The Possibilities and Problematics of Promoting a Liberatory Classroom in an Institutional Context the University

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Abstract

This paper includes a dialog about an experiment using the Liberatory Pedagogy outlined by Paulo Freire in his seminal work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Two instructors and one student recount some of the concerns, challenges and rewards of incorporating some of Freire's ideas into a classroom of students in an American university, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Their former student, Amanda Rabalais, begins and ends the paper with a gesture at her experience in the liberatory classroom, followed by instructor's responses to several questions including, "What have you seen in education that seems to be problematical?" "Why did you decide to experiment with liberatory pedagogy?" "In what ways did you feel impeded as you tried to advance a liberatory pedagogy?" and "Is it possible to escape from the paradox of requiring liberatory work in an institutional context, such as the university?"

Below we present a conversation among two professors (Carol Thompson and Michael Kleine) and a former student (Amanda Rabalais) focusing on the efforts of the professors to enact a liberatory pedagogy (inspired by Paulo Freire) in a rather rigid institutional context, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR). Amanda's voice, as one of our best students, will frame a dialog responding to questions (posed by Amanda for Carol and Michael to answer) concerning a first-year class that the professors have been co-teaching for nearly twenty years--Rhetoric and Communication, a course that is core for the highly selective Donaghey Scholars program at UALR.

A**manda:** At the start of my undergraduate career, my expectations for college courses included a lot of lengthy, one-sided lectures, a plethora of homework, and a tough grading scale. A majority of my classes have lived up to these expectations. During my first semester, however, I encountered a class that went against the normal vision of a college class. I encountered a class modeled after the education guidelines of Paulo Freire. In this class, I was not merely a vessel to be filled with the words of my professors.

Question: What have you seen in education that seems to be problematical?

Carol: I have experienced every style of educational philosophy during my academic career as a student and as an instructor. In most cases, material was presented as "motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (Freire, 1992, p. 57). In college often instructors would read their scholarly papers to us and we would be expected to take notes and comment on their cherished words, with no attempt to "reconnect to keep a relationship between teacher and student alive" (Thompson & Kleine, 2015, p. 174).

Michael: John Dewey (1916/2008), an American philosopher of education, believed that what is most deeply learned in school is the social structure and power configurations of the classroom space. I was fortunate that I had some teachers who promoted problem-posing, creativity, collaboration, and even dialog. But they were rare. In the dark, oppressive spaces of banking education, I found myself objectified, uninspired, bored, and even resentful.

Why did you decide to experiment with liberatory pedagogy?

Michael: From the outset of our teaching, we discovered that we both shared key teaching values:

1. The belief that speaking, writing, listening, and reading should be completely integrated beneath the umbrella of rhetorics of positive communication and cooperation.
2. A shared sense that the two of us wanted to share the floor with not only each other, but also with our students.
3. The assumption that writing promotes speaking and speaking promotes writing.
4. Finally, above all, our mutual enthusiasm about dialog, as it is promoted by Martin Buber in *Ich und Du*.

Carol: We were both profoundly moved by Martin Buber's work *I and Thou* (Buber, 1923/1970). Because both of our earlier experiences as students and teachers had been so stultifying in traditionally structured

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classrooms, it seemed that developing the "relation," as Buber puts it, was seminal to any work we would do with and for students.
To emphasize this idea of co-construction for our class, we focused strongly on Pearce and Cronin's idea of the co-construction of meaning, or CMM, in which parties engage in the tough work of communication in order to create positive "social worlds" (Pearce and Pearce, 2000a). We believed that "communication is consequential" (Mirivel, J.C., 2014, p. 37), and to engender the type of open, problem-posing course we wanted, we designed our communication activities to be saturated with dialog.

In what ways did you feel impeded as your tried to advance a liberatory pedagogy?

