

Ten Years on: Engaging the Work of Paulo Freire in the 21st Century

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Paulo Freire died on 2 May 1997. He left a legacy of practical and theoretical work equalled by few other educationists in its scope and influence. Born in 1921, Paulo Freire grew up in Recife, Brazil. After completing secondary school Freire attended the University of Recife, where he studied law. He also developed a strong interest in educational and philosophical matters. Freire's work with the Social Service of Industry (SESI) at the Regional Department of Pernambuco in the 1940s and 1950s brought him into direct contact with impoverished workers and was to have a significant impact on his subsequent thinking about social class. In the early 1960s Freire developed the distinctive approach to adult literacy education for which he was later to gain international acclaim. Plans for a nationwide literacy campaign were brought to an abrupt halt with the military coup in 1964. Freire was seen as a subversive and he was forced to seek exile. He spent approximately five years in Chile, working with adults in an extension education programme. This was followed by a decade with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. Freire was finally able to return permanently to Brazil in 1980. He became active in the Brazilian Workers' Party, and from 1989 to 1991 served as Secretary of Education in the municipality of São Paulo. His final years were devoted primarily to writing, lecturing and reflection.

Freire's best known book is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1972a). This classic text, together with two other early works, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Freire 1973) and *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Freire 1972b), was published at a time of intense educational debate, with a number of writers across the globe questioning cherished assumptions about teaching, learning and schooling. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was often read alongside Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1973). While Illich and Freire both provided a radical critique of traditional education, the 'answers' they offered were rather different. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* went on to become one of the biggest selling books of all time by an educationist. After the flurry of international interest in the years

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immediately following the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire entered a 'quieter' phase in his writing career, publishing just two books in English in the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. One of these books, *Pedagogy in Process* (Freire, 1978), was based on his experience as an adult education consultant in Guinea-Bissau; the other, *The Politics of Education* (Freire 1985), brought together writings from the previous fifteen years and also included a new interview with Donaldo Macedo.

From 1987 onwards, Freire enjoyed a strong 'second wind' as a writer. He published a number of 'dialogical' texts, written in the form of structured conversations between Freire and his co-authors (Freire and Shor 1987; Freire and Macedo 1987; Freire and Faundez 1989; Horton and Freire 1990; Escobar et al. 1994). These dialogical works addressed both practical and theoretical questions. Freire's reflections on his work as Secretary of Education in São Paulo are captured in *Pedagogy of the City* (Freire 1993). In *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire 1994), Freire responded to some of the issues raised by readers of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *Letters to Cristina* (Freire 1996) captures, in more detail than any of his other books, some of Freire's early educational experiences and is, together with *Pedagogy of the Heart* (Freire 1997a), one of Freire's most 'intimate' and introspective works. Freire's concern with the neoliberal turn in economic and social policy is expressed in a number of later works, among them *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire 1998a), *Politics and Education* (Freire 1998b), and *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Freire 2004), all of which were published posthumously. Freire's later writings also include a book devoted specifically to teachers and teaching (Freire 1998c) and important statements—through articles, chapters and interviews—on his engagement with postmodern and feminist ideas (e.g., Freire and Macedo 1993) and his critique of technocratic approaches to education and teacher training (e.g., Freire 1997b; Freire and Macedo 1995).

Freire's work has been engaged not just by educationists but also by philosophers, sociologists, political studies scholars, anthropologists, linguists, literary theorists, theologians, counsellors, social workers, nurses, prison rehabilitation workers, and peace activists. This list is not exhaustive, and Freire continues to exert an influence on a growing number of scholarly and practical domains a decade on from his death. In the field of education, Freire's ideas have had an especially strong impact in critical pedagogy and adult education, but they have also been discussed and applied by literacy specialists, early childhood educationists, teachers at all levels of the school system, and those working in the tertiary education system. The secondary literature on Freire is vast. In the past ten years alone, more than a dozen books on Freire's work have appeared, together with numerous papers in academic journals. Clearly there is something in Freire's work of ongoing interest to a wide range of scholars and practitioners.

