stratification in U.S. higher education at the institutional level is evident, for example community colleges are 'junior' colleges or were also referred to as 'sub-colleges;' in addition, social stratification of the student body occurs within institutions.

Community colleges, initially referred to as junior colleges, originated in Illinois in 1901 with Joliet Junior College through an agreement between Joliet High School and the University of Chicago (Cohen & Braher, 2008) with the aim to prepare students not yet ready to enter established higher education institutions, such as the University of Chicago. This is the common narrative, but the historical reality indicates that this picture may have been more 'complicated' (Hutcheson, 2020). Junior colleges were designed to provide the first 2 years of a liberal arts education that would allow students to transfer to a 4-year college/university program and to accommodate the rising number of students who sought post-secondary education. Accommodating this increase in students seeking post-secondary education resulted in an increase in the number of community colleges, most significantly in the early 1960s (Cohen & Braher, 2008; Hutcheson, 2011, 2020), with currently 1,050 institutions (942 public, 35 tribal, 73 independent) (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

With time, vocational education leading even to terminal 2-year degrees became more prominent at community colleges at the expense of its original transfer-function. Within the U.S. higher education landscape, community colleges occupy a rather special place. They were conceptualized as open-access (non-selective) institutions of higher learning with low tuition costs, allowing students to pursue post-secondary education (Cohen & Braher, 2008). In addition, community colleges are characterized by comprehensiveness, life-long learning, community connectedness, and teaching focus (Bahr & Gross, 2016). Significantly, community colleges provide primary access to higher education for commonly underrepresented segments of U.S. society (Bahr & Gross 2016):

- 1st generation students
- students from low-income backgrounds
- underprepared students
- minority students
- students of non-traditional ages and circumstances.

Community colleges are clearly an integral and important component of the U.S. higher education landscape. They provide education for 41% of all U.S. undergraduate students, and they provide post-secondary education for a large segment of a student population that is historically not represented in higher education. The average age of community college students is 28 years and a large proportion of first-generation students to attend college do so at a community college. As a matter of fact, the diversity of students at community colleges is of major significance (Table 1) – both for providing educational opportunities and enriching the classroom experience for all students as a microcosm of the larger society.

Category	Percentage
White	44
Hispanic	26
Black	13
Asian/Pacific Islander	6
Native American	1
2 or more races	4
Nonresident Alien	2
Other/Unknown	4

Table 1. U.S. community college student demographics (based on American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.)

Significantly, of the total U.S. undergraduate students, 57% of Native Americans, 52% of Hispanics, 42% of African-Americans, and 39% of Asian/Pacific Islanders attend community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). This implies whatever political, societal, economical forces affect community colleges will affect primarily students from segments of society commonly underrepresented within U.S. higher education.

U.S. community colleges readily accepted neoliberal free-market principles (e.g., Levin, 2001, 2005; Saunders, 2010; Boyd, 2011; Kroll, 2012, 2016; Rhoades, 2012; Cruz & Dorsch, 2015). As with other institutions of higher learning – worldwide – (e.g., Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000; Giroux & Searls Giroux, 2004; Giroux, 2009; 2014; Levidov, 2005; Kumar, 2016) this adoption of free-market business-driven ideas permeates the fabric of the U.S. community colleges exacerbated by the fact of a long history of ties to the corporate world (Boyd, 2011). This neoliberal thrust is illustrated, for example, by the implementation of an auditing culture; the decrease of full-time faculty members coupled with an increase in contingent faculty; the standardization of the curriculum; the growth in the number of courses emphasizing corporate values; the

abandonment of shared governance and the installation of top-down management; the emphasis on skills acquisition correlated to demands from corporations; and the introduction of business language and corporate leadership structure (e.g., Saunders, 2010; Cruz & Dorsch, 2015). Reflecting on this take-over of higher education (which includes U.S. community colleges) by neoliberal philosophy Giroux (2019), for example, states that higher education institutions are "... willing to make the culture of business the business of education" and that "... education is now viewed either as a form of mass entertainment, training, or aligned to market values and dominated by the imperatives of economical exchange." (p. 12)

The COVID-19 pandemic, starting in late 2019, had a significant impact on education and students from the pre-K-12 through postsecondary education (e.g., United Nations, 2020). The pandemic-induced conversion to exclusively online education also affected U.S. community colleges which experienced a significant drop in enrollment (twice as much as experienced by U.S. 4-year colleges, e.g., Saul, 2021), as students struggled with economic challenges, health concerns, and the digital divide when the required technology resources for online education could not be matched by students and their families. Although all U.S. community college students were affected, the proportion of African-American, Hispanic and other minority students was especially high (e.g., Saul, 2021) with a fear that this is not just a disruption in their college education but that they might drop out completely with subsequent enormous social and economic implications.

