Early Freire, Scientific Freire, and Mature Freire: Complete Ontological and Epistemological Rupture or Partial Shifts?

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Abstract: This article rejects the mainstream view that Freire made one all-important definitive contribution to popular education. Althusser’s application of the theory of epistemological breaks (2006) informed this research. Based on a deconstructive re-reading and survey of Freire’s important literatures this research traced the diachronic changes in Freire’s thought: Christian, Marxist, and postmodern. The results of this research have implications to research and practice in adult, continuing, extension, and community education.

Introduction

Description of the Issue
Paulo Freire is an author to which many articles and books make reference, especially those dealing with critical pedagogy and popular education. Freire is often but erroneously pinned down as having metaphysically produced an immutable formula for his pedagogy for liberation. This article challenges the dominant interpretation that Freire primarily developed a method once and for all that has timeless applicability. Many view critical consciousness, dialogue, and problem-posing education as the definitive formula for liberatory education, which is a misrepresentation of Freire. Freire is far more complex that these trite formulations. In contrast, this paper presents the argument according to which Freire’s ontology and epistemology developed from one space and time to another, yet it remains to be a coherent and cohesive philosophy, despite numerous changes.

Research Questions
This paper answered two research questions. One, based on the literatures he cited, what are the different phases in the development of Freire’s ideas? Two, what are the implications of the findings to adult, continuing, extension, and community education?

Intellectual Inspiration as Theoretical Framework
Althusser, who was a professor at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, France, studied the evolution of the ideas of Marx. Althusser inspired me to do a similar study on Freire. Althusser (2006) claimed that Marx had an epistemic break or discontinuity in his writings. Hence, he classified Marxist thought in to two: young Marx and mature Marx. The problématique or the fundamental structure of thought of the Young Marx focused on the study of ethics and ideology, while the problématique of the mature Marx focused on the scientific study of history and political economy. Althusser claimed that the break was not a specific event in a chronological point in time but a process. Hence, there still was continuity amidst discontinuity. Althusser asserted that Marx was grossly misunderstood. I make the same claim that Freire was likewise grossly misunderstood and that his break was a process. This article
continues the in-depth research based on the direction that Jeria (1989) took, showing the various influences on Freire through time (history) and space (context).

**Research Process and New Insights and Challenges on the Issue**

The issue raised in this research developed new insights about Freire and critical pedagogy. Specifically, this paper advances a controversial argument that Freire had paradigmatic shifts, but not total epistemic breaks. While Freire consistently struggled against the pedagogy of the oppressed, he did not speak with one voice. He spoke with multiple voices throughout his life in different contexts and historical moments. Hence, one image of Freire is insufficient to describe and interpret his educational philosophy. Rather, Freire can be classified as young Freire, middle-aged Freire, and mature Freire: Freire the Christian existentialist, Freire the political economist, and Freire the postmodernist. However, Freire must not be broken up into pieces, as educators must recognize both tensions and maturity in the development of Freire’s philosophy of education.

Only textual evidence from Freire’s own words in his books will be used. Interpretations from secondary sources will not be used in this research. Major works of Freire’s subject to textual analysis in this research include the following: (1) *Education for Critical Consciousness* (2006), (2) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997; 2005), and (3) *Pedagogy of Hope* (1996b). Some other books which are possible candidates for this literature survey do not qualify, such as *Letters to Cristina* (1996a) and *Pedagogy of the Heart* (2006), as, by the nature of the writings, more of personal reflections, they do not contain academic references.

**Linking Theory and Practice**

This paper clearly links research and theory to practice. It challenges the conventional wisdom about Freire’s pedagogy as a given formula, based on the research-based theoretical literatures. It warns of the negative effects of such reading of Freire’s works on the practice of curriculum development, educational policy, as well as teaching and learning, especially from the perspective of critical pedagogy. This research presents the alternative view that there are at least three phases in the development of Freire’s ontology and epistemology: early Freire, middle Freire, and late Freire, each with its own distinct “flavor,” with both its tensions and unison, when taken as a whole.

