

The Concept of Teacher-Student/Student-Teacher in Higher Education Trends

Jennifer Job, Oklahoma State University

Bharath Sriraman, University of Montana

Abstract: In this article we examine the use and misuse of the term “Freirean” with respect to student-centered classrooms, flipped classrooms and problem-based learning. In doing so, we unpack teaching methods which are contrary to dialogism and yet subsumed and reported as Freirean.

Keywords: Paolo Freire; constructivism; problem based learning; flipped classrooms; Khan academy

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers.

(Freire, 2005)

Introduction

As schools and universities feel the pressure of the top-down mandates from No Child Left Behind and its reimagining, Race to the Top, the theories of Paulo Freire have gained new traction as a rejection of such mandates. In an age of reduced teaching autonomy and an audit culture of constant surveillance (Taubman, 2009), it is understandable that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* would be attractive; the series of mandates from the federal government are directly traceable to neoliberal policies begun in the 1990s. Under such policies, not only are populations typically underrepresented and marginalized in capitalist societies oppressed, but teachers in the system have begun to see themselves as oppressed as well.

In such a climate, there has been a rush of recommended teaching methods in the literature (e.g., Brass, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2009; Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Snaza, 2013) that borrow from Freirean language and pedagogies, claiming to work towards social justice and empowerment of students in a variety of ways. For

example, both student-centered curricula and open curricula with lack of conclusion are gaining popularity in curriculum studies journals (e.g. Snaza, 2013), and teaching models such as project based learning and flipped classrooms are increasingly seen in schools (Knewton, 2014). However, the difficulty with this type of application of Freirean theory is that in choosing to use the language instead of digging into the underlying purposes and philosophy of Freire's work in its entirety, this application may be at risk of at best a misapplication of his theories and at worst disguising neoliberal agendas in the language of social justice.

Macedo, in conversation with Freire (1995), accused professors of misusing Freire's models:

In their attempt to cut the chains of oppressive educational practices, many North American educators blindly advocate the dialogical model, creating, in turn, a new form of methodological rigidity laced with benevolent oppression—all done under the guise of democracy with the sole excuse that it is for the students' own good. (p.377)

The result of such teaching is that students know the terms and the superficial aspects of Freire's work without understanding the philosophy behind it.

Additionally, Freire worried (1995) that by only teaching *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, professors give students only a partial picture of what true emancipatory education is.

As it is the point of the professor where Freire and Macedo pin the break from his theory, Freire's concept of "teacher-student/student-teacher" is an interesting point from which to examine the interpretations of Freire in current higher education trends.

The Teacher in Student-Centered Classrooms

Trending now in both higher and public education systems in America is the model of the “flipped” classroom, that is, “to flip the common instructional approach: With teacher-created videos and interactive lessons, instruction that used to occur in class is now accessed at home, in advance of class” (Tucker, 2012, p.82). While focused on the technology advances that have allowed the change in instructional method, the literature behind the flipped classroom model also emphasizes aspects of the technique that may be considered Freirean—problem-based learning methods, emancipatory curriculum, and student-centered learning theory (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). Part of the method is adjusting the role of the teacher.

Analysis of the Khan Academy, the most well-known of the flipped classroom models, shows the context of such claims. The “flipped” classroom model as now understood is typically traced to the rise of the Khan Academy, an online database of short instructional videos covering topics as diverse as finance and quantum physics, medieval French history and phlebotomy. Designed by Salman Khan as a nonprofit endeavor, the mission of the Khan Academy seems at its core liberatory:

Khan Academy is an organization on a mission. We’re a not-for-profit with the goal of changing education for the better by providing a free world-class education for anyone anywhere. (khanacademy.org)

The Khan Academy boasts a global community, providing instruction to anyone around the world (with an internet connection, of course). According to its website, since its founding in 2008, Khan Academy has delivered 374 million lessons to an average of 10 million unique users per month in 200 countries. The content on the website is translated into 28 different languages. Khan Academy’s core values are as follows:

Personalized – We believe that students need the time and space to master

concepts before moving on to a more advanced concept. Personalized learning allows students to build confidence, learn how to take responsibility, and drive their own learning experiences.

Mastery-based – Gaps in foundational knowledge often cause shallow, frustrating learning experiences for students as they progress in a subject area. We believe that students should have deep, conceptual understanding of fundamental ideas before they are pushed ahead to more advanced topics.

Interactive & Exploratory – We believe that learning should bring students together to explore questions and grapple with them in tangible ways. Open-ended projects can help make concepts real and relevant to students while also giving them an intuitive and deeper understanding of the subject.