The change in the U.S. in January 2021 from the Trump-Pence administration to the Biden-Harris administration also offered a potentially significant

opportunity for U.S. community colleges. The Biden-Harris administration's proposed legislative initiative 'American Families Plan' includes \$109 billion for tuition to cover two years of community college education (e.g., The White House, 2021; Jaschik, 2021). This initiative emphasizes workforce training ("American workers need and deserve additional support to build their skills, increase their earnings, remain competitive, and share in the benefits of the new economy" – The White House, 2021) and harks back to the unfunded 'American College Promise' proposal of the Obama-Biden administration in 2015 that also emphasized workforce training at U.S. community colleges (e.g., Kroll, 2016). Should the Biden-Harris administration's plan turn into law, U.S. community colleges can expect an increase in student enrollment. However, with such an increase in enrollment there also needs to be the funding for additional infrastructure, support staff and instructors to align with this expected upsurge in students attending U.S. community colleges.

Freirean Critical Pedagogy: A Pedagogy of Liberation

Considering the nature of U.S. community colleges, the spectrum of students attending community colleges and their backgrounds, and the colonizing attitudes many of these students are exposed to, critical pedagogy can play a crucial role in overcoming the disadvantageous circumstances faced by many of the students. Critical pedagogy, however, is indeed a complex notion. Some scholars even go as far as stating that there are several critical pedagogies, and in some countries it appears under a different name, for example as liberation pedagogy in Germany. Within the context of this paper, critical pedagogy as espoused through the work of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux is the focus. It emerged with the practical work of Paulo Freire on literacy in Northeastern

Brazil and with his scholarly work starting in the early 1960s. In an effort to try to explain critical pedagogy Darder, Baltodano & Torres (2003, p. 3) have stated that critical pedagogy attempts to link the practice of schooling to democratic principles of society and to transformative social action.

Kincheloe (2008, p. 6-11) adds that critical pedagogy is

- grounded on the social and educational vision of justice and equality;
- constructed on the belief that education is inherently political;
- dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering.

Leystina and Woodrum (1999) assert that critical pedagogy

[...] challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique (so as to transform) any existing undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations. (p. 2)

A Freirean critical pedagogy encompasses several salient concepts (e.g., Cruz, 2012 & 2015 -- based on Freire, 1970/1994; 1974/2005; 1998a; Freire & Faundez, 1989; Table 2).

Dialogue	Curiosity	Questioning
Love	Hope	Ethics
Conscientização		Praxis – Agency

Table 2. Concepts of a Freirean critical pedagogy

Dialogue, the ‘speaking with’ and not the ‘speaking to,’ is essential. A dialogic and problem-posing approach to teaching also needs to involve respect between the individuals involved; it constitutes the opposite of the banking model of teaching in which prepackaged knowledge is mechanically deposited into the minds of passive students. *Questioning* and *curiosity* (curiosity always driving the act of ‘asking questions’) are both instrumental in the generation of knowledge and both are related to the ability to think critically. Higher education institutions must provide an environment that promotes critical thinking, questioning, and critical analysis regarding the nature of knowledge. In democratic education, students need to learn to question where knowledge is coming from, how to evaluate its quality, who produced it, how it was produced, and whose interests does it serve. This all supports a functioning democracy; authoritarianism, on the other hand, suppresses questioning for the sake of ‘order.’ *Love* is at the heart of freeing the oppressed and it is at the core of teaching. Paulo Freire refers to ‘armed love’ as the “fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce” (Freire 1998b, p. 41). Central to a Freirean critical pedagogy is the concept of *conscientização*. It “... is the active process through which a critical understanding of the socio-political-economical circumstances is gained that enables one to actively change oppressive circumstances” (Cruz, 2013, p. 173). The concept clearly involves both the process of reaching critical awareness and the acting upon this realization which leads to a transformation of the conditions that are at the root of oppression. In the words of Paulo Freire (1972)

