

Understanding Freire, Understanding Myself

Paulina Huayamave¹
University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

Introduction

Ella está en el horizonte. Yo me acerco dos pasos y ella se aleja dos pasos. Camino diez pasos y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá. Por mucho que yo camine, nunca la alcanzaré. ¿Para qué sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve, para caminar.

Eduardo Galeano, *Ventana sobre la Utopía*

This poem by the Uruguayan poet, Eduardo Galeano, describes what utopia is. Utopia is in the horizon and even though we approach it, we will never reach it. What is utopia for then? Precisely for that, to keep us walking, to keep us moving forward. In pursuit of this utopia, I embraced the journey of a PhD program in education, this paper has been written during my first year of studies, responding to a personal search for my identity as an educator and emerging researcher, looking for answers or alternatives to disrupt educational systems that have not been able to surmount social injustice and disparities in contexts like the Latin American one. The work of Paulo Freire, a worldwide renown educator and philosopher has been analyzed and reflected by many scholars around the world. Freire has been heard, and there are people out there trying to do what they can to put into practice his theory. I have found myself experiencing, in my own life, some of his ideas and beliefs, but it has not been enough in order to change impoverished and unjust societies through education. What else needs to be done to incorporate critical pedagogy practices in the educational system so they are transformational and perennial?

In this paper I have made some analogies of a few of his key ideas and concepts to my own lived experiences, unpacking them to unfold understanding of Freire's thoughts of critical consciousness, reading and writing the world, and how to possibly confront a culture of oppression.

Awakening of consciousness

I was born and raised in the city of the big differences, Guayaquil, in Ecuador, a developing country with levels of poverty that reach 35% of its population. If we look at the people living in rural areas, poverty numbers go up (Observatorio Social del Ecuador, 2018). I have to say I have been on the privileged side, but raised with a strong consciousness to see injustice around me.

When I was 14, I had the opportunity to participate in a literacy program for adults in a poor and dangerous neighborhood of my city. I remember having to struggle with my parents so they would let me go to teach these lessons every week. My mom kept saying: "This is too dangerous; why do you have to go? Shouldn't they come to you? They are the ones "in need". The program was mandatory for one year, but I kept participating in



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the program for 3 years. This was my very first experience teaching, and just now I have become conscious that my journey as an educator started then. I had my first, and eventually, my only student, I am going to call her Juana, she was a mother of 3, all her kids were different ages but mom was not older than 32; she did not know how to read or write. In my first lesson with her, I had to teach her the vowels. I used the word Ecuador, it was in the textbook we had to follow, and I thought it would be easy for her to recognize it..., she did not know that it was the name of our country, she did not know she was Ecuadorian. I was not expecting that, I had assumed she knew the name of the country she lived in, but she did not. She was surviving, day after day, trying to meet her family's basic needs. I was not aware of this then but now I can say she was a victim of dehumanization and oppression (Freire, 1968/2018), oppressed by a system that served the privileged, and left out the poor and vulnerable ones; dehumanized, as the conditions around her had made her feel less human. I will elaborate more on this, she was a woman in her early 30's but illiterate, deprived from knowledge and unaware of her context, fighting alone as a single mom, surviving in a society where health and other basic services are not provided. She was immersed in a context where education is a privilege and a cost she was not able to afford. In vulnerable contexts like the poor neighborhoods in Latin America, the fact that a child attends school means a child that will not be able to provide for their family, therefore, even though public education is free, there is still a high cost behind that child that attends school. Being a woman increases the possibility of having to drop out school as they have to stay at home taking care of the youngest children and doing household chores (Observatorio Social del Ecuador, 2018).

Illiteracy prevents people from using their word; according to Freire (1968/2018) our word, in order to be a true word, interacts between reflection and action, and this word, as the essence of dialogue, should help us transform the world, our world. Reflecting more on Juana's situation, and considering everything she had gone through, not even being aware of the country she lived in, I could say she "had been denied her primordial right to speak her word" (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 88). She did not know what her word - world was.

