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**Freire, Aristotle, Marx, and Sartre:
A Critique of the Human Condition**

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Abstract: This paper examines some of the philosophical foundations that shaped Paulo Freire's pedagogy. From a componential analysis of the literature, a dominant theme of "critique" emerged. From a philosophic perspective, critique implies the human capacity of rational thinking when humans are given the opportunity to reflect on their sociohistorical conditions. This achievement of *telos* leads to an escape from Marx's concept of false consciousness into an existential perspective—that is, each person's confrontation with choice. Ultimately, the paper argues the potential exists to employ Freireian pedagogy in practice if educators understand the philosophical narratives and assumptions on which his work is based.

Freire's Contribution to Adult Education

Recent adult education literature suggests that the pedagogical theories of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire are gaining increased popularity among many adult educators. Merriam & Brockett (1997) report, for example, that Freire is having "a profound influence on adult education worldwide" (p. 43). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) suggest that critical theory, feminism, and postmodernism, all theoretical forces in contemporary adult education, owe a direct "indebtedness to Paulo Freire's work" (p. 341). Many teachers in adult education are understandably attracted to Freire's critical pedagogy with its compelling emphasis on student-centered learning and social justice.

In spite of the increased focus on Freire's work, however, the author is concerned that the rich eclectic mix of philosophical ideas that comprise his theory of learning are absent from the adult education literature. Many adult educators are attracted to the idea of resisting "banking education" while emphasizing the rational dimension of learning, for example, but are not aware of the philosophical arguments supporting this view. The implications of Freire's work are typically highlighted without any analysis of its underlying assumptions. In the absence of understanding the philosophical basis for Freire's views, the ability to teach his pedagogy in an effective and objective manner may be significantly impeded. To address this concern, then, my paper explores two key elements of Freire's work: (a) What are the various philosophical assumptions shaping Freire's critical pedagogy? and (b) How can these philosophic assumptions be used in a practical application?

The Philosophers: An Overview

The philosophies of Aristotle, Karl Marx, and Jean-Paul Sartre are important components in Freire's writings. Many others contributed to his narratives but to incorporate each person is beyond the scope of this project. Aristotelean ethics forms a central component in Freire's idea of humanization. In *The Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle (1985) argues that the characteristics

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distinguishing humans from all other entities, or their “excellence,” is their ability to reason. I extend this to mean that humans have the capacity to think critically which is discussed in detail later. Freire (1970/2000) adopts and expands this idea by arguing that denying humans the opportunity to reason is a *prima facie* violation of their basic humanity.

The dialectical social conflict Freire (1970/2000) identifies between the oppressors and the oppressed is directly indebted to Marx’s (1933) theory of dialectical materialism. The achievement of conscientization, the *telos* of Freirean pedagogy, mirrors an escape from the Marxist condition of false consciousness. This project relies on Marx’s assumptions that the psychological state of mind of members of society is dominated by ideology. Freire however avoids the deterministic implications of Marxism by emphasizing the existential capacity of humans to influence their circumstances.

The existentialist assumptions of Jean-Paul Sartre are reflected in Freire’s narratives. To encapsulate Sartre’s ideas, existentialism is based on “existence preceding essence.” From this perspective, Freire argues that humans have the potential and capacity to develop higher-level thinking and social relations. In sum, the paper draws heavily upon philosophy to provide an analytic framework to critique Freire’s pedagogical theory which relies heavily on critique.

For both teachers and students interested in Freire’s work, grappling with the original philosophical ideas that shaped his adult education program provides a far richer and more informed pedagogical experience. This analysis of the philosophical underpinnings of Freire’s work will help ensure his ideas are not simply reduced to trite adult education slogans and may help avoid misrepresentations of his views. Perhaps even more important considering the increased interest in Freire’s pedagogy, my analysis provides invaluable insight into the practical efficacy of his views for adult educators and learners. If there are fundamental incompatibilities in Freire’s philosophy of education, his theory may not hold the promise many educators believe it does.

Methodology

This research relies heavily on the literature of adult educators, and the narratives of Freire, Aristotle, Karl Marx, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed (POTO)* (1970/2000) is used primarily to draw parallels between the authors’ concepts. To facilitate the search for concepts, *POTO* and *The Nichomachean Ethics* were transcribed into a word processing program to facilitate searches.

A lion’s share of the adult education literature came from the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (2000; cited hereafter as *Handbook*). It is imperative to report that the *Handbook*’s editors called for papers with an emphasis on critically reflective practice which served as the overarching theme in this paper. Following a componential analysis method, each author’s reference from the *Handbook* to Freire was transcribed (see Appendix I, available only in the full paper). From these transcriptions, domains and concepts are identified. In Appendix I, readers can see the specific words and phrases used to determine domains (concepts). To organize the evident, significant passages were placed in a spreadsheet (Appendix II) for quick reference. In Appendix II, concepts are followed by information that I found of particular value. The readers can easily identify the respective author for each concept or passage. It is important to reiterate the intent of this research is clarification, not definition.