Conscientization [conscientização] implies, then, that when I realize that I am oppressed, I also know I can liberate myself if I transform

the concrete situation where I find myself oppressed. Obviously, I can't transform it in my head: that would be to fall into the philosophical error of thinking that awareness "creates" reality, I would be decreeing that I am free, by my mind. And yet, the structures would continue to be the same as ever – so that I wouldn't be free. No, conscientization [conscientização] implies a critical insertion into a process, it implies a historical commitment to make changes. (p. 5)

Praxis is the continuing dialectic relationship of action and reflection; action must be followed by reflection, which in turn, might lead to further action. The concept of *hope* permeates Freirean critical pedagogy and is a key to transformative education; Freire states "[...] though I know that things can get worse, I also know that I am able to intervene to improve them" (Freire 1998a, p. 53). In addition, the concept of *ethics* plays an important role in a Freirean conception of critical pedagogy; a universal human ethic resists fatalism and the insistence that a current reality cannot be changed.

Freirean Critical Pedagogy: Emancipating Students through Decolonization and Democratic Education

U.S. community colleges provide post-secondary education to a large number of working-class students, 1st generation college students, and African-American, Hispanic and/or indigenous students. Students from this cross section of society experienced/experience a dominant condition of social existence that is colonial "because there continues to be a structured relationship of cultural, political, and economic domination and subordination ..." (Tejeda, Espinoza & Gutierrez, 2003, p. 13). Tejeda, Espinoza and Gutierrez (2003) also employ

the term internal neocolonialism to emphasize the forms of domination, oppression, and exploitation reaching to the present and experienced by these students and their families.

These marginalized students commonly underrepresented in post-secondary education enter U.S. community colleges carrying with them the attitudes, ideologies, and preconceived notions instilled through internal neocolonialism. Therefore, there is concern that these students, already imbued with predisposed lower expectations and aspirations, are made to believe that they should conform to the predetermined notions of where their place in society should be and that their only educational path is limited to vocational studies which could, consequently, inhibit these students to fulfill their inherent full potential.³ For each individual student to reach their potential, and ultimately for a betterment of society and strengthening of a functional democracy, a 'decolonization of the mind' is crucial. Freirean critical pedagogy with the concepts of conscientização and praxis and the emphasis on questioning (see above) can be the path to such decolonization (see also Tejeda, Espinoza & Gutierrez, 2003; Austin, 2015) that will enable students to situate themselves within society, to realize the factors that determined their societal context, and to allow them reach their full potential and to start transforming their current condition. Students can overcome colonizing attitudes and opinions and choose the educational path and career and not to conform to predetermined notions of where their place in society should be. A Freirean critical pedagogy will enable "[...] that we engage young

³ A criticism of the U.S. community college system, voiced first in the 1970s and 80s (Karabel, 1972; Brint & Karabel, 1989; see also Brint, 2003), was that it contributes to cementing social stratification in U.S. society. In this argument, marginalized and minority student populations are force fed into the economic system and find their place in society by being 'channeled' into and through vocational studies (Pincus, 1980; Brint & Karabel, 1989).

people in the process of questioning their future identities and possibilities.” (Simon, 1992, p. 122)

Decolonization of the mind does not only apply to students. Biased preconceived notions regarding the potential of students commonly underrepresented in post-secondary education held by some community college instructors and community college administrators also need to be addressed and challenged. In the same vein, policymakers at the local, regional, state, and federal level also need to be made conscious that policies set into place for college education must not reinforce oppressive and neocolonial conditions. At an even more fundamental level high school guidance counselors and community college academic advisors, often the individuals students will consult for career advice, will need to be made aware of the neocolonial factors that dominate and subordinate students in order to try to counterbalance their impact. There truly is a wide and varied educational landscape that needs to be attended to with a Freirean view of an emancipatory and liberating education that will allow students to recognize their potential and then “[...] to take their dreams for reality and define images of “that which is not yet.”” (Simon, 1992, p.123)

A segment of students, however, will choose a career, with the prospect of a well-paying job with benefits after graduation, that requires following the vocational path at the community college. After all, the U.S. community college is characterized by offering a large selection of vocational programs (Bahr & Gross, 2006) and this is part of the community college identity. For a long time, community colleges are also the testing ground of the tension between the vocational *training* and vocational *education* emphasis, with the former commonly gaining the upper hand. The focus of federal

support on workforce development supports this and maps out a continuation of the preference for training and skills acquisition at community colleges. Training for a job and rote skills acquisition constitute, following Simon, Dipppo & Schenke (1991)

... an approach that emphasizes the production, organization and regulation of human capacities to fit the existing social and technical relations and material conditions of the workplace (p. 6),

and embrace

... constricted schooling agendas that emphasize individual, technical, and narrow economic interests (p. 6).