Surely, Freire had made paradigm shifts in each stage of his development. However, Freire did not completely reject his previous tools of analysis. Rather, he refined and enriched his social investigation by adding newer tools of analysis available to him in new contexts in which and in different historical periods during which he lived.

**Findings**

Social and political thought changes throughout human history. Ideas are conveniently categorized as ancient or classical, medieval, modern, and postmodern (Curtis, 2008; Rosen & Wolff, 1999). Just as historical moments and ideas change, Freire’s ideas likewise changed throughout his lifetime.

**Early Freire** In the history of ideas, there are different ways in which humans constructed knowledge. During the early stages of human evolution, living and coping with the natural world was part of knowledge construction. In his book, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (2006), Freire introduced the concept of critical consciousness, which he defined as the awareness and understanding of the oppressive nature of societal structures. This Consciousness is developed through a process of critical pedagogy, which Freire believed could empower individuals to challenge and transform these structures.

**Middle Freire** In his later works, Freire elaborated on the idea of critical consciousness by introducing the concept of the oppressed, the oppressor, and the liberator. He argued that the oppressed are not passive victims of oppression but proactive agents who can resist and transform the oppressive system. Freire believed that education could be a tool for liberation, helping the oppressed to critically reflect on their experiences and challenge the oppressive structures. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997; 2005), Freire developed this idea further, emphasizing the importance of critical pedagogy in empowering the oppressed to take control of their own lives and build a more just society.

**Late Freire** In his final phase, Freire expanded his concept of critical consciousness to include the development of a postmodernist perspective. He recognized the limitations of traditional approaches to education and called for a more flexible and inclusive approach that could accommodate the diverse needs of students. Freire believed that education should be responsive to the changing social, economic, and political conditions of society. In his book, *Pedagogy of Hope* (1996b), Freire discussed the importance of hope in the face of oppression and the need for a transformative education that could help individuals overcome their fears and uncertainties.

In conclusion, Freire’s philosophy of education was characterized by a commitment to critical pedagogy, which aimed to empower individuals to resist oppression and transform society. His ideas have had a profound impact on educational practice and continue to inspire educators around the world.
Consciousness, Freire (2002, p. 34) called this “fatalistic” and “naïve consciousness.” Later, humans created superstitious beliefs, which Freire (2002, p. 17) termed “intransitive” or “magical consciousness.” Semi-intransitivity is found in “circumscribed” and “introverted” communities where people “cannot apprehend problems situated outside their sphere of biological necessity” (Freire, 2002, p. 17). “Their interests center almost totally around their survival, and they lack a sense of life on a more historic plane” (Freire, 2002, p. 17). In the state of semi-transitivity, people “confuse their perceptions of the objects and challenges of the environment, and fall prey to magical explanations because they cannot apprehend true causality” (Freire, 2002, 17).

Freire (2002, p. 17) stated that as people “amplify their power to perceive and respond to suggestions and questions arising in their context, and increase their capacity to enter into dialogue… with other [people and] the world, they become ‘transitive’.” Freire (2002, p. 17) added: “It leads [one] to replace [one’s] disengagement from existence with almost total engagement.” Freire (2002, p. 4) defined conscientization as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality.” “Conscientização represents the development of the awakening of critical awareness” (Freire, 2002, p. 19). Freire (2002, p. 19) explained that in “Brazil, the passage from a predominantly intransitive consciousness to a predominantly naïve transitivity paralleled the transformation of economic patterns.” In a nutshell, Freire (2002, p. 44) said: “Critical understanding leads to critical action; magic understanding to magic response.”

At this point in time, Freire himself was a devoted Christian who was involved in social action. Using Christian theological explanations, Freire (2002, pp. 17-18) wrote: “Existence is a dynamic concept, implying external dialogue between [people], between [people] and the world, between [people] and their Creator.” Freire (2002, p. 18) added that: “It is this dialogue which makes of [the human being] an historical being.”

