

## *Commentary:*

### **Staying True to Freirean Praxis as well as Theory<sup>1</sup>**

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The papers presented on this first panel cover a lot of ground in application of social theory, especially Freirean, to questions of teaching and learning. They include both theoretical reflections that place educational theory in its own broader social and historical context, and also practice-based accounts from reflective practitioners in higher education's teaching trenches, who have been seeking to use, find, or test theory in practice.

I will address mostly the practice implications in education. Some consensus emerges in the papers around what we should be doing in practice as educators—many of them drawn from Freire or coincident with his vision—that can especially be seen in Kingston-Mann's, Disch's and Martin's presentations, but that are illuminated as well in Zalanga's and Bonikowski's more theoretical papers. They include:

- Recognizing the classroom's connection to wider contexts: the classroom is a public place, and a site, even a crucible, for the practice of public participation, participatory democracy, and critical citizenship.
- Recognizing the classroom's promise for promoting participation, engagement, and critical thinking in a contemporary culture and wider social & political regime that does little to encourage any of these, as Martin notes so well—but that instead promotes disempowerment, alienation, and disengagement, in education as in the wider polity.
- For educators, these considerations advocate for a classroom practice that moves in certain directions:
  - Creation of a culture of dialogue and collaboration among students that can be effective in promoting deeper critical thinking and engagement among students, as Disch and Kingston-Mann illustrate so well.
  - This requires as Kingston-Mann and Bonikowski explain, not just attention to pedagogy by itself, defined as procedures for delivery of content, but also interrogation and critical appraisal of curriculum content—together with students—as part of the learning process.
  - The results, from this engagement and critical thinking, in terms of more incisive, authentic critical dialogue and insight, can lead to very welcome surprise, wonder, and hope—and of course learning—for both teachers and students.
  - Students' engagement in making knowledge through their own research including examination of primary sources, through becoming scholars in their own right, thus represents a serious, hopeful raising of academic standards and expectations, as Kingston-Mann especially notes.
  - All this can help us in education break down the barriers between public and private, between our personal woes and public problems, as Disch points out, between theory and practice, and between only learning about so-

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cial problems and becoming agents of social change.

— Giving substance to the shibboleths and cliches, what is learned in the university can actually be a resource to students in gaining more critical insight into their own life challenges, and impinging social and political constraints, as Bonikowski and Kingston-Mann argue.

— Teachers of course need to be parties to classroom dialogue, as Freire makes so clear, and need to listen carefully to students in order to define what their most effective contribution to the learning encounter can be. Instruction and dialogue should begin with the student's voice.

Defining the limits and potentials of teacher authority remains a complex question. Unless they are in courses that focus on writing or other areas where content can have fairly free play, few college or university professors can easily adopt Freire's truly open "problem posing" pedagogy that allows curriculum to emerge from the felt concerns and issues of the students, rather than from any pre-ordained specification of what needs to be learned. Whatever happens, as Zalanga argues, a real "problem posing" education will only happen if "hierarchy between teacher and student is collapsed. Doing so will require humility on the part of the teacher." We do see a lot of this in the practical accounts given today, but these are issues for all educators that deserve and in fact require continual questioning and experimentation.

Finally, Freire challenges us all in another way. "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world," he writes in *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Freire and Macedo 1987: 35). True implementation of Freire's pedagogy requires much more attention from all of us to linking our classrooms to social action and service, to creating more interchange between critical reflection and critical practice, through for example, more incorporation of service learning and other forms of action into regular university learning. Great strides are being made in this direction in some fields, especially in ethnic studies nationally, and in competency based education such as at the University of Massachusetts Boston's College of Public and Community Service. Without this accompanying element of social engagement *outside* the classroom, however much we might be doing in our classrooms to promote critical dialogue, this amounts only to accomplishing a "Freire Lite," a partial realization of the full liberatory project that Freire's vision promises.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Freire, Paulo and Donaldo Macedo. 1987. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey.