

Critical Pedagogy and the Transformative Power of Creative Writing: Teaching & Learning with the Urban Poor Children

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Abstract

The paper aims to: (1) explain how Freireian critical pedagogy can be used to defamiliarize and revolutionize a dialogue between the organic intellectuals (in NGOs) and co-intellectuals (urban poor children) through teaching-learning via creative writing workshops with the urban poor; (2) show the process of rethinking culture-sharing and culture-learning through a series of collaborative poetry workshops as a reconstructive method in achieving pedagogic goals; and lastly (3) discuss the findings and final writings of urban poor children manifesting vivid consciousness and transformative actions towards self-realization and development away from conditions of poverty.

This study covers the results of the researcher's ethnographic fieldwork and immersion conducted in the relocation site of depressed families in Towerville, San Jose del Monte, Bulacan. The researcher is a member of bukalsining, a cultural and non-government organization that handles literary and street-theater workshops for urban poor children.

The first phase of the study is called pedagogic enculturation. This could be done by learning the situation, conditions and history of the community, the bukalsining and its respective members. The researcher first conducted a case study of the community in Towerville and of bukalsining. Series of structured and unstructured interviews and focus group discussions were held among community and NGO leaders and the youth to situate the study.

The second phase is called pedagogic acculturation. The researcher used participant-observation during the poetry workshop where the researcher became lecturer/ facilitator/ student during the sessions. It is in this stage when the researcher observed and analyzed the cultural-educational mechanism of dialogue (teaching & learning) between two different groups in raising their social consciousness through writing and towards liberation from the conditions of poverty.

1. Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire [1], the author of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, talks about a common type of learning. He calls this as the narrative education [2]. Teaching is just but a mere narration, which centers on the authority of the teacher. In his analogy of the bank, the teacher merely deposits or dispenses knowledge to the students. There is no dialogue but only a one-way transaction where the teacher remains the central figure. The grand narrative flows gently and untrammelled from the mouths of teachers. Freire explains that the students in response accept, repeat and mimic the teacher. This 'narration sickness' [3] perpetuates ignorance and silence for the part of the students while arrogance and deafness for the part of the teachers. The so-called intellectualization is a mirage that blinds the students. The intellectual student is one, in this educational artifice, who gets excellent grades in exchange for his/her submissiveness, passivity and docility.

An individual becomes intellectual in many ways. Grades do not measure up the quality and totality of students' learning. But an intellectual in another way signifies one who is conscious and enlightened about what is happening in the society. He/she learns from the experiences of his community where he/she belongs and likewise, shares the interest of the class he/she represents. This person is an organic intellectual [4]. Hence, critical thinking starts among students only if critical pedagogy is being initiated and practiced by teachers.

Teaching is strengthened by processes that would bring forth or direct students' knowledge and social consciousness. It is in this way that education through critical pedagogy clears the ground for learning experience and teaching awareness. Mortimore [5] explains that pedagogy is any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another. Pedagogy stands in the middle as the foundation between teacher and students relationship. Bell hooks says that:

Such teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings, even if the situation does not allow the full emergence of a relationship based on mutual recognition. Yet the possibility of such recognition is always present [6].

The students on the other hand need to initiate the aspiration to learn and to take part in the incessant journey towards learning and personal growth. It is not something just for the mind to be critical but for the heart to prepare oneself in engaging with others through experiential and societal learning.

2. From Teacher to Facilitator/Student

The term 'teacher' still remains in the mode of narrative education, of objective and universal truth in arriving at holistic knowledge and skills using Freire's principle. In the context of critical pedagogy, this term would have to be replaced. It is a fact that teachers do learn in the process of meeting minds with his/her students. The teacher becomes a student too. Hence, the teacher becomes a facilitator. Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) prefers to use the phrase "facilitator who shares rather than teacher who instructs or directs" [7]. In the *Proceedings of the World Congress on Higher Education* [8] the role of facilitators is recognized.

[T]eachers will become learning facilitators rather than instructors. They will become less and less a direct source of information. Instead they will help students access information [9].

It is a common fact that people learn from their experience. Students have already knowledge prior to classroom or formal education. Hence in the learning situation there is no dividing line between the teacher and students. The *raison d'être* of education is for everyone to learn without discrimination or inequality.

One task of a facilitator is to make sure that the process and flow of sharing and learning would be concretized in a classroom and/or practical situations. It can happen that he/she opens a discussion or follow the discussion of participants. The facilitator follows the creed of intellectual humility without the pretense of knowing everything. This humility is the fountainhead of learning.

The facilitator is a guide. The entirety of the learning process does not rest solely on his/her shoulder. He/she can thus become just an initiator of the learning process. The application and reflection are difficult to teach because it should be the learners themselves who should internalize and actualize this stage of learning in their respective lives.

