

Power-Filled Lessons for Leadership Educators from Paulo Freire

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Abstract

This paper is designed to introduce readers to teacher-philosopher-practitioner, Paulo Freire and to illustrate the power of his educational ideals for the task of teaching leadership. Readers will encounter Freire, understand how one's definition of leadership needs to match one's approach to teaching leadership, review a proposed Freirean leadership pedagogy, and consider ways this pedagogy has been used in practice. Finally, I will offer a series of recommendations for getting started with these ideas.

Introducing Freire

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator whose official work was teaching the economically poor of his country how to read (see summary of his method Brown, 1987). But this was not the heart of his work. In his own words "acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context" (Freire, 1973, p. 48). Freire's intent was that by learning to read, the oppressed would become conscious of the existence and exploitation of their oppressors.

Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1990) along with his other publications, have impacted thinking regarding the task of higher education, particularly in the area of adult education (Brookfield, 1987; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Vella 2002). Applications of his approach have also been made for teachers working at other stages of learning (Finkel, 2000; Shor & Pari, 1999; Shor, 1987b) and learning in everyday life (Shor, 1987a) as well.

His educational philosophy is grounded in a critique of what he calls the “banking model” (Freire, 1990, p. 61) which he believes has resulted in economic oppression. He initially identified this in his work among the illiterate in Brazil. In his later travels around the world, Freire confirmed his observation from a global perspective (Freire & Faundez, 1998). His recommendation that the professor persona be eliminated from students’ perception coupled with a problem-posing approach to learning provides an alternative to the banking approach and is intended to empower would be learners (Freire, 1990). The goal of this approach is to bring forth a grassroots critique of *sectarian* contexts which are fanatical, castrating, and alienating and embrace *radicalization* which is critical, creative, and liberating.

Part of this process, called “*conscientizacao*” by Freire (1990), is a new awareness of one’s oppressed state and insight into the suppressive methodologies of the oppressors. This awareness is the foundation for liberating action that, when coupled with reflection, creates *praxis*. *Praxis*, in turn, builds a sense of proactive responsibility in those who would engage in social change. This, from my perspective as a long-time leadership educator, defines the means and ends of our pedagogy.

Freire’s educational philosophy has resulted – sometimes intentionally, sometimes as a by-product – in the emergence of leaders and organizations founded by common people. These leaders, “awakened” via Freirean principles of learning, tend to have ownership of social problems and learn to ask what might be done about such problems. They tend to see social structures and systems in an enlightened way. Freire (1997), recalling experiences from his childhood backyard, says, “To see again what had already been seen before always implies seeing angles that were not perceived before. Thus, a posterior view of the world can be done in a more critical, less naïve, and more rigorous way” (p. 38).

Matching Educational Methods to Leadership Content

This paper purports that leadership educators can learn much from Freire in both intent and practice. Freire’s ideals, applied to the work of teaching leadership, suggest the means by which an instructor teaches leadership must match the kind of leadership the instructor intends to promote. Shor (1993) explains, “Freire insists on consistency between the democratic values of his critical pedagogy and its classroom practices” (p. 27).

From a negative standpoint those who teach leadership according to what Freire calls the *banking model* are disseminating via their pedagogy an authoritarian

model of leadership. Perhaps due to their ignorance that as a teacher “he or she is a politician, too” (Shor & Freire, 1986, p. 46), the campaign being waged via instructional strategy is for a command-and-control style of leadership rather than servant leadership, or transforming leadership, for example. Under this approach, students learn that:

- Positional leadership is necessary for those who choose to use their authority to keep followers in a quiet, submissive role.
- Leaders know the realities of their followers sufficiently and don’t need to inquire about the needs, problems, or injustices they may be facing.
- Answers reside in the expert-educated leaders.
- Empowerment of others is unnecessary for strong leadership.
- Good leaders neither negotiate with followers, nor encourage participation.
- Experiences, contributions, and the strengths of others complicate efficient plans that have been previously prepared by the leader.

Uncritical inheritance of this industrial view of leadership (Rost, 1991) will leave most educators with little else but just such an approach. An approach committed to empowerment, collaboration, and trust will require a completely different paradigm. “If, on the other hand,” notes Denis Goulet, “...one is to adopt a method which fosters dialogue and reciprocity, one must first be ideologically committed to equality, to the abolition of privilege, and to non-elitists forms of leadership wherein special qualifications may be exercised, but are not perpetuated” (Freire, 1973, p. xi).