The young Freire (2002) cited Gabriel Marcel, a French Christian existentialist (p. 19), C. Wright Mills, a U.S. sociologist advocating political engagement (p. 34), Jacques Maritain, a French Catholic philosopher (p. 39), Karl Mannheim, a Jewish Hungarian-born anti-fascist sociologist (p. 41), and Karl Theodor Jaspers, a German existentialist (p. 45). Based on the authors that he cited, the young Freire was an educator who was a Christian existentialist and sociologist who was calling for political engagement.

Scientific Freire. In his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire turned modernist, more secular, and Marxist. He talked more about Marxist philosophy, dialectical historical materialism, political economy, and socialism than about Christianity. In this stage of his life, Freire (2002, p. 18) emphasized “critical consciousness.” Freire cited “Marx and Engels” (Freire, 1997, p. 75) and Lenin (Freire, 1997, pp. 106-7). At the same time, he cited the original critical theorists of the “Frankfurt School,” such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas.

Specifically, Freire (2005) cited Rosa Luxemburg, a Polish Jewish Marxist (p. 35), Karl Marx and Engels, German co-founders of Marxism (p. 51), György Lukács, a Hungarian “Western” Marxist (p. 52), Erich Fromm, a German member of the “Frankfurt School” of critical theory (p. 59), Franz Fanon, a postcolonialist from Martinique (p. 62), Régis Debray, a French pro-Che Guevarra who studied under Louis Althusser in Paris (p. 64), and Simone de Beauvoir (p. 74). Others whom Freire (2005) cited included Jean-Paul Sartre (p. 76), Reinhold Niebuhr, a U.S. Protestant theologian who combined Christianity with Marxism (p. 78), Edmund Husserl,
an Austrian-German phenomenologist (p. 83), Lenin, a classical Marxist from the former Soviet Union (p. 125), Fidel Castro, a “Third World” Marxist (p. 129), Gajo Petrovic, a Marxist humanist from the former Yugoslavia (p. 137), Pope John XXIII of the Roman Catholic Church (p. 140), and Albert Memmi, a Jewish Tunisian postcolonialist (p. 140). In addition, Freire (2005) also cited Louis Althusser, an Algerian-born French Marxist (p. 159), Ernesto “Che” Guevara, an Argentine-Cuban “Third World” Marxist (p. 163), Camilo Torres, a Colombian theologian of liberation (p. 163), Martin Buber, an Austrian-born Jewish theological existentialist, Bishop Franic Split of the Roman Catholic Church (p. 143), and Marie-Dominique Chenu, a progressive reformist French Catholic theologian (p. 172).

In summary, “middle Freire” was still a Christian existentialist and phenomenologist, but he leaned more onto classical Marxism-Leninism as well as western Marxism or critical theory, “Third World” Marxism, and postcolonialism. At this stage, Freire’s citations were not only from dead or living white men but also women and people of color. From being a Christian scholar practitioner, Freire at this point in time was becoming more of a modernist Marxist thinker of different variants, combining classical Marxism-Leninism with western Marxism or critical theory and Third-World postcolonial thought.

**Late Freire.** When Freire wrote the *Pedagogy of the Heart*, his sources became even more inclusive. The mature Freire (1996b, p. 10) defended “progressive postmodernity” and rejected “conservative neoliberal postmodernity.” At this stage, he made references to many U.S. based and other critical theorists, as he interacted with them in this different historical period and context. Some of them were Henry Giroux, a U.S. critical pedagogist (p. 11), Donaldo Macedo, a Cape Verdean-American critical theorist (p. 11), Ira Short, a U.S. critical pedagogist (p. 11), Stanley Aronowitz, a U.S. urban sociologist who combines Marxist political economy and culture (p. 11), and Michael Apple, a U.S. critical education theorist (p. 11).