Witnessing this reality was definitely a starting point in my life. Juana was willing to want more, she was willing to do more for herself and her kids. She was willing to restore her humanity. We worked together every week for 3 years. She would ask me to help her pay her bills or understand the doctor's prescription when one of her kids was sick, we learned some math and letters recognition by doing this. Lots of the times I would help her prepare dinner, those were our favorite lessons. We had a relationship where the student and the educator approached the object of cognition, not from the same place maybe, but with the same capacity to understand, ask questions and draw conclusions We worked hard, we shared our experiences, our knowledge, our beliefs. Was it a dialogical relationship? According to Freire, a dialogical situation happens where there is a sincere love for the world, humility, and faith (Freire, 1968/2018). Were we humble enough to build a dialogical relationship? Was there enough love and faith to learn to re-create our world? I do not know the answer to these questions. What I do know now when I reflect back on this experience is how important it is to be aware of who our students are to know about our students' reality, see where they live, ask questions about their families, their hobbies, their dreams, their problems and limitations. This praxis might change our perspective and we will be able to teach not from our minds but from our students' minds and hearts.



A few years later I travelled to El Salvador and lived there for one year. I was a volunteer teacher of 7th and 9th grades. This experience also shaped my reading of the world. I lived in a small rural town in the north of the country, 4 hours away from the capital city. The community played a crucial role in the development of this town. El Salvador, six years before I was there, had signed peace agreements after living through 12 years of a civil war. My students had not attended school properly during those years, all of them were the children of former guerrilleros, and one of them had actually been a guerrillero. I had boys and girls, all of them of different ages, and I have to say, a couple of them were even older than me. I had students that had to travel from smaller distant towns and walked for three and half hours every day to get to school, three and half hours under very harsh weather conditions, extremely hot and humid. They were excellent students, their motivation to learn and finish their studies was admirable. We decided we could enter a national math contest as they had shown really strong abilities in math. We practiced extra hours on the weekends. It was hard work, but they were incredibly driven. After a few weeks they qualified for the semi-finals and were able to represent their province in the contest. We got to travel and see the capital city of the province where we lived, they were so proud. It was the first time they had ever left their town. We did not make it to the finals, but all the experience had been totally worth it. “Love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others” (Freire, 1998/2018, p. 89). There was certainly love in these students, love for the idea of having better days, that is hope. They felt love for their education which fostered their commitment. That love was contagious so that others, like me, believed in them and made it happen. “As critical perception is embodied in action, a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads men to attempt to overcome the limit situations” (Freire, 1998/2018, pg. 99). These students did not only learn and practice math, but they learned to believe in themselves, they developed confidence to defeat their own limitations.

After one year, I was back in Ecuador. I returned to the neighborhood I had worked before while in high school, but this time to work with teenagers and youth in order to help create a space that would prevent them from using drugs or getting involved in gangs. I taught guitar and singing lessons. A non-formal education offer was a tool to engage them, to keep them occupied, to help them discover their hobbies and talents, to give them a “why” thus they stayed away from drugs and built their life plans towards a better future. This group of teenagers grew older, we are still friends, they entered higher education institutions and became professionals. Were these my first steps in trying to become a humanist educator? I was not much older than they were and this experience helped us all find our vocation to become more truly human (Freire, 1992/2014) as there was a sense of belonging that was crucial. We were all part of something, we all had responsibilities, they knew they were valued, respected and needed. These are crucial feelings for all teenagers, especially for teenagers that are at risk.

When we teach in a vulnerable environment (poverty, family violence, children that are abandoned, drugs consumption, etc), oppression and oppressed situations can arise from different angles (family relationships, “machismo” in the family and community, boss - employee relationships, unfair or unequal relationships where power is demanded) but they can also happen in the classroom, in relationships between teachers - students, administrators - teachers and even among students. In oppressed situations, banking education arises. A few years ago, when I was working as an English teacher, I had the opportunity to teach at a private school for rich people in my home-country. Yes, I have not mentioned yet that my “formal” setting of teaching for more than 15 years has been in the field of teaching English as Second Language; however, in this “point of departure” and in this “necessary historical understanding of my own situation” (Freire,



1992/2014, p. 26), all the experiences that have made sense, that have built my reading of the world, have not necessarily happened in that formal setting of teaching. Anyhow, I still remember the first day of class at that school. I had to teach the first hour, it was at 7:15am, I was waiting for my students by the door. Suddenly, all the students entered making such a big noise, they did not say anything to me, not even good morning! They started jumping over benches so they could talk to each other and completely ignored the teacher. I could not believe what was happening. After the class ended, which was a great relief, I asked my peers how they coped with that situation, what strategies they applied and they just told me: “Here, as long as the students are not noisy, it’s ok, just let them do what they want except for speaking loudly.” Another teacher said: “I just write the number of the pages of the book I want them to complete by the end of the class and if they don’t complete them, I’ll give them a zero”. I was perplexed by their answers. At that point, I did not understand the students and of course, I did not understand my colleagues.