The facilitator is also dynamic and sensitive. He/she inquires through feelings the sensibilities and sensitivities of learners. Noticing shifts, discomforts, restlessness, boredom among participants is as important as delivering the content of the modules or lessons. The facilitator therefore should be aware and sensitive about the profile and background of students. There are cases that students are from orphanage while some had sad stories like being abandoned by their parents. It could be, in some instances, where students are victims of violence and oppression and that the facilitator should take the role as counselor or an open-minded listener. Students have different profile because they come from different places with different background. There are no homogenous experiences among students; they might come from a place with different language and different culture. With these in mind, the tasks to inquire into the sensibilities, strengths, weaknesses of students would boost the effectiveness of processing learning experience. The roles and tasks of facilitators are important to guide and continue the path towards learning together with the students. He/she does not stop being a facilitator, for in the first place and above all he/she is always a learner.

3. Awareness and Reflective Writing

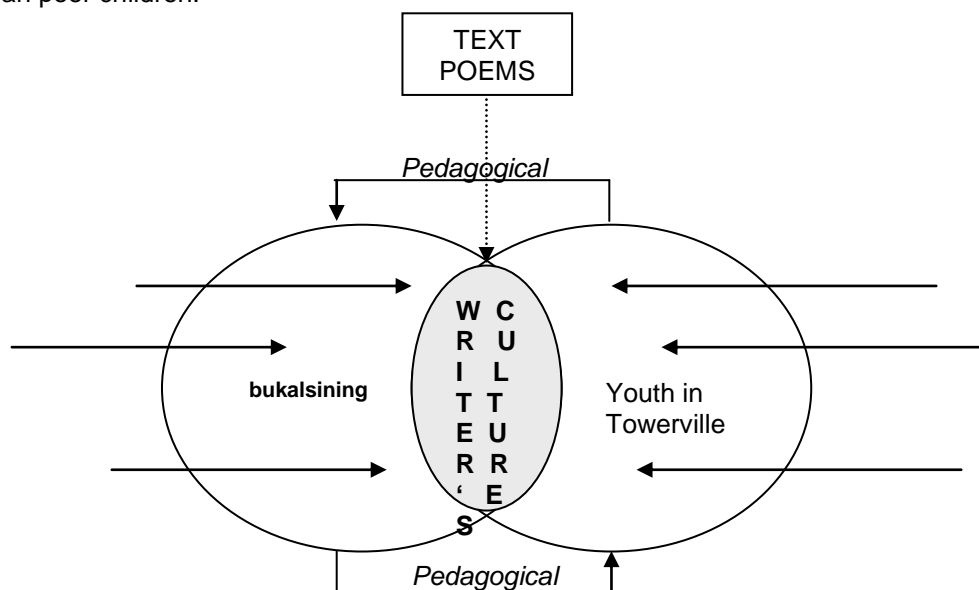
There are many ways of reflecting about society. However, no matter how much effort is used to reflect on this and no matter how many information we absorb to know more about social realities, there would be always be inequalities. Even McLaren echoes that:

We live at a precarious moment in history. Relations of subjection, suffering dispossession and contempt for human dignity and sanctity of life are at the center of social existence. Emotional dislocation, moral sickness and individual helplessness remain ubiquitous features of our time [10].

According to Freire awareness starts with acknowledging the presence of dehumanization in society. Class contradictions according to him beget a relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. As such, to stop or minimize the negative effects of class struggle a dialogue should be reached not just as “beings” but as “human beings.” Ramon Guillermo, however, cautions the effects of dialogue. He says that such a ‘humanization’ without regard to the emancipation of the people from all concrete conditions which bind them to a life of poverty and exploitations, and focusing instead on changing their ‘modes of thought’ so that they can better ‘dialogue’ with their oppressors, smacks of sheer deceit [11]. Freire examines the practice of emancipation as equal to the practice of education. Education for him involves free expressions and actions to concretize liberating from the conditions of oppression. This can only be achieved, initially and continually, through awareness, consciousness or *conscientizacao* [12]. Liberation is anchored on consciousness and education. As a way of doing things, the underprivileged like the urban poor children can reflect and write. In a way, writing becomes for them a conscious act for emancipation. It is in this act of writing that entails dialoguing with readers. These two are not mutually exclusive but are conjoined together within the writer’s culture by way of his/her written words.

4. The Writer’s Culture

Defining culture in this context would consider the interplay of *social, ideological, pedagogical* and *textual* elements while going through the process of emergent writing or the written texts produced by urban poor children.



Culture as a social definition refers to the relations of people—narrowly in determining the social site of individuals as against others’—manifesting their worldviews on the materiality of experience and discoursing on different individualities and cultures. This is the first writer’s cultural element as this defines relationship, exchange and referentiality. The writer’s culture will have diminishing effects without these elements. The writings will remain superficial and shallow, that is, writings as art for art’s sake. The cultural matrix would not be possible without social relations. With these relations come social action, attitudes, valuations, beliefs, artistic expressions and language. It is in this respect that identification points to the identity of people who share common beliefs and actions. Since identification presupposes social identities, social classes merge to be defined. The social specificities of culture give the writer a sense of belongingness and attachments. He/she writes within social bounds. The society he/she speaks is the society that he/she deals with in his artistic and expressive works.

References

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