Componential Analysis

Spradley (1979) defines componential analysis as “the systematic search for the attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural symbols” (p. 174). A componential analysis is

typically used by ethnographers to find differences between specific words (i.e., attributes) or concepts. Attributes are related to folk terms by additional semantic relationships. By placing folk terms in a particular domain and finding its place in a particular taxonomy, a single semantic relationship is isolated. A componential analysis relies on the language of the informant/s. In this study, the adult education authors' language is explored to develop meaning in relation to Freire's concepts. The researcher looked for themes within the informants' narratives.

The evidence

The analysis identified ten concepts or domains related to critique from the 2000 *Handbook*. These concepts are listed below and are dominated by the concept of critique or what Freire calls "the human vocation".

1. Critique
2. Collaboration
3. Social transformation
4. Experiential learning
5. Praxis
6. *A priori*
7. Adult educators' tasks
8. Structural dimension
9. Definitions, and
10. What ought to be.

Critique

Critique's intent is not to prove or disprove an argument or simply to prove right from wrong. In fact, a critique values its opposing argument for its "rightness" but looks more specifically at identifying the hidden or underlying social interests or implications. In other words, critique is a process of human thoughtfulness in order to uncover dominant relationships. In many respects, Freire's concept of humanization and dehumanization emerge from the critique process. More importantly, critique is a characteristic solely embraced by humans and is essential to Aristotle's argument.

Hegel was the first to develop criticism systematically. In doing so, he employed the concepts of "being", "nothingness", and "becoming". From the two antithetical perspectives, being and nothingness, arose becoming. This dialectic led Hegel to argue that human development fosters the development and redevelopment of ideas. Much like Freire's argument, if indeed we are dominated, then we must therefore dominate others. Freire (1970/2000) wrote, "If what characterizes the oppressed is their subordination to the consciousness of the master, as Hegel affirms, true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another" (p. 49). To expand Freire's argument, Marx's concept of false consciousness gains currency through the assertion that society is dominated by ideology.

In order to be truly liberated, humans must be aware of the ideologies that are imposed upon them. Until humans are aware of forces that shape their existence, they are subjected to the deterministic life described by Marx. To move beyond this cognitive passivity, people must look closely at the sociohistorical ideology that shapes their consciousness. Brookfield (2000) insists "Ideology critique contains within it the promise of social transformation and frames the work of influential activist adult educators such as Freire, Tawney, Williams, Horton, Coady, and Tomkins" (p. 36). Thus, ideology critique and social transformation are key concepts underlying the domain of critically reflective practice.

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For clarification, I define ideology as a visioning theory. To name but a few, political, religious, educational, and revolutionary ideologies are all visionary perspectives. All visionary ideologies tend to be conservative in that their intent is to conserve or preserve their charter or character. As a result, ideologies tend to become dogmatic. Adult education has changed with the economic and social tides and its original charter found in Lindeman and Dewey's democratic platforms have lost favor. Adult education has found favor in professionalization of adult education at the expense of social justice. According to Mayo (1999),

The last decade or so has witnessed the propagation of a hegemonic discourse in adult education. This discourse is essentially technical-rational and focuses primarily on "what works." It reflects a concern with marketability at the expense of, for instance, social justice. Among other things, it propagates the creation of programmes aimed at providing a "flexible" and "adaptive" workforce. This workforce is to be capable of learning and relearning skills for employment required in an age characterized by the threat of the "flight of capital" across difference geographical boundaries. (p.1)

Research to practice

The main question for most adult educators is how do we apply critique into practice? How can we introduce Freire's concepts into our everyday practice? There are roadblocks according to Gore (1993) who refers to that as "institutionalized pedagogy of regulation." Gore asserts that there are limitations on the level at which higher education can be emancipatory. (p. 141). The basis for my argument is bound in the human ability to look at their circumstances and understanding why the institutionalized regulations exist. In obligatory essentialist education, the concept of critique conjures visions of good and bad, depending on an individual's perspective and experiences. Critique summons negative reactions because students have been tested and evaluated throughout their formal and informal experiences. Many of them have never asked why they are tested, they just accept the cultural tradition and hostile invasion. In the adult education tradition, however, critique is a concept associated with critical theorists. In this essay, the authors from the *Handbook* report critique in many ways and find it particularly important in adult education's historical narrative.