This is a situation that happens pretty often in educational scenarios, and this is an oppressor - oppressed situation. These students and all the school community, from my point of view, were victims of banking education, where education was a practice of domination, where creativity and reflection were inhibited, anesthetized (Freire, 1968/2018). This experience of banking education also shaped and became an important piece in the puzzle of my reading of the world. I wanted to quit from this job, and believe me, I tried many times. Yes, quitting was the easiest way out; however, I noticed that my students were responding back to different things I tried. It all started to change when one day I decided to make cards for them with their names on it and a phrase describing them on the other side, they entered the classroom and I had left their cards on their desks. That was all it took, from that day on, things started to change positively. I think I showed them I cared. With that positive response I felt more motivated too; we had lessons in the school patio, in the auditorium, under a tree, etc. We had discussions about topics of their interest, maybe issues that worried them, or things they were doing at school or even current issues happening around the world in that moment, and I built my language lessons through these topics. And it worked, we managed to work together through the school year. They started to trust me and I learnt to trust them too. That is the wonder of people, once you trust them they trust you back, and by having faith and love, dialogical relationships start to flourish.

These experiences and some key concepts presented so far, should shape an education that intends to transform the world (Freire, 1968/2018), concepts such as: witnessing, dialogue, the oppressed and the oppressor relationships, banking education. I genuinely believe that being able to see what happens around us, helps us build our reading and subsequently, our writing of the world (Freire, 1992/2014).

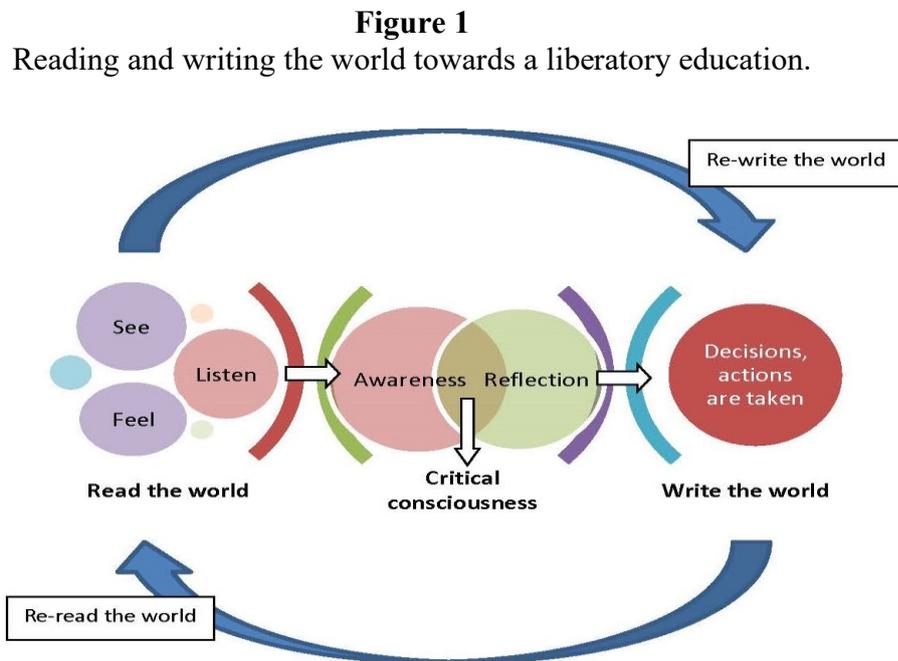
Reading and Writing the world.

Our reading of the world comes from our experiences, from what we have been able to see, touch, smell, feel. From the people we have talked to, the places we have been to, and the moments we remember. My reading of the world comes from witnessing the struggle and happiness of the poor, the anguish but willingness of the youth, the redemption but not resignation of the guerrilleros, the endless love of the abandoned children. And I think the sense of urgency that is instilled in me comes from this ambiguous, never ending dichotomy of life, where there is good, there is bad, we find hope in despair, joy in sadness; this sense should urge our pursuit for social justice and critical reflections that help educands take the right decisions and steps toward emancipation, an emancipation that lasts, that can become a new just and social order and



that goes beyond from just nice tryouts of good will.

Let us go back to reflect about the concept of reading the world, which I see as awareness. This awareness and a deep reflection of it, should generate critical consciousness, and this critical consciousness leads us to make decisions, to take actions, to write the world. I see this as an ongoing cycle that helps us keep re-reading and re-writing the world by going through the process again and again, whenever we are at a new positionality.



