



Enacting Paulo Freire in an Institutional Context: Developing Positive Relationships

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Abstract

Co-author Michael Kleine and I have experimented with the Brazilian author Paulo Freire's pedagogy in our team-taught classes. Enacting Freire's ideal of a liberatory epistemology is extremely difficult because institutional constraints increase the psychological and emotional distance between our students and ourselves. Michael and I devised ways to create a classroom based on Freire's dialogic approach to education. Using Martin Buber's terminology, we work to establish our students as "Thous" rather than as "Its. Together with our students we explore the texts we read, and generate open and liberatory discussions based on the notion of co-constructing our classroom, and co-constructing what knowledge means to us. Establishing this "open space" of inquiry, a climate of acceptance, involves putting into practice Freire's strategies that produce authentic dialogue. As teachers we are active participants in the discussions as well as the assignments, writing journals and assignments with the students and submitting our work for student examination. The atmosphere in the classroom is decidedly relational and inter-subjective. Mutual respect is a cardinal value. We also enact behaviors associated with Julien Mirivel's Positive Communication model such as greeting by first name thus bridging the gulf of separateness; we ask questions to discover the known and unknown with our students; we encourage students and compliment ideas; we disclose in our discussions; we listen deeply to our students and work to establish authentic dialogue. Essentially we manage the tension between traditional, banking classrooms, in Freirean terms, and a classroom that exhibits and even compels the openness of the liberatory classroom. Our writing (and our teaching) is informed by reviewing the work of Freire, mentioned earlier, but also that of Dewey, Buber, Vygotsky, Palmer and Mirivel as discussed in our chapter.

Keywords: *Freire, Buber, Positive Education, Authentic Dialogue;*

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This paper focuses on our efforts as two professors at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock to enact a liberatory pedagogy, inspired by Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, in a traditional and somewhat rigid institutional context.

Among the books experienced together is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), which students find edifying. Students' acceptance of Freire's ideas help rationalize our efforts to actually develop Freire's idea of a liberating pedagogy in an institutional context. Here, though, we speak of the strategies suggested by Freire that lead to profound learning based on personal critical assessment of powerful ideas, not necessarily the goal as Cortinas (2017) describes of using the Freirean method to "break the chains of capital." We prefer to allow our students' investigations and insights to lead to their own new vision of knowledge and what it can do for our society as they envision it.

Freire describes is a dialogic method wof teaching here students and instructors are co-equal participants in the construction of what counts as knowledge in the classroom (Freire, p. 88). Students with students, and faculty with students are urged to engage in authentic dialog. This involves deep listening and thoughtful response, as well as humility and the willingness to allow dialog to develop organically.

Moreover, Freire suggests that instructors, and even students, work toward a psychological thought-shift from, as Martin Buber would say, an "I-IT" response where other individuals in our world are considered "its" or "objects," to an "I-Thou" response, in which each partner is regarded as a unique and worthy human being (Buber, 1970). This shift brings with it a subtle change in the atmosphere in the

classroom from one of neutrality to one of mutual regard and respect. Taking on this change is no easy task. Without complete commitment and focus, the entire moment can go awry and learning can disintegrate. To enact this orientation toward the “thou” perspective, which in turn can lead to dialog in its purest sense, Freire’s work implies an existential framework where students and instructors believe they are personally responsible for co-constructing what happens in the classroom, for contributing to the climate of discovery, for recognizing that their understanding of life is driven by their choices, and that their decisions have consequences.

Initial Thoughts in Enacting a Liberatory Strategy

Let’s review a few implications of importing Freire into a traditional classroom. Teachers and students would be engaged, actively, in the co-construction of knowledge. Knowledge should grow from the texts and communication we are analyzing; everyone has a part. Through free dialog where all would present arguments, counterarguments, example, instances, experiences, evidence, verbal and textual, we find that a truth emerges for the group.

