Pedagogy of the Oppressed: The Publication Process of Paulo Freire’s Seminal Work

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Because Pedagogy of the Oppressed has received worldwide acclaim, influenced many, and has uniquely defined Paulo Freire, it is noteworthy to highlight the book’s evolution from concept to publication. What were the contextual factors that prompted Freire to write the book? What was his approach for converting his thoughts to prose? How long did it take him to write the book? To that end, this article examines those and other questions that brought the world Paulo Freire’s seminal text.

Keywords: pedagogy, oppressed, Paulo Freire, education, literacy, Brazil, Chile, writing

Introduction

While it has been more than 40 years since the publication of Paulo Freire’s classic work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 1990a), the text remains popular and is recommended reading in university classes around the world, clearly indicative of its incredible sustaining value and importance. Of course, Freire has had numerous insightful, influential books published subsequent to that book. However, Pedagogy of the Oppressed has received such worldwide acclaim, influenced so many, and has so uniquely defined Paulo Freire that it is noteworthy to highlight this book’s evolution from concept to publication (Kirylo, 2011; Elias, 1994). What were the contextual factors that prompted Freire to write the book? What was his approach for converting his thoughts to prose? How long did it take him to write the book? To that end this article will explore those and other questions that brought the world Paulo Freire’s seminal text.

Historical Context

As a result of a military coup d’état in 1964, Paulo Freire, among hundreds of others, was forced into exile from his homeland of Brazil. One of several reasons for the coup was the extraordinary success of Freire’s adult literacy program, whose potential to increase the country’s literacy rate made many in power rather nervous (Elias, 1994). By law, only those who were considered literate were allowed to vote, which were the overwhelming majority represented by the elite, landowners, and those of the conservative classes. The potential of an enormous amount of new voters who were being taught to read through the learning of Freire’s “subversive ideas” was extremely threatening to the establishment (Elias, 1994). The middle and upper class were fearful because they saw the potential of a major power shift taking place. Hence, the coup shut Freire’s work down sending him into exile for nearly 16 years.

After a brief stay in Bolivia, Freire moved on to Chile where he stayed and worked from 1964-1969. At the time of Freire’s arrival to Chile, there was a euphoric vibrancy in the capital city of Santiago de Chile because it seemed to be the hub of learning in Latin America, where
Colombians, Venezuelans, Cubans, Mexicans, Bolivians, Argentineans, Paraguayans, Brazilians, Chileans, and Europeans gathered, particularly engaged in critical discussions of the pros and cons of the left-leaning Partido Demócrata Cristiano (Christian Democratic Party). Adding to the excitement was the newly elected Christian Democrat President, Eduardo Frei, who, among other initiatives, focused on agrarian reform and education for adult literacy learners (Freire, 1994; Mackie, 1981).

While in Chile, Freire took on many roles, beginning only a few days after his arrival. He began work as a consultant for Jacques Chonchol, a leading Chilean economist, who was the president of the Instituto de Desarrollo Agropecuario (Institute for the Development of Animal Husbandry). In addition, he was able to secure a position at the University of Chile, worked as a consultant for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and was asked to promote his adult literacy model, which eventually led him to participate in the Chilean agrarian reform effort (Mackie, 1981). Consequently, Freire was led on a fascinating path traveling throughout the Chilean countryside with other educators, administering training courses in order to set up cultural circles, engaging peasants in dialogue about agrarian reform, and learning his new country of residence.

**Early Publications**

At the same time he was conducting his work, Freire also was immersed in his writing, which led to the publication of his first book. Published in 1967 in Rio de Janeiro, *Educação como Prática da Liberdade* (Education as the Practice of Freedom) is an examination of his experience in Brazil and the detrimental remnants of its colonial legacy, providing a detailed account of the workings of cultural circles, the making of generative words, and the overall emergence of his philosophy (Gadotti, 1994; Freire, 1994). Two years after the publication of that book, Freire wrote about the challenges of the Chilean agrarian reform in a piece called “Extension or Communication.” While this particular essay is often overlooked, it expounds on the theory of knowledge that frameworks Freire’s educational thought and makes clear that dialogue as opposed to cultural invasion is key to education and agrarian reform (Elias, 1994). A combination of *Education as the Practice of Freedom* and “Extension or Communication” later appeared in one volume as a book titled *Education for Critical Consciousness*, which appeared in English in 1973. While there are important practical aspects to the text, Freire acknowledges his naiveté regarding no reference to the political nature of education, something that evolved after the 1964 coup d’etat (Shor & Freire, 1987).