Freirean leadership educators will ask questions, and more questions, such as:

- Does the way I determine class content communicate that I trust and value my student’s experience and expertise?
- Does the way I talk to my students illustrate that I respect them as co-learners and, even co-leaders in the classroom?
- Do my pedagogical methods lead students closer to confidently claiming their leadership identity and responsibility?
- Does my approach to teaching help students to see for themselves the problems and needs of society, as well as the strengths and potential in others?

Freirean Leadership Pedagogy

“Freirean critical education invites students to question the system they live in and the knowledge being offered them, to discuss what kind of future they want” (Shor, 1993, p. 28). How then, can this be applied to the teaching of leadership?

Bringing it all together, a good *Freirean Leadership Pedagogy* includes the following commitments and practices:

First, Freirean leadership pedagogy exists within the awareness that institutional models of leadership are a means to oppressing would-be leaders as well as the cause for the ongoing oppression of others. The success of institutional leadership is typically marked by financial achievements. Freire (1990) explains, “Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more – always more – even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing” (p. 44). But he adds, a short time later, “They cannot see that, in the egoistic pursuit of *having* as a possessing class, they suffocate in their own possessions and no longer *are*; they merely *have*” (p. 45). To move, then, from an oppressive leader who believes he is necessary for transformation to occur and who finds it difficult to trust the people to one who does see the inadequacy and injustice of exploiting others in order to have, who enters into communion with the people and who is willing to learn with them, requires “a profound rebirth,” says Freire (p. 47).

If one’s model of leadership embodies a more non-profit orientation in which leaders are motivated by service, then the leadership educator willingly takes on the challenge to awaken her students. Her goal, then, will be to help them to see the oppressiveness of the prevailing worldview regarding successful leadership and to see the way in which that worldview is literally oppressive to others.

Secondly, Freirean leadership pedagogy is built on a whole-hearted conviction that those once called students are credible contributors to the overall process of learning. To begin with, this idea is an affront to the culture of degree granting. But what’s more, students, like the poor-oppressed, tend not to be confident in their ability to get knowledge for themselves, much less the ability to teach their teachers (Shor, 1993). Freire (1990) calls them “emotionally dependent” (p. 51). He says, “Almost never do they realize that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves” (p. 52).

Freire (1990) says to would be teachers, and (for our purposes) teachers of leadership, “To achieve praxis...it is necessary to trust the oppressed and in their ability to reason” (p. 52). Vella (1994) interprets this principle as “Respect for Learners” (p. 12). She says, “Inviting learners to be subjects of their own learning is indeed the practice of freedom” (p. 14).

A third aspect of Freirean leadership pedagogy will embed a *praxis* orientation in leadership students during the course itself and with the intent that such an orientation will continue to be applied following the course. According to Freire (1990), *praxis* is a “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 36). “Embedded in a commitment to critical and liberating dialogue” (p. 52), it is the means to liberation. And liberation is an essential element of transforming leadership. Burns (2003), citing Freire, notes, “At their best, creative thought and action engender, for leaders and followers together, the conviction that the reality of their situation is not, in the words of the great Brazilian educator and theorist of liberation Paulo Freire, ‘a closed world from which there is no exit,’ but ‘a limiting situation which they can transform,’ a mobilizing and empowering faith in the collaborative struggle for real change” (p. 169).

The challenge of the teacher of leadership – as a precursor to *problem solving* – is what Freire calls *problem posing*. Brookfield (1987) explains this as “an artistic exercise in which important situations are delineated, central concerns are expressed, and difficulties are identified....problems to be addressed are identified by participants rather than external authorities” (p. 155). Problem posing sets the stage for empowerment.

Finally, Freirean leadership pedagogy models a healthy perspective on authority. Many misunderstand Freire to be suggesting a pedagogy of chaos. But he adamantly critiques this assumption (Freire & Faundez, 1998). He explains, “Authority is necessary to the educational process as well as necessary to the freedom of the student and my own. The teacher is absolutely necessary. What is bad, what is not necessary, is authoritarianism, but not authority” (Horton & Freire, p. 181). This is a vitally important point for leadership education. Good leadership (modeled by teachers of leadership) does not do *nothing*, but neither does it do *everything*. Freire and his collaborators help us see the beauty in this paradox.