Carol: Having lectured much of my career as an instructor, I didn't realize how much I depended on the certainty of the lecture. The lecture was outlined; I knew the content. I knew how it would proceed and how it would end. It was certain, predictable reliable. To step boldly out of that comfort felt like I was stepping off of a cliff like the happy fool in a Tarot deck into a chasm of uncertainty, and it was difficult to even contemplate.
It was not only the uncertainty that bothered me; it was the feeling that had been programmed into me all of the years of my academic career--that teachers talk, thus they teach, they are the knowledge experts, they are the veritable stars of the classroom. To do otherwise was a denial of and even a denigration of what I believed to be my duty to my students.
So the first impediment I discovered was my own.
Impediments came from the institution also, or at least I thought they did. If the chairs of our department learned that *all we did was sit around and talk*, would Michael and I be censured? What would our colleagues think? And, of course, what would the students say?
Michael: With Carol, I felt a kind of fear when we endeavored to promote a dialogical classroom, and an even greater fear when we added Freire to our syllabus and began to seek a semblance of a "liberatory pedagogy." But Carol and I were, in a way, *requiring* our students to write and speak what the two of us considered to be a liberatory discourse.
Carol and I pushed our version of liberatory pedagogy even further when the two of us began DOING the writing assignments that we gave with our students. Both of us shared rough drafts of papers, and we asked our students to critique those rough drafts. Our students were both supportive AND astutely critical. They seemed to learn that they were more than capable of engaging in positive critique of scholarly writing not only with their teachers, but also among themselves.
Carol: Above, Michael discusses some of the measures we developed in our course to enact a Freirean model of course design and reduce the teacher-student binary. We didn't want our course to be one that became an "act of depositing" (Freire, p. 58).
As discussion about our texts and ideas ensued we slipped into a Rogerian (Rogers, 1964) listening mode and focused carefully on each student as he or she struggled with the content.
Even though our assignments reduced the power differential between ourselves and the students, we still were not able to eliminate it entirely, and we were always aware of Freire's words that suggest, "Oppression—overwhelming control—is necrophilic; it is nourished by love to death, not life" (Freire, p. 64). Moreover, it is this attitude of nourishing love, not death, in Freire's terms, that compels our approach to this course, as well as we can within the guidelines established by our university. We believe most strongly that, "only through communication can human life hold meaning" (Freire, p. 63).

Is it possible to escape from the paradox of requiring liberatory work in an institutional context, such as the university?

Michael: During the fall semester, when Carol and I last taught the class together, the two of us developed what we considered to be a "liberatory" writing assignment in which we wrote assignments with students. To help us revise our papers, the students posed a number of solid counter-arguments that they thought we needed to address. (We revised with an eye toward their counter-arguments.)
Writing and revising the paper in the context of a learning community enabled me to understand, at last, how a class based on the theme of focusing on communication might become, if not completely liberatory, at least MORE liberatory through a dialogical process. My claim in my paper I shared with the class asserted that despite institutional requirements, students and teachers might embrace what I called a "liberatory epistemology."

I still see our mutual effort to enact a liberatory pedagogy in a university class to be problematical; but I also believe that a liberatory process of inclusive dialog and valuation of a "liberatory epistemology" is largely edifying, perhaps even life-changing for both teachers and students alike.

Carol: The idea of teaching a course wholly based on Freirean principles is difficult within most current university structures, but, whatever the structure, however restrictive, we can move closer what we consider an ideal. Just recently, on April 14, 2016, an article by Eric Westervelt appeared on *nprEd* that describes the views about education of Nobel prize winner, Carl Wieman. Wieman finds the typical college lecture as the "educational equivalent of bloodletting," and "one long overdue for revision" (Westervelt, 2016).

As we note in an earlier piece in *Innovative Higher Education*, Dr. Jeanette Norden, a neuroscientist at Vanderbilt University, uses Freirean methods to involve students in solving problems themselves instead of hearing solutions produced through lecture, and Professor of Engineering Al-Rizzo at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock develops a classroom that is facilitated by "mutual respect" and problem solving. Rizzo says "I respect them, and they return the respect to me. Students learn from each other; together, we encounter and solve problems" (Thompson & Kleine, 2015).

Amanda: In a class like this learning moves beyond the traditional banking method to a new depth of understanding, where students and teachers alike are challenged to grow with the text instead of just stagnantly reading it for brief retention. Creating the dialog between the students and teachers removes the traditional power barrier to free thought, allowing students to explore meaning in a way that brings enrichment to themselves and to their instructors and allows us to develop more positive social worlds.

Conclusion

As education orients students toward the workplace, we lose the impact of a true and deep educational experience, one that shapes our ability to think and promotes our compassion for others. As instructors Michael and I design our classroom to meet needs that flourish in the workplace, but also to address needs that involve the development of the entire human being. Philosopher J. Krishnamurti wonders what education should do and why should we even be educated? Is passing tests, earning a living, and "brutalizing ambition" part of education? (Krishnamurti, 1955). We believe education is more than that. An educator creates an environment where we can collectively find what we construct together as meaning, where all voices are affirmed,

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