Interestingly, the *Handbook's* authors never use the term historical as it related to critique and practice. Practice is, however, an historical enterprise. That is, an educator can only reflect on what has happened in the past and change the present. Critical reflection on practice is an historical endeavor and only occurs as an afterthought. According to Bailey-Johnson and Cervero (2000), critically reflective practice encourages adult educators to reconsider their efforts in relation to "positivist science, capitalism, and bourgeois liberalism" (p. 163). From this argument, reflection on practice encourages adult educator to consider the sociohistorical contexts in which he/she practices and in which students live. It is, therefore, more than changing classroom methods by some quantitative or empirical evaluation of students' scores or outcomes. It is a process of critically examining the cultures and contexts in which education takes place. Critical theory is about understanding the origins of power and knowledge and who is helped or harmed in the uneven relationship of power and knowledge creation.

Freire's notions of history came from Marxist ideology. Marx (as cited in Stumpf, 1989) wrote, "Besides the world and its history there is nothing" (p. 429). Marx's emphasis on history illuminates his belief that humans are not only shaped but act on their historical pasts. Stumpf (1989) also argues that "unlike Hegel, Marx believed Feuerbach's ideas that the generating influences of men's thought was the total sum of the material circumstances of any historic time" (p. 430). As a result, Freire (1970/2000) argues, "There is no history *without* humankind, and no

history *for* human beings; there is only history *of* humanity, made by *people* and (as Marx pointed out) in turn making them” (p. 130). Marx and Freire’s notion of history differ in one important respect. Though Marx argues that humans are subjected to history and act according to sociohistorical antecedents, Freire maintains humans can shed history’s shackles through critical historical analysis. By and through this historical analysis, individual and social transformation is possible. This is in part the reason Brookfield (2000) argues Freire is a “constructivist and pragmatist” (p. 38). In order to be critical, people must be aware of the lenses (e.g. past events, philosophies, and beliefs) that shape their view of the world. Sartre would, therefore, argue that until people are aware that their focus is distorted by their perceptions, they cannot perceive the world as it really exists. Moreover, they cannot make rational, informed decisions about their futures.

The role of adult educators

In *The Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle maintains everything has a function or a form. A knife’s function, for example, is to cut and to cut well. A dull knife loses its function. Its unrecognizable past extends to the ore from which it came. It owes its existence to the human who gave it form. Its form gives it its essence. But according to Aristotle, a knife cannot contemplate whereas a human’s function is contemplation. Contemplation allows humans to reason from previous experiences and creates a present and potential future. The ultimate present for humans is happiness. According to Hyslop-Margison (2002), Aristotle maintained the epitome of the human condition is intellectual virtue (e.g., *eudaimonia*) or human happiness. It is the natural function of persons to exercise their natural cognitive faculties, most importantly the faculty of reason. So, according to Aristotle, happiness consists of activity in accordance with reason. (p. 5) Unfortunately, humans too can become dull; dull in the sense that they lose their ability to function or to think critically. In many instances, their ability to be contemplative is stolen by their sociohistorical experiences.

The role of an educator is, therefore, to help students analyze and discuss ideas; to help them find their truth or their role in the world. By way of the critical educator, a moral education is possible. Moral in the sense that everyone encounters their essence and place in the world. A moral education would lead to good habits, which demands critical reflection. Critical analysis reveals cause and effect relationships. Armed with the ability to reflect, man’s intellectual life leads to practical wisdom, which produces rational behaviors. This reflective practice allows humans to act responsibly toward other humans.

The ability to critically reflect leads to consistent, moral practice. To deny another human his/her right to enjoy the essence of humanness denies everyone his or her humanness. Freire argues that anyone who denies another person his or her human essence has not achieved what it is to be fully human. Thus, they are ignorant to the concept of what it is to be human. Their education is, therefore, not complete. They lack the ability to reason in a manner that elevates others. They have not achieved their true essence by denying others the right to their essence.

With this in mind, Sartre argues that the existentialist perspective allows humans to be redefined. In order to do this, people need to be aware of the experiences that have shaped their worldview. Until people are aware that their existence is shaped by prior experiences, they will continue to make decisions based on experiences created and valued by others. By understanding and realizing that choices and decisions are shaped and created by past experience of others, “it confronts man with the possibility of choice” (Sartre, 1960, p. 263).

Suddenly, people are cast into a new world; one in which they are required to think for themselves. This new existence is difficult and fraught with difficult decisions because most

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people view themselves from the perspectives created by others. Their concept of themselves is largely based on the previous experiences constructed by others whose primary motivation is to maintain a position of power. Thinking critically requires more than just an individual's perspective on their humanness. According to Sartre, "When we say every man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men" (p. 264).

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