Data Driven – Accurate real time data can supercharge learning experiences by allowing students, teachers, and parents to see exactly the material that students should focus on for optimal learning outcomes. Additionally, data analysis of the billions of data points from our users enable Khan Academy to build a robust, data-powered learning experience that has never before been possible. (Khan Academy Fact Sheet, 2014)

The student-centered aspects of these goals have been identified as Freirean (Fecho, 2011). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Freire calls for students to take an active role in determining what is of importance to them to learn, which may be interpreted as “personalized” learning. An independent student joining the Khan Academy may pick any subject she finds to be of importance and follow that series of videos. The openness of the website, free of charge and readily available to so many populations, emphasizes the emancipatory elements of personalized curriculum. Students of the Khan Academy may search out the knowledge that they feel will provide them routes out of their oppressive contexts.

In this way, the Khan Academy is very relatable to a slew of literature emphasizing “student-centered” teaching in the past decade (e.g. Oliver & Oesterreich, 2013; Snaza, 2013). Student-centered models have sprung up as a counterpoint to the standards-based movement, a contradiction to the idea that all students can be taught to the same level and meet the same educational goals, an inherently neoliberal educational ideal. As the pushback against neoliberal

education ideals coalesces around “student-centered” teaching models, proponents of those models have drawn piecemeal from Freirean language. These models, especially the “constructivist” methods (Wilson, 1996), claim emancipatory language from different roots than the flipped classroom: student-centered models focus entirely on student interest and preferred modes of learning. Teachers of these models are expected to derive knowledge of student interests; how they are to do this tend to fall along one of two lines. Several studies, such as Phelan (2011), encourage teachers to survey their students to discover their interests, strengths, and areas they wish to improve in order to build a curriculum around those areas. Other literature emphasizes the concept of open-ended discussion as a way to center students in the curriculum, giving students the opportunity to drive the conversation to their own interests.

By centering the curriculum on student interests, these models challenge the idea of teacher as “authority” and rather encourage the movement toward Freire’s concept of student-teacher:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire, 2005, p.264)

Indeed, the literature referenced above referring to student-centered methodology express their purposes through language that is distinctly Freirean, speaking of liberating the student voice, the teacher learning as much as the student, and embarking on projects together. This concept of “teacher-students” has gained traction in teacher education programs as of late; the University of North Carolina,

where one of the authors of this paper was trained, states directly in its School of Education conceptual framework that teachers must be committed to democratic communities of learning (UNC Conceptual Framework), a commonly used Freirean phrase.

However, Freirean methodology is dependent on dialogism, with the result of “open(ing) and extend(ing) the conversation without necessarily coming to closure with the final word coming from the more powerful person” (Moriarty et al, 2008, p.432). In the flipped classroom model, the powerful person is actually not a person at all, but rather the technology as authority. The video, whether it be designed by an outside individual, corporation, or the teacher who will be performing as “in-class advisor,” is ultimately the authority on the knowledge that is to be provided, and thus cannot be considered the object of dialogism but rather the true font of the banking system (education by which the teachers ‘deposit’ knowledge into students as ‘repositories’). As stated earlier, the “flipped” classroom is not new, but rather a new system of delivery of the same type of information deposited by old classroom techniques. In terms of the Khan Academy, while the variety of lessons is vast, the types of lessons and information available is still that privileged by the Academy and its education partners that support the system. The same can be said for the public school systems implementing flipped classroom techniques; the curriculum is tied to standards decided nationally or through state education offices, and while the pace of the learning may be “personalized” to the student, the content is not.

This concept is not new; rather, it is the delivery that is new. There is really very little difference between seeking out an apprenticeship or scouring the library

for relevant texts and logging onto a website for lessons. This is a type of learning that has taken place for centuries and must not be mistaken for Freirean pedagogy.

Another element of the Khan Academy values that may be construed as Freirean is the concept of “bringing students together to explore questions,” which echoes Freire’s ideas of problem-posing learning (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). The concept of project-based learning (PBL, often called problem-based learning or experiential learning) predates Freire; perhaps the best-known proponent of PBL was John Dewey, who encouraged teachers to give students inter-disciplinary problems to solve (Savery & Duffy, 1996). While Dewey saw PBL as a method of connecting students to the world around them, Freire (2000) saw “problem-posing” (p.79) education, wherein teacher and student determine a societal issue to interrogate, as that which integrates student consciousness. He writes:

“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. (p.79, emphasis original)

