



COMMUNITIES OF DIFFERENCE

CULTURE, LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY

EFFIE BALOMENOS

ROBERT LUKE

TREVOR NORRIS

BLANE DESPRÉS

DARREN LUND

CARLO RICCI

PAULO GHIRALDELLI JR.

PETER McLAREN

JOEL WEISS

HENRY A. GIROUX

VERA NINCIC

JOHN WILLINSKY

CARL LEGGO

JASON NOLAN

EDITED BY

PETER PERICLES TRIFONAS



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Chapter 8 ∞

Freirean Literacy: Difference that Makes a Difference

Carlo Ricci

This chapter looks at ways that we need to engage in dialogue about difference with our students to make a difference. In our contemporary world literacy cannot be limited to learning to read words, but it must connect to the world and our everyday lived experiences. Using Freirean pedagogy as a guide we can start to think about what a system of education that teaches literacy to include difference that makes a difference looks like. This is not meant to be what Freire critiques as a “how-to recipe” for teaching literacy (*Literacy*, p. 134), but it is meant as an example of a fluid approach that others can then re-create and rewrite for use in their own context.

First, as educators we need to give our students the opportunity to engage in dialogue along *with* others in a comfortable nonthreatening environment. Second, teachers need to use what Freire calls a problem-posing method of teaching rather than a banking system. Problem-posing pedagogy forces students to think critically, to reflect, and to act. Of problem-posing education, Freire says,

They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings and their relations with the world. “Problem-posing” education, responding to the essence of consciousness—*intentionality*—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being conscious of, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian “split”—consciousness as consciousness of consciousness. (*Oppressed*, p. 60)

A problem-posing system of education is one that offers students the opportunity of engaging in meaningful dialogue about questions and issues that are genuine. Teachers and students need to talk *with* each other, as opposed to having the teacher talk *to* the students. Of course the teacher can and is encouraged to share his or her opinion; however, the teacher should not manipulate or authorize the students to

take on the teacher's position. The dialogue must be a genuine inquiry into a substantive issue that is meaningful to the students' lives. A banking system of education, on the other hand, is one whereby the teacher deposits information into the student's head. hooks defines it as, "that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed on them by a professor and to be able to memorize and store it" (p. 14).

In a chapter in *Literacy: Reading the Word, and the World* titled "The People Speak Their Word: Literacy in Action" Freire shows us an example of an emancipatory literacy in practice that focuses on teaching literacy and difference that makes a difference. The chapter is about adult literacy in the context of the republic of Sao Tome and Principe. The texts that are used to teach adult literacy are *The Popular Culture Notebooks*: Freire tells us that this is a generic name given to a series of books and primers. By examining a few of the passages in the text, the political nature of the text quickly becomes apparent. Recall that Freire insists that all teaching is political and that teaching in a directive way is not problematic, but it is only when teaching is done in an authoritarian and manipulative way that it becomes problematic. Here are some sample passages from the texts:

We all know something. We are all ignorant of something. For this reason, we are always learning.

Let's read, think, and discuss.

Working with perseverance, we produce more. Producing more, on the land that is ours, we create riches for the happiness of the people.

With the MLSTP (Liberation Movement of Sao Tome and Principe) we are building a society in which everyone participates for the well-being of all. We need to be watchful against those who are trying to bring back the system of exploitation of the majority by a dominant minority.

Now try to write about what you read and discussed. (Freire, *Literacy*, p. 72)

And,

Let's read.

We become independent at the cost of many sacrifices. With unity, discipline, and work we are consolidating our independence. We repel those who are against us and we gather together those who demonstrate their solidarity with us.

You the colonists, you were wrong to think that your power of exploitation was eternal. For you, it was impossible to believe that the weak, exploited masses would become a force in the struggle against your power.

You took with you almost everything that was ours, but you couldn't take with you our determined will to be free.

Maria, Julieta, and Carlos—they struggled to increase production. They always bring with them the certainty of victory.

We, us, with us.

You, you, with you.

They, they, themselves, to themselves, of themselves, for themselves, with themselves, to them, them, them.

Write sentences with:

Us, to them, with us. (Freire, *Literacy*, p. 73)

The political nature and messages championed in these passages are poignant examples for how in teaching literacy the approach is not academic, utilitarian, cognitive development, nor romantic, but definitively emancipatory.

Just like in the *Popular Culture Notebooks*, we need to focus on an emancipatory literacy that begins with the students' everyday lived experiences. We need to challenge them to read the word and the world in a way that will challenge the oppressive pressure and practices that are racist, sexist, and/or homophobic; we need to challenge them to question the status quo and aim for transformation, rather than merely affirmation. Along with Freire we must engage in literacy and difference that makes a difference.

Furthermore, as teachers are engaging in dialogue *with* their students they need to focus on what Paulo Freire refers to as right thinking. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire tells us that part of "right thinking" is to decidedly reject any and every form of discrimination. "Preconceptions of race, class, or sex offend the essence of human dignity and constitute a radical negation of democracy" (p. 41). Right thinking, therefore, is an attempt to make society less racist, less sexist, less classist, less homophobic, and more environmentally conscious. In short, right thinking aims to encourage each of us to do our part and transform the world into a more socially just place. Are students and teachers ready for this challenge? Can students and teachers teach and learn to engage in literacy that focuses on difference that makes a difference rather than on a literacy that focuses on Phonics Readers?