In Practice

The author was fortunate to have been a participant in a doctoral program in which the faculty practiced, and thus modeled, a Freirean approach. Andrews University’s Leadership Program (Alaby, 2002) began offering their innovative program in 1994. Some related themes on their web site explain the program (see http://www.andrews.edu/sed/lead_ed_admin/leadership/about/index.html).

The Leadership program is learner-driven. The participant works with an advisor and develops a plan of study with course work and directed activities to fit

his/her needs. An extraordinary amount of personal ownership by the participant is critical for satisfactory completion of the program.

The Leadership program is life-embedded. Participants are encouraged to use their work and life experience as the basic context to demonstrate the Leadership competencies.

The Leadership program builds important bonds among its participants. The participants become partners in learning, both with faculty members and other participants.

The faculty at Andrews demonstrated for me an amazing, otherwise unheard of, approach to doctoral education. Naturally in positions of authority, the faculty did not carry their authority in a way that demanded compliance. Although they led us in knowledge discovery, and ultimately re-presentation of our new knowledge, they postured themselves as co-learners. In Alaby's (2002) assessment of the program he makes links to Tom (1984) who presents a model that derives from the moral equality of teachers and students. In this model, equality implies reciprocity and demands fairness. In the LP (Leadership Program), faculty and students are all significantly called participants and not students. As participants, they are viewed as integral *parts* of the *whole*. This approach appears to be an effort at equalizing inequalities.

In classes, conversations, and online exchanges, I was often in awe at the ability of the Andrews Leadership Program faculty to draw learning from me and to appreciate and value my insights. Although I had not yet been *minted* with my doctoral degree, I was respected as a viable and valuable learner. My job was my Freirean "historic situation." As such, it was taken seriously and considered *the context* for my leadership learning experience. In turn, I learned much from the experiences and reflections of my teachers.

The Andrews experience made sense to me. I had been reading Freire, and teaching in Freirean form non-formally since 1991 and was glad, during my doctoral studies, to be on the receiving end of its power. Upon graduating in 2005, I found myself teaching leadership courses at Azusa Pacific University. First, with their global masters degree in Organizational Leadership ("Operation Impact") and later as a faculty member teaching both graduate and undergraduate leadership courses. In each educational situation, Freire – and the memories of my time at Andrews – has been my companion.

I have found that teaching *a la Freire* is very natural for me. I am passionate about learning in any and every way and so I genuinely expect to learn from my

students, no matter their age or life stage. I do my best to disparage my rank as a “trained learner” by encouraging students to call me by my first name. Most graduate students comply. Most undergraduates respond to my request by saying, “Okay, Dr. Kaak.” I have noticed that if I have a student in a second class, they may start calling me, Paul.

Because my definition of leadership includes the idea “leaders are those who see,” I am eager to help my students see the problems embedded in leadership as a position. Knowing my students may make wrong assumptions, I do my best to help them find freedom from the subtle expectation that passing an academic program in leadership is a ticket to successful leadership. Furthermore, I intentionally organize my courses so that those I teach will find liberation as learners, a gift that in turn they will give to those who choose to follow them. Finally, my students do a lot of dialoging. In some cases, the dialogue is with themselves via the journaling philosophy of Proff (1992) and in other cases they dialogue with one another and me. I pose real world questions and invite them (often in groups of two or three) to pursue an answer. Their solutions are then shared with everyone and students are taught to continue the process of questioning each other, ultimately seeking a best, or collective, solution. Quite often, they return with answers better than what I had prepared, leaving me with little to say, except: “You have exceeded my expectations in your skills of collaboration and reasoning. Well done!”

Another approach to leadership education in which elements of Freire’s ideals can be detected is Ronald Heifetz’s *case-in-point* approach as used at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government (Cox, 2007; Parks, 2005). Heifetz’s (1998) thinking about leadership has led him to the awareness that authority and leadership are not the same thing and authority (positions of legitimacy that create in people the expectation problems can be solved by the so-called leader) is problematic for those whose preference is to lead people to take ownership of their problems and the need to address them. This is a notably Freirean notion. Heifetz applies this idea by allowing tension to emerge in the classroom and then, though he remains the teacher, he is careful to not quickly fix the conflict. In most cases, his students expect him to do just that. Heifetz’s intended alternative is that “Conscious conflict involves creating something new from what isn’t working” (Cox, 2007).