Freire differentiates consciousness for a liberatory education from that of his “banking model” in that an emancipatory education involves students who are conscious of themselves as the world, rather than consciousness of the world as separate from themselves. In this frame of understanding consciousness, it is understandable why proponents of PBL and experiential education often (Savery & Duffy, 1996) cite Freire in describing their methods; by making students actors in the act of solving problems of the world, PBL encourages students’ consciousness of their part in how the world evolves. This type of work, if the problem that is posed is truly important to the progress of the student’s world, revolves around authentic

communication rather than the *communiqués* described above—speech acts that fulfill the requirements made of them but that do not further understanding or knowledge. As Freire (in Davis & Freire, 1981) noted:

Education for freedom implies constantly, permanently, the exercise of consciousness turning in on itself in order to discover itself in the relationships with the world, trying to explain the reasons which can make clear the concrete situation people have in the world. (p.59)

The student needs to have not only a conscious access to the knowable object, but the opportunity to manipulate those objects (Au, 2007), to reknow them in the name of education for freedom. There must be a space for deconstructing the world, not just solving an issue within the world as it is already framed.

PBL differs from problem-posing in the resolution of the project; the Freirean emphasis is on the posing of the problem and the inherent inconclusiveness of the social issues that plague society, while PBL focuses on the solution to the problem, on the students' resolution as a new idea to improve the world. The role of the teacher in PBL is another marker of differentiation between Freire's problem-solving education and other PBL that may be using Freirean terminology to bolster its credibility. Freire (2000) requires that,

the practice of problem-posing education entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved. Dialogical relations—indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to cooperate in perceiving the same cognizable object—are otherwise impossible...The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. (p.79-80)

This quote highlights two disconnects between the Freirean theory and the theory behind PBL. The first is the use of the term “project” in Project Based Learning; teachers using this method not only determine the problem or question to be resolved, but also the parameters of the question, the rubric against which the

solution is to be graded, and the materials the students may use in solving the problem. Even if the students are integral to deciding the question, the further decisions made by the teacher negate the students' power to determine where the question may lead and thus are still subject to teacher authority contradictory to what Freire imagined. Secondly, a teacher who decides not only the problem to be solved but the standards to which the solution must adhere is already envisioning a solution to the problem; any learning that the teacher does from the students is ancillary, not intentional.

In teaching such methods in teacher education classes, professors are complicit in the misunderstanding of Freire's theories by the students. However, it is the teaching methods of the professors themselves that further diverges from Freire in these attempts.

Teaching Freire without Freire

A cursory review of a social justice-oriented School of Education's mission statement calls for the teacher to learn from the student as the student learns from the teacher (UNC School of Education Framework). This is the essence of the Freirean idea of student-teacher/teacher-student, as quoted above, one who learns with the students through dialogue. However, the typical arrangement of the college course, even those identified as "seminar courses," precludes this from occurring in a way faithful to what Freire intended. For example, Moriarty et al. (2008) describes the importance of a Freirean dialogism to "open and extend the conversation without necessarily coming to closure with the final word coming from the more powerful person" (p.432). However, the course syllabus, designed by the instructor

(perhaps with student input, but by the instructor nonetheless), necessarily frames the length and course of discussion. Freire put it, “I cannot think *for* others or *without others*...producing our own ideas—not consuming the ideas of others—must constitute this process” (2000, p.100).

Additionally, in an attempt to introduce students to Freire in an overly-packed curriculum, professors may choose to teach about Freire without requiring students to read his work. Freire himself recognized the dangers of this use of his theories in conversation with Macedo (1995); he and Macedo accused educators, especially professors, of “elevat(ing) their status by introducing translated materials that students almost blindly consume as innovative and progressive” (p.381), rather than having students complete an in-depth study of Freire’s work itself. In that way, the professor is the authority, exactly the opposite of what Freire intended. Similarly, the misuse of dialogics in Freire’s term occurs. Professors may institute class discussion to encourage student voice, but unless the professor is asking questions he does not already know the answer to and is truly activating his own curiosity along with his students’, he is engaging in what Freire called “dialogue as conversation that mechanically focuses on the individual’s lived experience” (p.381).

At this point, the question must be raised as to whether students can truly learn the methods of Freire without the benefit of a Freirean-modeled educational experience. The seduction of the authority of teaching in the academy is that professors have an entirety of lived experience that has led them to a particular expertise, an expertise that has secured them a position in the academy and thus a

worthiness that is tempting to impose on students. As professors, we encounter what Blau called the “fundamental paradox of teaching” (p.3): we came to our knowledge through a lived experience that our students cannot replicate, and they cannot learn the same knowledge without living those experiences. The professors in higher education who have succumbed to believing that they have a privileged knowledge due to their position, who believe in the power of the syllabus and the gradebook, cannot hope to engage students meaningfully with Freirean principles that stand in direct opposition to those beliefs.