In order to answer the above question I read the world by sharing some contemporary examples of stories in today's news (Saturday, December 21, 2002) that offer evidence for how teachers and students can make a difference. Using contemporary news stories is a valuable way of teaching students about the world. It is a useful way of making students aware of substantive issues and to get them to become active citizens that feel empowered enough to transform the world. I argue that literacy is about encouraging students to engage in transforming the world and in contributing to making the world a more just place for all. The first news item I share with you is from British Columbia, Canada. Anybody who has been in the school system recently will attest to the need for dialoguing about homophobia. Many students use language that refers to homosexuals in a derogatory way. This injustice needs to be challenged and students need to reflect on why these citizens have traditionally been marginalized within our society. Using a story that made the front page of many of the major papers in Canada (Saturday, December 21, 2002) is a good way to get students to engage in a meaningful dialogue about the issue. The following news story is a true testament to how we can engage students in literacy that focuses on difference that makes a difference. James Chamberlain, a primary teacher, and four other litigants spent \$400,000 of their own money and are now \$175,000 in debt to successfully challenge a British Columbia school board for banning three books (*Asha's Mums*; *Belinda's Bouquet*; and *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads*) depicting same-sex parents. The Supreme Court of Canada said that, "no age is too tender for children to learn the value of tolerance" (Makin, A1). In his article, Kirk Makin quotes Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin saying, "children cannot learn [tolerance]

unless they are exposed to views that differ from those they are taught at home" (A1). Mr. Chamberlain makes a stronger case when he argues for acceptance rather than merely for tolerance. Makin quotes Mr. Chamberlain as saying that "It sends a message to school boards that they need to teach acceptance of same-sex families and have their educators teach kids about homophobia" (A1). A sign of hope is that of the 300 students Mr. Chamberlain taught since the case began only one set of parents has denounced him. We, as educators, must teach texts that encourage right thinking and like Mr. Chamberlain we must challenge unjust decisions and thereby contribute in transforming society for the better.

While at a friend's home several weeks ago she brought out several children's books that she had recently purchased for her two-year-old daughter. She explained how she noticed them on display as she was browsing through the bookstore. She picked up two of the books and proceeded to walk to the cash register ready to pay. The clerk mentioned to her that they have other books in the series and a tape that goes along with it—she purchased the four-volume set. My friend assures me that these books and books like them are very popular and widely used even in schools, and that partly motivated her to buy them. When she took them home and reviewed them before deciding whether to expose her daughter to them she quickly realized that they were not what she had expected or hoped for. She embarrassingly admitted that the purchase was impulsive. The books in question were Dr. Maggie's Phonics Readers. The books (*I Spy; Hap and Cap; Top Job, Mom!; Pom-Pom's Big Win*) were written by Dr. Margaret Allen and illustrated by Priscilla Burris. These books try to teach literacy by using what Paulo Freire refers to as syllabification, rather than by using engaging texts that deal with substantive issues that connects to students' lived experiences, social justice, and democracy. In this chapter I argue that teaching literacy cannot simply be about syllabification but that it must deal with substantive issues. Teaching literacy must be about difference that makes a difference. A literate person is not someone who can decipher phonetic skills, but a literate person is someone who can actively participate in and transform the world they live in.

Both Phonics Readers and the banned books are tools that teachers have to teach literacy. The Phonics Readers are focused on syllabification and sentences like "Spy, spy. I spy. I spy the cat in the hat on a mat" (Allen, *Spy*, pp. 8–9). The banned books, alternatively, deal with issues that are of a more substantive nature. They readily allow for teachers and students to think about, question, challenge, dialogue with each other and transform the status quo in favor of a more right-thinking democratic position. As educators we must offer our students the opportunity to engage with texts that deal with substantive issues.

To those who have Phonics Readers in their rooms and insist on using them I suggest that as teachers we need to teach our students to critically challenge the stereotypes that many of these texts depict. For instance, in Allen's *Top Job, Mom!* the mother is often wearing an apron and cooking while the father is lying on the couch reading a newspaper. Students need to be trained to challenge these stereotypes. The book tries to pass itself off as progressive by having "Mom put the new tan fan on" (Allen, *Top*, p. 5). Mom is pictured with a ladder and tool box; unfortunately, while mom is doing this as well as cooking and taking care of the children, dad is still pictured lying on the couch reading his newspaper. We as educators must teach our

students to read their texts (whether they are words, films, malls, architecture, their homes, schools, communities and so on) critically. Teachers should have students rewrite, challenge, and resist the antisexist, antiracist, anti-homophobic, anti-classist, antienvironmental messages whenever they are presented in texts.