Almost all philosophers of education have some knowledge of Freire's work, but many have only limited familiarity with his later (post-1986) publications. This is significant, for in these later writings Freire extended and deepened many of his earlier ideas, addressed new areas of theory, and commented at length on Brazilian and global politics. The later works pay detailed attention to questions of ontology and epistemology, dialogue, the relationship between 'word' and 'world', reason and emotion, educational virtues, oppression and liberation, the teaching process, authority and authoritarianism, teacher education, the responsibilities of intellectuals, and the role of the university, among other areas. From the early 1990s, Freire also made increasing reference to postmodern ideas and the politics of neoliberalism. He accepted a number of insights from postmodern scholars (see Freire 1993, 1997b; Peters 1999; Roberts 2000; Mayo 2004), yet retained the modernist idea of a 'universal human ethic' (Freire 1998a, 2004). Noting that many on the intellectual left had allowed their differences to become a source of fragmentation and

divisiveness, Freire argued for a position of ‘unity in diversity’ and remained committed to the older political ideals of solidarity and collective struggle. He saw difference as not merely compatible with his notion of educational dialogue, but essential for it. Freire was a staunch opponent of neoliberalism. He drew attention to the destructive impact of neoliberal policies in Brazil and other countries, and argued against the marketisation of education, the commodification of knowledge, and the ethics of greed and exploitation at the heart of global capitalist expansion.

The papers in this issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, collectively, draw on the full corpus of Freire’s published works. The contributors all address areas worthy of further development and discussion in Freirean scholarship. All see something of ongoing value in Freire’s work in the 21st century, but do not accept Freirean ideas uncritically.

The first paper addresses a classic literary work, Hermann Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game*, in the light of Freire’s philosophy of education. The main part of *The Glass Bead Game* is devoted to the educational life of Joseph Knecht, who, it is argued, undergoes a complex process of conscientisation. Knecht develops a critical consciousness, learning, in part through his dialogical relationships with two other key characters, to question prevailing beliefs, attitudes and practices in Castalia—the ‘pedagogical province’ of the future in which he lives. As he matures, Knecht becomes less certain of his certainties, and eventually makes the momentous decision to leave his esteemed position as Magister Ludi (Master of the Glass Bead Game) in favour of a quiet life as a tutor. The paper concludes with brief comments on the value of putting ideas from educational theorists into critical conversation with novels that address complex ethical, epistemological and ontological themes.

One way of continuing the tradition of constructive critical dialogue with Freire is to compare his ideas with those of other thinkers. Peter Mayo’s paper makes a distinctive contribution in this area, addressing points of convergence and difference between Freire and the Italian priest and educationist, Lorenzo Milani. Mayo contextualises the work of Freire and Milani, considers whether either influenced the other, discusses their respective radical readings of the Christian Gospels, and analyses the relationship between education and social justice in their pedagogical theory and practice.

Brian Findsen tackles an area often neglected by philosophers of education: adult education, and in particular, learning in older adulthood. Findsen assesses the relevance of Freire’s philosophy and pedagogy for adult education. His analysis shows that Freirean theory offers an alternative to the prevailing emphasis in lifelong learning on upskilling the workforce for global economic competitiveness. Freire, Findsen argues, has much more in common with the tradition of critical educational gerontology. Findsen critiques technocratic and romantic portraits of later life, addresses the relationship between education and oppression in older adulthood, and, drawing on Freirean ideas, develops a set of pedagogical principles for critical adult educators.

Finally, Claudia Rozas considers the demands placed on Freire by a postmodern view of justice. She identifies three key themes in postmodern work on justice: the way in which individuals are constituted or produced, the significance of difference, and the notion that justice is context dependent. Rozas then ‘tests’ these ideas against Freire’s philosophy and educational theory. She discovers both possibilities and limitations in Freire’s work. Rozas argues that while there are postmodern elements in Freire’s educational philosophy, Freire does not need to be ‘rescued’ from modernity. Freire, Rozas concludes, reminds us of the unacceptability of suffering in all contexts and at all times, and for this reason he remains an important contributor to debates over justice and education in a postmodern world.

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