

Closing the Gap: An Essay Pertaining to Paulo Freire's Ideal Education System

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Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing deposits. (244)

Picture a classroom containing 30 students. They are sitting in rows of tables facing a blackboard on which a teacher frequently writes and draws while pacing back and forth. She speaks directly from the textbook which pertains to the class they are taking. As she talks at them, they frantically write down everything she says in case she happens to mention something that is not in the textbook they are expected to memorize. Every week they are to complete the given homework assignment, and they are tested once a month on the material she has expounded upon for the past thirty days. Not once does she engage in conversation with them or ask them their thoughts on the matter. Rarely does she stop to answer questions the students might have, and when she does she resorts to the textbook to help her explain, yet it only mimics her original explanation, ultimately leaving the question unanswered. There is a distance between the teacher and her students which remains constant. This is my macroeconomics class. This is the “banking” concept of education according to Paulo Freire. In his essay concerning ways of teaching, he discusses how students are never engaged in discussion with their educators, let alone with each other about what they learn; they are “oppressed” by their teachers—the “oppressors.” Unfortunately, it seems to be as though more teachers approach their students with this “banking” concept instead of using the antithesis: the “problem-posing” method.

Although this is not the first time I have been in a class where the teacher uses the “banking” concept, I am used to thinking and learning much differently, because for the past four years while I was in high school, the “problem-posing” method was in praxis. So much more was expected of me than in my macroeconomics class. I did not feel oppressed in any way or as if I was not allowed to have an opinion about what I was being taught. In fact, it was expected that I would have an opinion, and that I would share that opinion with my classmates and my teachers. I was able to be so free with my education because my teachers were not so distant from my peers and I. We were continuously engaged in conversation and debate. As Freire says, “Only through communication can life hold meaning” (247)—can education hold meaning. “Problem-posing” became effective because the gap between the role of the teacher and the student was filled.

I attended a Jesuit high school, which has a profile for its graduates at graduation that outlines what is expected of all students who graduate. Ultimately what it states is that we have “mastered the fundamental skills of language and mathematics” (II. Intellectually Competent, Academic Requirements), “are developing a mastery of logical skills, critical thinking, and a curiosity to explore ideas and issues” (II. Intellectually Competent, Skills and Attitudes), and are “beginning to develop that critical consciousness which enables one to better analyze the issues facing

contemporary men and women and to evaluate the various points of view on those issues" (II. Intellectually Competent, Substantive Knowledge). Using the "banking" concept when teaching its students would mean that the school would not succeed in graduating students whom meet its requirements. Therefore, they brought the "problem-posing" method into practice.

My AP English Literature and Composition class was taught by a man whom I have great respect and admiration for, yet who shall remain unnamed. This class, though taught to high school students in their fourth year, was a college level course much like the College Writing class I am enrolled in this semester at Northeastern University. We were required to read certain texts and be tested on them; there was a short story unit followed by poetry and novels as well as compilations from various authors. Although there were "verbalistic lessons and reading requirements" (247), they did not define us as students. We were not only expected to take what we know and add to it, but expand our ways of thinking and problem solving. "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (244). We were expected to communicate with our fellow students and the teacher, and in doing so, we were more successful in our learning.

The stories and books and poems which I read during my senior year in high school English were not easy to read or grasp the first time through—only with the continuous conversation and questions asked during class did I fully come to understand what I at first could not comprehend. My teacher did not spew information at us day in and day out as I have had multiple teachers do in the past. He did not expound every opinion and idea of his onto us as though it was the one and only way to interpret or understand things. He not only expected, but required us to think on our own.

As mentioned previously, communication between students and their teachers is key when learning. However, all conversations must start somewhere. Before giving us an assignment, he would supply us with background information on the author and the time period in which the piece of writing was composed. By doing so, he gave us a starting point—a place where we could begin our thinking. Paulo Freire states in "The 'Banking' Concept of Education" that when teachers act as oppressors, "the students are not called upon to know, but to memorize the contents narrated by the teacher" (250). However, there are some things that the student must be taught. There are always things that the students do not know, and due to this, the teacher should serve as a resource, so that they may help the students and give them the information that they need before letting them think on their own. My english teacher was this resource. He gave us information on what we were reading, and we were called upon to know it, but we were also called upon to take that information and formulate an argument or an idea and to share it.

His teaching embodied Freire's "problem-posing method." During class he would write something on the board—perhaps a quote, phrase, or word from something we had read—then point to a student and say "go." The one he pointed to had to give their thoughts on what was presented. As our own opinions were formed, questions began to arise. Another student would give their thoughts next and, in turn, would ask their own questions. Students began to answer each others questions and share their ideas. By doing this, a conversation began to flow. A dialogue was created, and the teacher became the one who answered the questions we could not

answer ourselves while allowing us to converse and let our ideas grow, only interrupting to guide us in the right direction or set us back on track when we digressed. He was there to help us to the answer but to make sure we arrived there on our own.

When the teacher allowed my classmates and I to converse, we brought new ideas to the table, and on multiple occasions he commented on this. He would say that we had made an excellent point and that he never thought of it like that before. “The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create...” (250). In Freire’s words, “he was partners with us” (246).

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. 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. In this process, arguments based on “authority” are no longer valid; in order to function authority must be on the side of freedom, not against it. (249)

I believe that his way of teaching embodies Freire’s ideal system of education. It is so very important that this “problem-posing method” be put into action.

Although I have had the privilege of being taught by “problem-posing”, not all students have that opportunity. Perhaps because I attended a private institution which does not receive funding from the state, there is more room for the administration to teach what they think should be taught and how they think students should be taught. Also, because it is private, they are allowed to accept only the students who they deem fit to attend the school. As a result, a hand picked group of students are taught to think critically and engage in debates and really expand their knowledge base, ultimately entering the world with the upper hand—compared to students who are the product of the “banking” concept. Freire would agree with the way my previous teachers conduct their classes; however, he would be bothered by the fact that my experience only came to be due to the fact I attended a private school. The “problem-posing” method should be brought into all classrooms, I believe he would say. And I agree. In my opinion, the “banking” concept of education should be eradicated entirely. But can teaching be revolutionized? It is not about who, what, when, and where to start the revolution, but how. How do we go from the “banking” concept to the “problem-posing method”? It is not whether the revolution should start in one classroom, or one school, or a whole district. It is how we change the way school teachers teach and how students learn. Students who have become “‘containers’ and ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’” (244) by the oppressors who pose as teachers and who have never thought in the problem-posing way. It is a more complex process than simply telling them to expand their minds. It is time consuming. Not only do the students have to think in a new way, but the teacher must teach in a new way. Their methods of teaching mimic the way they have been taught, therefore, they must now think and conduct their class in a new way. While in the process of learning how to teach and learn as teacher-student and students-teachers, we have already begun to problem-pose.

The roles of students and teachers are not necessarily what needs to be altered. The role of a teacher and a student will always remain; however, it is the distance between the roles and

authority of the two which should change. “Both should simultaneously be teachers and students” (244). The teacher no longer “knows everything and the students know nothing” (245).

How can students be expected to think for themselves and come up with new ideas and reasoning if the teacher is held in a position of “know all”? “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (244). Freire makes this point in the beginning of “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education”; however, I believe that this point is how education can be mended. It is so very important that the teacher have a position and a role which is regarded with authority, yet must in some way be able to connect with the students. When the relationship between the teacher and the student grows closer, the movement away from the “banking” concept will grow simultaneously—as evidenced by my personal experience.

Works Cited

Freire, Paulo. “The “Banking” Concept of Education.” *Ways of Reading*. By David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008. 242-54. Print.

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