The other end of the spectrum involves the professor who attempts to frame a democratic classroom, encouraging student voices and critical exploration, by adopting the role of facilitator of discussion rather than authoritative teacher. While the facilitator, as was described earlier in terms of the flipped classroom, allows for education as directed by the student and avoids impressing students with his own ideology, the facilitator is not a teacher as envisioned by Freire. As Freire notes (1995), “I have never pretended to be a facilitator...I cannot accept the notion of a facilitator who facilitates so as not to teach.” According to Freire:

When teachers call themselves facilitators and not teachers, they become involved in a distortion of reality. To begin with, in de-emphasizing the teacher’s power by claiming to be a facilitator, one is being less than truthful to the extent that the teacher turned facilitator maintains the power institutionally created in the position...Teachers maintain a certain level of authority through the depth and breadth of knowledge of the subject matter that they teach. (p.378)

In claiming facilitation, the teacher is also repudiating the objectives of the class itself. In Freirean instruction, the final objective is that of emancipation from oppressive institution, but other levels of objectives exist: the object of subject matter, the object of social behavior desired, the object of critical thinking. Freire

(1995) asserted that:

there is no educational practice that does not point to an objective; this proves that the nature of educational practice has direction. The facilitator that claims “since I respect students I cannot be directive”...denies himself or herself the pedagogical, political, and epistemological task of assuming the role of a subject of that directive practice. (p.378)

In attempting to be facilitators and avoid being authoritarian, such educators fall prey to practicing what Freire termed *laissez faire* pedagogy. This is the educator who feels that it is more important that every student speak than what the students have to say, the one who is more concerned with what students are interested in than what the object of knowledge for the class is, and the one who is more concerned with fulfilling his own dream of educator than meeting the demands of the subject. The result of such classes is often a “descriptive dialogue” (p.383), that of students sharing prior knowledge and lived experiences without movement toward new understandings.

Conclusion

Au, W. (2007). Epistemology of the oppressed: The dialectics of Paulo Freire’s theory of knowledge. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 5(2), 1-18.

Bishop, J.L. & Verleger, M.A. (2013). The flipped classroom: A survey of the research. Proceedings from the 120th ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition, Paper #6219.

Blau, S. (2003). *The literature workshop: Teaching texts and their readers*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Press.

Brass, J, (2012). A “hyper- and pessimistic activism” in a curriculum master’s course. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 9(2), 158-175.

Cook-Sather, A. (2009). *Learning from the student’s perspective: A sourcebook for effective teaching*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.

Davis, R, & Freire, P. (1981). Education for awareness: A talk with Paulo Freire. In R. Mackie (Ed.), *Literacy and revolution: The pedagogy of Paulo Freire* (pp.57-69). New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Fecho, B. (2011). *Teaching for the students: Habits of heart, mind, and practice in the engaged classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Freire, P. & Macedo, D.P. (1995). A dialogue: Culture, language, and race. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65(3), 377-402.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed (30th anniversary edition)*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Freire, P. (2005). The banking concept of education. In D. Bartholomae (ed.) *Ways of Reading (7th ed.)* (pp.255-267). New York: St. Martin Press.

Knewton. (2014). The flipped classroom: Turning traditional education on its head. Retrieved from: <http://www.knewton.com/flipped-classroom/>

Moriarty, B., Danaher, P.A., & Danaher, G. (2008). Freire and dialogical pedagogy: A means for interrogating opportunities and challenges in Australian postgraduate supervision. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27(4), 431-442.

Oliver, K.L. & Oesterreich, H.A. (2013). Student-centred inquiry as curriculum as a model for field-based teacher education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 45(3), 394-417.

Phelan, A.M. (2011). Towards a complicated conversation: Teacher education and the curriculum turn. *Pedagogy, Culture, & Society*, 19(2), 207-220.

Savery, J.R. & Duffy, T.M. (1996). Problem based learning: An instructional model and its constructivist framework. In B. Wilson (ed.) *Constructivist learning environments* (pp.135-139), Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

Snaza, N. (2013). Bewildering education. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 10(1), 38-54.

Tucker, B. (2012). The flipped classroom: Online instruction at home frees class time for learning. *Education Next*, 2012(3), 82-83.