Students on the vocational path, of course, need to acquire the skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen profession. However, this is not enough. They also need to receive a critical education that allows for, in the words of Kincheloe (1999, p. 9), “[...] true democratic empowerment of vocational students [...].” Kincheloe (1999) refers to this as *democratic vocational education* and Simon, Dipppo & Schenke (1991) and Simon (1992) describe it as a *critical pedagogy of work education* –

“... a pedagogy that begins with the premise that while students need to learn about the “realities of work” and develop marketable skills, the primary task of work education *is not* to prepare students to meet the needs of employers nor to ensure a student’s immediate economic survival. We are interested in education for work and not simply training for jobs. Therefore we ask what knowledge, skills, and abilities do students need in order to understand and participate in changes that are

taking place in the work world? This, we assert, is a question of cultural politics. Helping students to understand the economic, social, and cultural relations that shape their sense of what is possible and desirable influences the extent to which they are able to define an expanded range of possibilities for the future (Simon, 1992, p. 123).

A democratic vocational education resulting in a worker educated to be an active and critical citizen within a democracy – and able to support a substantive democracy – and also able to understand “what democracy means in the economic sphere” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 7), can best be employed by following the tenets of a Freirean critical pedagogy, an education for liberation not domestication (Freire, 1970/1994). This includes learning and practicing a critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1987) based in the social sciences, humanities, and physical sciences that allow students to critically interrogate statements, data sources, data acquisition, etc. This exposure to critical literacy is not only important but fundamental in a post-truth era, as it would allow seeing through lies, misinformation, “alternative” truths, and “contempt for facts” (Arendt, 1951, p. 350). A “training to be obedient workers” (Aronowitz, 2009, p. x) and to conform without being able to ask questions is not supportive of a vibrant democracy and could lead down the path to a more authoritarian political system. U.S. community colleges must implement critical pedagogy and a democratic vocational education as it will be the path to developing the critical attitude and understanding that is necessary for a productive citizen in a truly democratic society who will be able to speak out and act against authoritarian tendencies and designs in a post-truth society.

A narrowly designed training for a specific local/regional workforce also entails the danger that many jobs and careers as defined today will no longer be available at graduation or shortly after graduation from a college program. Kroll (2012) provides examples from Michigan where a narrow certification training program designed in collaboration with local corporations left graduates stranded when the jobs for which they trained for vanished. Another consideration is that with the rapid advancement of 21st century technology the future work landscape is unknown, what current jobs will be obsolete or completely transformed, and what new jobs/careers will emerge. Students need to be educated as critical thinkers with a broad-based education - not narrowly focused - that will facilitate them to be adaptable to novel situations in the future and not require a constant return to vocational training for 'job re-training' making education not the pursuit of knowledge but a mere commodity 'sold' for training the 'obedient' worker.

Conclusions

A Freirean critical pedagogy, build on the concepts of *questioning*, *conscientização*, and *praxis*, is crucial for decolonizing the mind of U.S. community college students; many of these students are from segments of U.S. society commonly underrepresented within higher education and marginalized based on race, socio-economic status, and cultural backgrounds. These students face a legacy of colonization extending to the present that often results in internalization of preconceived notions of inferiority and acceptance of a place within society predetermined by those in power. A Freirean critical pedagogy can be the path to emancipation, transformation and the realization of the students' full potential. A Freirean critical pedagogy will also enable the development of a *democratic vocational*

education that will reach beyond ‘workforce training’ emphasizing corporate-aligned narrowly-focused rote skills acquisition. If a vocational path becomes a true choice for interested students, it must be a democratic vocational education. A democratic vocational education based on Freirean critical pedagogy concepts will be the best avenue to foster professionally competent, critical and politically literate citizens who can be supportive of a substantive democracy in a post-truth era. It is only by engaging citizens with their own humanity, their need for freedom, and the possibility of a renewed historical context that the decolonization of minds as a process can take place. As Paulo Freire (1985) stated “[w]e need to decolonize the mind because if we do not, our thinking will be in conflict with the new context evolving from the struggle for freedom.” (p. 187)

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