Because of his experience in Brazil and what he was observing in Chile, Freire was in the process of developing his ideas for *Pedagogia del Oprimido* (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) (First published in Spanish in 1968, later in English in 1970). While a liberal developmentalist perspective largely influenced the writing of his first book, Education as the Practice of Freedom, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reflects an evolution of Freire’s thought that is greatly informed by Marxist humanism (Holst, 2006). In *Pedagogy*, he explores multiple themes related to the exploitive nature of political, social, and educational systems that summarily marginalize groups of people. In addition to “denouncing” oppressive structures, he also “announces” ways in which the oppressed can be moved to a place of critical consciousness through processes that promote a democratizing climate. In sum, the text is perhaps the best and most concise presentation of the critical aspects of Freire’s philosophy, particularly relative to his making the
distinction between the notion of humanization and dehumanization (Roberts, 2000). It is also worth emphasizing that for the English reading audience, *Education for Critical Consciousness* appeared as the second book published by Freire (followed by *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). In comparing the two, Elias (1994) makes the point that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is more theoretical and revolutionary than the practical and methodological nature of *Education for Critical Consciousness*, arguing that reading the latter first is very helpful in understanding the former.

## The Writing Process that Brought *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Like the writing of any text, it is a process that is simply dictated by the unique experiences, ways of thinking, and characteristics of the writer. In Freire’s case, he typically had a pretty good idea what the title of a respective book would be even before he wrote it, and the title of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was no exception. Freire (1990b) explains the process of choosing that title: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which I think is one of my best titles, came to mind during the process of my experience in Chile, and it repeated many of my earlier experiences of Brazil. Secondly, the title came as a need to underscore the existence of another pedagogy, which is the pedagogy of the oppressor. I intended, with the title *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to distinguish this type of pedagogy from the existence of another pedagogy which, even though it existed, had concealed itself under other titles, under other names. I was preoccupied also with calling to attention the role of the subject, and not that of pure actor, for the working classes in the process of their own liberation. Hence, the title of “Pedagogy of Oppressed People” which, in a general way, is also expressed in the singular. Fundamentally, my preoccupation was with a pedagogy of oppressed people, in the plural. But it ended up in the singular as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (p. 3)

Because of Freire’s distinct experiences in Brazil and Chile, he was led to a period of deep reflection that contextually examined the historical intersection of the complex web of the religious, social, educational, economic, and political milieu that directed thought and action of groups of people. Freire’s reflection naturally moved him to an “oral” period of thought, and somewhat disapprovingly of his daughter, Madalena, who preferred her father “restrain his eagerness” in talking about the still–not–written book, he spent over a year engaging friends and others in discussion about aspects of his thought (Freire, 1994). He, of course, also included Elza, his first wife, in these discussions. She proved to be an extraordinary, attentive listener and one who offered critical insight. During this oral period, two Catholic priests who were conducting similar work invited Freire to New York in 1967. Freire was impressed with their efforts, which furthered prompted his evolving thinking, and in a major address, he presented themes that are reflected in *Pedagogy*. Upon his return from New York, he came back to Chile, finding himself in a new “gestation” phase of writing the book (Freire, 1994).

In the final analysis, Freire (1998) readily admits that he was obsessed with the phenomenon of oppression, which kept him focused, but also, for him, was an indicator that he had something of value to say about the subject. It is important to note that at the writing of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire’s study of oppression was conducted in light of “its social, existential, and individual tendencies,” implying his focus was on the oppressed as a social class. This does not mean he ignored such issues as racial oppression, an issue Freire had spoken
against since he was child. As his awareness grew, he was more specific in later writings regarding oppression relative to such issues as language, gender, race, and ethnicity (Freire and Macedo, 1995, p. 397).

**Notepad and Index Card Use**

Following a habit he developed while in Chile, Freire carried around a little notepad, jotting down thoughts and reflections as they came up, whether it was on a bus, in a restaurant, or simply walking down the street. Subsequently, every night, he expanded on the ideas he had written down on paper from his notepad. Freire (1998) describes the process as follows: When I arrived at home at night, after eating dinner, I would go to my study and there I would take out the little pieces of paper, read them, get inspired, and then write…However, there were nights I did not write anything. Still, with much patience—I am always very patient with myself—I would sometimes spend three hours in the library without writing a single word and without getting angry at myself. The next day I would write. Sometimes I would write eight pages based on an idea that I had written down in the street that morning. (p. 90)

From that point, he would place all that he wrote on small index cards, titling and organizing them, which collectively fell under his preoccupation of one central theme: the struggle of the oppressed. The more he spoke and listened to the Chilean peasants, it became ever more t him apparent that “the more the relation of oppressor and oppressed, of oppressive consciousness and oppressed consciousness appeared before me…they constituted an object of curiosity for me” (Freire, 1998, p. 90).