However, the mature Freire (1996b) did not abandon existentialism, classical Marxism and postcolonialism. For example, Freire (1996b) continued to cite Jean-Paul Sartre, a pro-Mao Zedong pro-postcolonial, pro-Third World existentialist Marxist (p. 17), Frantz Fanon, a postcolonial theorist from Martinique (p. 17), Ernesto “Che” Guevara, an Argentine-Cuban “Third World” Marxist (p. 43), Marx and Engels, founders of classical Marxism (p. 88), and Albert Memmi, a postcolonial Jewish Tunisian (p. 105).

He became self-critical and emphasized the need to be gender sensitive as well as to include ethnicity in social analysis. Furthermore, he called for the need to respect differences, including gay rights. In summary, from being a Christian writer, Freire became a Marxist and now a postmodernist. Freire made a distinction between conservative postmodernism which is sophistry and progressive postmodernism with which he identified. Based on textual evidence, the mature Freire was still a “Third World” Marxist, existentialist, phenomenologist, and postcolonialist. But at the same time, he now entered into dialogue with U.S. critical pedagogists and progressive postmodernists.

**Summary.** People change their views, including Freire. Freire was predominantly a Christian existentialist and phenomenologist in his *Education for critical consciousness*. Later, Freire became a classical Marxist-Leninist in the *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Mao Zedong influenced Freire in his views about culture, education, and consciousness. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School later impacted his ideas. By the time Freire wrote the *Pedagogy of the*
heart, he was a progressive postmodernist. There were epistemic breaks. But there were also some overlaps. Freire’s shifts were not neat, as the shifts were not total breaks.

**A Grounded Model of Freire’s Pedagogy and Implications to Education**

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**Conclusion**

**Restatement of the Problem**

This article presented the controversial findings according to which current interpretations of Freire are erroneous. The burden of proof lies with me as the author of this research, which I have provided. Debunking the current understanding about Freire, I presented the antithesis that Freire historically and dialectically developed his pedagogy. Direct textual evidence from major works of Freire was analyzed in detail.

**Summary**

In summary, there are at least three phases in the development of Freire’s thought: early Freire, middle Freire, and late Freire. Each one has a distinct “flavor.” What do textual evidence reveal? Freire did not reject his earlier tools of analysis in each of the three stages in the development of his thought, such as Marxism and postcolonialism. Instead, flowing with the changing times and contexts, Freire added on new theoretical tools to sharpen his analysis. Sure, Freire had made paradigm shifts. But they are more of refinements by adding new tools to enrich his social and political analysis, not rejection of “older” frameworks of analysis.

Early Freire was a Christian nationalist. Still influenced by Christian existentialism, middle Freire was engaged in a Christian-Marxist dialogue but tended to be more of a scientific Marxist. Late Freire still carried Christian and Marxist tones, but was postmodernist on the foreground.

**Implications and Importance to Research and Practice in Adult, Continuing, Extension and Community Education**

So what? Error in understanding Freire has direct impact on the usage of Freire’s ontology and epistemology on educational research and practice. Those who see in Freire an immutable formulaic method are in danger of universalizing his historically and socially contextualized ontology and gnosiology, which were in fact always in the course of constant
development. Far from laying down a blueprint fixed for all eternity, Freire was a very complex thinker whose ideas went through spiral development. In the Hegelian tradition (Hegel, 1979 & 2001), Freire’s old ideas (thesis) and new ideas (antithesis) qualitatively and quantitatively interacted and changed to bring about a new set of ideas (synthesis) over and over again. He demonstrated his sophistication by adapting to the changing times (history) in the different places in which he resided and to which he traveled (social contexts). Historical and social determination is an important lesson for adult, continuing, extension, and community educators, who, in Freire’s tradition, therefore, must also adjust to the shifting times and places. At the same time, while educators, in the practice of Freirean approach, need to enrich their pedagogy, they do not necessarily have to discard their earlier worldviews, just because they are previous perspectives they have adopted in the times past.

References


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