Another example of a news story that can be used to examine homophobic issues aired on December 18, 2002. Connie Chung interviewed a gay teen who was banned from gym class, her mother, and their lawyer. The teen, Ashley Massey, was banned from gym class and made to spend over a week in the principal's office during that period. The school claims that she was banned from class because the other students felt uncomfortable about having a gay teen in the locker room. When the teacher called Ashley's mother, Amelia Massey, Amelia asked if Ashley was removed because of misconduct. The teacher responded that there was no misconduct and that Ashley is doing what she is supposed to do in gym class. Although, the teacher added that the other girls felt uncomfortable. Ashley, however, says that she asked the other girls, many who are her friends, and they all assured her that they do not feel uncomfortable by her presence. Connie Chung makes clear that the school, the teacher, the superintendent, and the principal have not given their side of the story.

Martha Matthews, Ashley's attorney, explains that what they are trying to achieve by this lawsuit is that Ashley's constitutional right to equal treatment in a public school classroom be protected. Matthews refers to a fairly recent California state law, Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, which prohibits school districts from discriminating against students on the basis of real or perceived sexual orientation. Matthews discloses that what they want to gain from the lawsuit is an injunction that would require the school to have clear and written policies and training for teachers and administrators. Ultimately, the hope is that this will not happen to any other student. Matthews concludes that just because someone is uncomfortable others do not have a right to exclude them from a public space like a school that everyone has the right to be in. After all, Matthews reminds us that students might have felt uncomfortable by having students of a different race during the early days of integration.

Jeffery Tobin who is the CNN Connie Chung Tonight show's legal analyst paints a bleak picture by revealing that the federal courts under the U.S. constitution have by and large said sexual orientation is not something that they protect. Fortunately, California state law does say that discrimination in a school setting because of sexual orientation is grounds for damages. So, Jeffery predicts that if their allegations are true they could win under California state law. Jeffery concludes that even though the federal courts might let people get away with discrimination resulting from sexual orientation, California state law will not.

This case is another good opportunity for teachers to expose students to literacy that focuses on difference that makes a difference. Teachers can easily use this as a part of their curriculum and allow students to talk *with* each other about the implications of this case. Ultimately, the hope would be that students would side with democratic principles and right thinking. The aim is not to force students to accept right thinking, but to trust that through dialogue students will come to understand that discrimination is not acceptable, that difference must be accepted.

I recently witnessed a group of high school students engaging in a dialogue with their elder family members about interracial marriages and same-sex marriages.

The young high school students did a laudable job of dialoguing with their elders. The elders insisted that interracial and same-sex marriages were wrong, while the high school students passionately argued against this racist and homophobic position. It is shocking that going into 2005 there are still members of our community that are not accepting of interracial and same-sex marriages but not surprising when we consider how high-power community leaders have the audacity to make racist, sexist, and/or homophobic comments in public. Today's news also includes Trent Lott's comments, which are an obvious example of this type of racially inexcusable language.

Another story that has played large in both the United States and Canada is Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's resignation. In his article, Paul Koring says,

"Mr. Lott sullied that effort [Mr. Bush's attempts to reach out to minorities who have traditionally felt ignored by the Republican Party] when he recalled that his state of Mississippi had backed Mr. Thurmond's presidential bid in 1948. 'We're proud of it,' he [Mr. Lott] said. 'And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over the years.'" (A18)

The "our lead" that Mr. Lott is referring to is his wish that Strom Thurmond who "launched his 1948 bid for president on a platform of the 'segregation of the races and the integrity of each race'" (Saunders, A18) would have won the election. In essence Lott is supporting racial intolerance. Students need to be given the opportunity to engage in dialogue about politics and racial intolerance so that they can make informed decisions during elections and hopefully side with acceptance of difference and not with intolerance. They must feel empowered and realize that they can make a difference.

In our visual culture reading pictures is another invaluable form of literacy. The *Globe and Mail* has a poignant and visceral picture of Vice President Dick Cheney, President George Bush, Senator Trent Lott, daughter Julie Thurmond, and wife Nancy Thurmond with Senator Strom Thurmond on December 6, his hundredth birthday. This picture can inspire students to think about the president's attempts to reach out to minorities on the one hand, and his posing with Senator Strom Thurmond who launched his 1948 bid on a platform of the segregation of the races on the other. Students can discuss whether the racial intolerance that the American South is so well known for is alive in the Republican Party and the American presidency? Students must be allowed to engage in a dialogue about the racist ideologies still evidenced in Canada and the United States and they must be encouraged to take their antiracist messages to the community. Just like the example above where the high school students passionately challenged their elders' misguided views, students can take what they learn in the classroom and spread right thinking.

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to offer examples of pedagogy that teaches literacy by focusing on difference that makes a difference. By using contemporary media, Paulo Freire's dialogical approach, his emphasis on problem-posing education, and his notion of right thinking we can see how our education system can go beyond teaching students to accept the status quo and instead to challenge society to struggle to eliminate oppression. We need to encourage students to go beyond the

words and to transform the world. We must teach literacy and difference that makes a difference. Students need to read, write about, watch and produce works about difference that make a difference and aim to approach right thinking.

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