As Freire considered the thought of the various philosophers and thinkers from whom he drew (Fromm, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Niebuhr, and many others), he carefully pondered their assertions, sometimes affirmed and reinforced by their thinking, other times challenged. At the same time, what kept Freire grounded in this overall process was his deep respect for the “common sense” thinking of the educators, agronomists, peasants, and others with whom he worked during the formation and conducting of the cultural circles. As Freire (1994) puts it, “At the very least, the educator must keep account of the existence of his or her educands’ ‘here,’ and respect it…This means, ultimately, that the educator must not be ignorant of, underestimate, or reject any of the ‘knowledge of living experience’ with which educands come to school” (p. 58).

Freire spent an enormous amount of time examining what he wrote on his index cards, ascertaining the solidity of his thought and whether there would be an emergence of new ideas. While he admittedly noted the tedious or mechanical nature of the particular process he incorporated in writing *Pedagogy* (certainly, as he later pointed out, a process that would have been less time consuming with today’s technology), it was extremely helpful when he actually “sat down” to write text. Indeed, as Freire (1998) puts it, “*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is possibly the most didactically well–organized book that I have written” (p. 95).

**Moving Toward the Final Product**

Because of his intensely organized, disciplined process of study, discussion, and the index card use, Freire was able to write the first three chapters in 15 days during the month of July 1967. At times he worked the night through, prompting Elza to come into his office from time to time to remind him that he needed sleep, which did not do much to budge him from his desk (Freire, 1994; 1984). At other times, he was so engrossed in his work that he was surprised by the morning greeting of the birds chirping, and the sun peeking through the window of his
small study where he lived on 500 Alcides de Gasperi Street, Apoquindo, Santiago de Chile (Freire, 1994). All along during that process, Elza would read his work each morning and not only saw the brilliance, but also realized the potentially provoking nature of it, prompting her to ask Paulo, once the book was published, if he had thought about where he would spend his next exile. In fact, she added, “By writing this book I am not quite sure where you can go!” (Freire, 1984, p. 513).

After the writing of those three chapters, Freire surmised that the manuscript was finished. He gave the manuscript to a trusted friend, Ernani Maria Fiori, who was to write the preface. After Fiori completed what Freire thought was a nice piece, he assumed his book was ready for publication, but decided against it after taking the advice of Josué de Castro, a prominent Pernambucan physician and writer, who suggested that once a writer thinks he has completed a manuscript, he or she should let it “marinate” for a few months and then after that, read the text again (Freire, 1994). Heeding the advice, for two months Freire locked his manuscript up in his office, and while he distanced himself from it, he certainly was tempted from time to time to look at it, but “restrained” himself (Freire, 1994).

After the two month period, with great anticipation, he read the manuscript again with fresh eyes and still was pleased with the work, not making many significant changes. He came to the critical realization that the book was still unfinished and needed one more chapter. At the time, Freire was still traveling in and around Santiago de Chile consulting and conducting training seminars. Thus, he often wrote the last chapter during his lunch break and again through all-nighters at the various hotels where he stayed. The last chapter took him approximately three to four months to write. After he thought that it was complete, in addition to more editing and revising of the first three chapters, Freire had the manuscript typed and made several copies, distributing them to some Brazilian exiles and close friends from Chile. Finally, Pedagogy of the Oppressed was first published in Spanish in 1968. The entire process of conceptualizing and writing the book took approximately two years (Freire, 1998; 1994).

Translating and Distributing the Text

Because Brazil was still ruled by a dictatorship, having Pedagogy of the Oppressed published in Brazil in his native tongue was a difficult task, but something Freire aimed to do. He wanted to get the manuscript into the hands of Fernando Gasparian (1930–2006), who was one of Brazil’s most distinguished publishers with Paz e Terra publishing house (Freire, 1994). Because of his left–leaning politics, Gasparian, too, was forced to live in exile in the late 1960s. Upon his return to Brazil in the early 1970s, he continued denouncing the oppressive government by ensuring the publication of material related to liberation theology, a more just society, and the promotion of a more democratic country. Not surprisingly, Gasparian was constantly under the watchful eye of the government, even discovering a bomb that was placed in his publishing house (O'Shaughnessy, 2006). By the time Freire was able to place into motion the process of getting Pedagogy into the hands of Gasparian, he was already in Geneva working with the World Council of Churches (WCC). Of course, living on another continent complicated his ability to safely get the manuscript to Gasparian, not to mention to assure the safety of the one who would somehow transport it to Brazil (Freire, 1994).