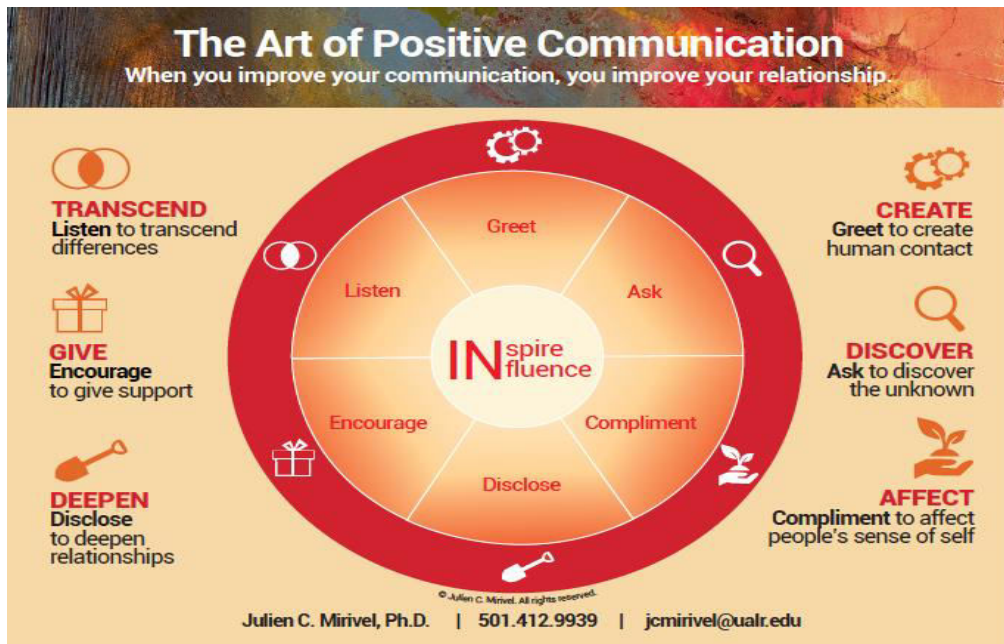
1. Role reversals would be common. (Students would sometimes become teachers; teachers would sometimes become students. Perhaps faculty could submit one of their rejected papers for analysis, or they might actually write the assignment along with the students. This is a powerful way to diminish status differences)
2. Writing, discussion, and attendance would be expected. We mentioned in an earlier paper (Thompson & Kleine, 2014), “we found that the teacher/student binary was undermined as we engaged in oral dialog with our students.” (p. 181).
3. Asking students to call us by our first names does much to create that relationship atmosphere.
4. Flexibility rather than rigidity would be the norm.
5. Mutual respect (among students and teachers, among students) would be essential.
6. “Discovery” and “creativity” as well as critical thinking would be valued.
7. Responses to texts and to topics would not be evaluated in terms of “correctness”; instead, relational and effective discussion and writing would be stressed. Comments would focus on what is positive about the paper and even areas of concern framed positively, e.g., “You’ve got a good start on analyzing this text. You might look further at areas where we became confused and rework some of the phrasing in those places. You have the makings a terrific paper. Can’t wait to see the final copy.”

Positive Communication

We want to add one more approach to enhance the Freirean, liberatory classroom: positive communication. Theorist Julian Mirivel developed a model (below) that highlights communication behaviors between faculty and students that can open lines of discourse, tends to lead to deeper and more authentic dialog. Mirivel explains:

Positive communication refers to any verbal and nonverbal behaviors that function positively in the course of human interaction. It includes all of the ‘communicative processes and forms which we would be proud to model and teach to children’ (Socha & Pitts, 2012a, p. 324). Positive communication reflects our potential: what we are capable of doing. It includes all of the behaviors and satisfaction, as well as those that challenge our self to move in the direction of others and to act ethically” (Mirivel, 2013.)

The Mirivel model shows behaviors that can lead to a positive communication interaction with anyone, but particularly among students as we work to create strong learning relationships that invite creativity, critical thinking and intelligent thought.



Notice the model begins with something simple, greeting. Greeting bridges the divide between human beings, and opens the door for communication. To greet a student using his or her name suggests something worthwhile is going to happen; it signals that the instructor cares about the student, a major step in creating a liberatory classroom.

Next, Mirivel discusses asking. Asking questions, asking someone to explain, to argue, describe, quick-starts the relationship as we seek to uncover what is known and unknown about ourselves and others. Instead of talking the entire time for the fifty minute classroom, thoughtful questions could allow student participation and engagement.

The next element of the model, explores the action of complimenting. Positive remarks work to "affect the sense of self" and give students (and others) the courage to contribute.

Mutual disclosure tends to bring human beings together. It deepens relationships. Being able to disclose "I don't know," for example, in front of a class is an important disclosure milestone for every instructor who are trained to be the experts in their field and it is difficult to admit the possibility that he or she does not know everything..

Positive communication is predicated on the idea of encouragement. Encouraging, looks, comments on papers, comments to the students or to the class offer encouragement that students need to develop more.

Finally, the Mirivel model stresses listening. Listening enables us to understand someone else. learn in depth what his or her ideas. Not only that but the person who is listened to grows in internal stature. To be listened to prompts us to "transcend differences."

We are not sure we have fully addressed the paradox lurking in the phrase "liberatory pedagogy" as it applies to American, or other, institutions. However, we have endeavored to join important voices—Freire, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Mirivel—in a dialogical examination of the paradox and in providing a few tentative ideas about how to both understand and address this paradox. Perhaps the ideas contained here will seem like a hopeless (and vacuous) dodging of the problem posed by Freire's work, but, in the spirit of love, we offer this final comment: we cannot avoid institutional realities; however, incorporating some of the practical behaviors we have cited from Parker Palmer's idea of the space and from the Mirivel model, and others, we can endeavor to respect, deeply the subjectivities, the differences, we encounter when we are engaged in dialog with others. The implication of this comment for education is profound, we believe.

Yet embedded within this profundity is the recognition that every instructor by virtue of simply wanting to develop a liberatory classroom, by strength of will, can enact positive behaviors and some of the structures described above that focus in on students as authentic, as individuals with personal

abilities, hopes and dreams, individuals that given the chance, stand to make outsized contributions to the world as a whole. Thus, we find the seminal element in designing the Freirean classroom would be this: respecting the students, and even loving the students.

Insofar as “teachers” and “students” both avoid the kind of objectification that Freire critiques, they just might come together in a community of democratic and constructive learning.

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