For this to be educationally meaningful, the teacher cannot feel threatened by challenges from students. In fact, this is just what Freire would hope for from those participating with him as learners. Cox (2007) explains the kind of freedom *case-in-point* leadership education encourages. He says, “The teaching of leadership is in essence leadership. While I may be the ‘authority in the room,’ all

of us can engage in leadership activity. You have to contend with my ‘authority’ just like the folks in your organization have to contend with your ‘authority.’ My leadership is open for our scrutiny as much as yours” (p. 8).

The teacher makes himself vulnerable to critique in the classroom. The teacher points out problems that emerge while the class is meeting. Becoming aware, students are required to struggle with a leadership response. And, although the classroom is not a situation students are actually facing in their real world, *it is their real world for the moment*. Such problems *are* the *case-in-point* experience and the instructor asks questions that generate praxis during the class.

Occasionally, I have turned my classroom into a learning organization (Senge, 1991) in order to practice *case-in-point* leadership and open the door for Freire-style dialogue. In such an environment students of leadership can master dialogue and discussion, two distinct ways groups converse. In dialogue there is free and creative exploration of complex, subtle issues, a deep listening to one another and the suspension of one’s own views. In a discussion different views are presented and defended. There is a search for the best view to support decisions that must be made at the time. Dialogue and discussion can be viewed as potentially complementary, but most groups lack the ability to distinguish them and to move consciously between them.

Setting my students free to learn together in these ways allows problems to inevitably emerge. I then invite them to step back from the actual experience they (and perhaps we) are now in and define the situation. It is my task to point to the problem while releasing the students to name it and address it. I encourage them to return to dialogue with each other, asking questions, and posturing themselves in vulnerable ways in order to see what they were missing when immersed in the conflict. This allows students to practice what Heifetz (2002) describes as moving off the dance floor and getting in the balcony.

Recommendations

For those who are intrigued and wish to pursue Freirean pedagogy in their leadership classrooms, I recommend read Freire. Start at the beginning with a difficult, but important read, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Then read something like *We Make the Road by Walking* in which he dialogues with Civil Rights leadership educator, Myles Horton. Return to Freire with *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Stay with it. You will be glad. Reading Ira Shor will provide you with a readable interpretation of Freire for the North American educator.

Next, find a leadership cause – outside of the classroom – to struggle with. Mine is the matter of land justice and food access. Involvement in these issues makes

my invitation to social engagement credible.

Help your students to see for themselves the problems their generation of leaders will be called on to solve. Use questions and practice being okay with having no set answers. Provide yourself with evidence that learning is powerful, even when solutions are not forthcoming from the teacher's lips.

Analyze your teaching overall. Do your methods for teaching leadership match your understanding of leadership? As you carry out leadership – through teaching – are you displaying the kind of leadership you hope your students will carry out with their followers when they leave your classroom? If empowerment is important for you as an educator, what are you doing to empower your students in learning and in classroom leadership? If you want your students to integrate action and reflection, do your assignments allow for students to *do* and then *ponder upon* what they have done? If you expect your students to provide leadership that is collaborative and open to input, are you creating enough time for dialogue – about the course, its content, what works and what does not work – that students believe they can shape the course in appropriate ways?

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to understand that leadership education from a Freirean perspective requires the emergence of dual convictions. Leadership educators must realize that their own conviction of the necessity for struggle (an indispensable dimension of revolutionary wisdom) was not given to them by anyone else – if it is authentic. This conviction cannot be packaged and sold; it is reached, rather, by means of a totality of reflection and action. Only the leaders' personal involvement in reality, within an historical situation, led them to criticize the situation and to wish to change it (Freire, 1990).

In other words, to invite students of leadership into transforming (liberating) leadership requires that teachers be personally engaged in the causes of oppression. They invite students to struggle because they too have struggled. The other conviction, which must develop within the students, is "the conviction of the necessity for struggle" (Freire, 1990, p. 54). Both those whose role is to teach leadership (but who are also committed to learning about leadership) and those whose role is to learn leadership (but who are also committed to teaching leadership) must be committed to "a permanent relationship of dialogue" (p. 55) which Freire calls, "a humanizing pedagogy" (p. 55) and a "co-intentional education" (p. 56).

Leadership education must be democratic education. This kind of education says Paulo Freire (1973), is founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, and the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love and courage. To avoid being a farce, it cannot fear the analysis of reality or avoid creative discussion.

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