Because a Swiss colleague and University of Geneva Professor, Jean Ziegler, going to Rio de Janeiro around the time Freire was in Geneva, he accepted Ziegler’s offer to take the
manuscript with him. Ziegler was a good candidate for such a task because, with his Swiss nationality and diplomatic passport, there was no reason for suspicious searches from Brazilian authorities upon his arrival in Rio de Janeiro. Within a few days of his arrival, Ziegler was able to get the manuscript into the hands of Gasparian, who then let Freire know that he received it, but also mentioned that the political climate was such that he asked him to “await more favorable times for its publication” (Freire, 1994, p. 62). That more favorable time for publication in Brazilian Portuguese was four years later in 1975. Prior to that printing, Pedagogy had already been translated and published in English, Spanish, Italian, French, and German, and, much to the delight of Freire, many of these foreign editions were smuggled into Brazil. Numerous Brazilians had already read the book before it was officially published in Portuguese. A North American Catholic sister who worked in Northeast Brazil creatively administered one such case in which the book was smuggled into Brazil. On several return trips from the United States back to Brazil, she covered many copies of Pedagogy with book covers that bore religious titles (Freire, 1994).

**Translation into English**

Richard Shaull, a North American theologian, was given a copy of the original manuscript of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. After reading it, he immediately thought the text was revolutionary and would significantly impact the thinking of liberation theology. Shaull not only wrote the preface for the American edition, but also suggested Myra Ramos do the translation, which she did the same year Freire was at Harvard (April 1969–February 1970). Living in a nearby city, Ramos regularly called Freire when she had any questions regarding translation challenges that may have arisen. Ramos had her critics regarding the translating of *Pedagogy* into English; however, Freire did not accept the criticism, arguing that the translation was carefully crafted and was done with his approval. Throughout the numerous editions subsequently published, Freire did not “update” any of the original translation other than a language change with respect to references to gender. It is also worth underscoring that because he was a master in the Portuguese language, Freire possessed the unique ability to create words and even recreate words and provide new meanings, which translated into a poetic writing style that was radically graced with richness, precision, strength, and beauty. Thus, the effort necessary to translate Freire’s writing was not an easy task, and sometimes impossible with respect to capturing the exact spirit of his thought. Freire’s flavor of writing is distinctively Brazilian, as he would characterize it (Freire, 2000).

**Worldwide Impact**

The publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* clearly was a threat to the establishment, confirming, as mentioned earlier, Elza’s prophetic words to Paulo when she proclaimed “By writing this book I am not quite sure where you can go!” (Freire, 1984, p. 513). Indeed, Freire was forbidden to enter particular countries in Latin America and Africa, where popular groups and progressive movements adopted his philosophy and his methodological approaches. The book was burned and prohibited in some countries that were under military dictatorships (Schugurensky, 1998). Freire also received much mail about his new book, some critical and some supportive. Shortly after *Pedagogy* was published in English, for example, he received many letters from North American women who were upset about the sexist language he employed. Because of the constructive criticism and because he deeply understood that language matters and is a critical aspect of transformation, Freire made it a point to utilize inclusive
language in his later writings. A young man, deeply affected by reading Pedagogy, had written Freire from an Asian country, sharing that he was so moved that he encouraged his colleagues, secondary school teachers, to study Freire. As a result of that study group and the implementation of some Freirean ideas; however, all of them lost their jobs. Freire wrote back to the young man in a letter of solidarity (Freire, 1995).

The above are but a few examples that demonstrate the provocative nature and power of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Now translated into over a dozen different languages, with many printings, and over a million sold, the book has drawn and continues to draw an eclectic readership of educators, social justice workers, theologians, academicians, politicians, those of the working class, and a host of others from around the world. One can only marvel how Paulo Freire’s words and thought still resonate. Whether it is economic or social injustice, or whether it is a business model of education that alienates and objectifies, as long as there are people on the outside looking in, the classic book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, will continue to remain relevant.

References


**Note:** This article is a modified extraction from Kirylo’s book *Paulo Freire: The Man from Recife* (2011) (Peter Lang).

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