Why is it important for educators to be conscious of this cycle of Reading and Writing the world? How can it help us as educators and how can it help our students? Reflecting on the concept of liberatory education, as the opposite of banking education and considering that liberatory education happens when we and our students have opportunities to make an understanding of ourselves and themselves and the world around us, that is the first step to be taken towards reading the world. A world that needs to be healed, where power relations need to be egalitarian, where everyone needs to have the same opportunities, where the voices of the oppressed need to be heard as an act of respect and justice, where their claims are important and taken into account. But liberatory education also demands action, that is writing the world, after reflection and consciousness have taken place.

A liberatory education, a pedagogy of the oppressed that can confront a culture of domination.

Torres (2019) suggests that “liberatory education will take place when people reach a deeper, richer, more textured and nuanced understanding of themselves and their world” (p. 20). I definitely think liberatory education was aimed to be achieved in that small and little town in El Salvador. Liberatory education is achieved when we provide people with opportunities to make an understanding of themselves and the world around them (Torres, 2019). Liberatory education also happens when the relationship between teachers and students is not vertical and becomes dialogical where students do not only

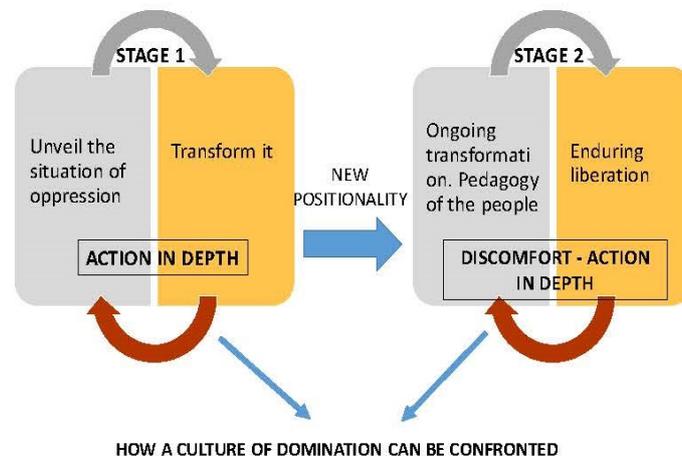
learn but also teach, and teachers do not only teach but also learn from their students. I lived this liberatory education during my experience teaching in that small rural community in El Salvador when I was 18 years old. I learned many things. I learned to value the power of education, how it can happen under tough conditions; I learned about people who fought for their rights even to the point of putting their lives under risk. I learned about an organized community that was able to do and achieve things through collaborative work, and I discovered my vocation for teaching.

Liberatory education practices might be an uncomfortable place for educators, as we fear to be questioned, as we (educators) want to have the knowledge (power) so we are superior. We still want to have the last saying and we want to be the only ones that are right. How many of us as educators really plan our work towards a liberatory education? Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, stated this pedagogy is “humanist and libertarian and has two distinct stages” (1968/2018, p. 54). In the first stage, the oppressed become conscious of their reality of oppression and are committed to unveil it and transform it. This reality can be transformed through actions in depth, which require reading and writing the world (Figure 1). Once this reality is transformed a new positionality is achieved but, still, ongoing transformation is necessary, this is the second stage, a transformation that does not come from the oppressed anymore but from the people, it becomes pedagogy of the people. This new transformation sees its origin in hope and struggle.

Hope alone does not win, but struggle or actions without hope become meaningless (Freire, 1992/2014). Hope that gives the sense of urgency a why. Hope that enlightens our aims and ways. Hope that invites us to reflect on the idea of an education for longing and yearning for freedom. But how are hope and struggle connected? Through the idea of discomfort. A few years ago, I attended a talk of a priest, he was one of the Theology of Liberation, saying we should always look for discomfort, no matter where we were in life, at what moment of our life. He said being comfortable in life was a dangerous place to stay for long, as that prevents us from moving, discovering, understanding and therefore learning. The constant pursuit of freedom, the constant pursuit of being uncomfortable hence we can reach a new positionality, that, leads us to a new reading and writing of the world, a utopia of struggle (Torres, 2019). Let’s be in discomfort, discomfort pushes us to new learning, discomfort pushes us to keep looking for alternatives of liberating the oppressed, alternatives to find the power that arises from the weakness of the oppressed as it is the one sufficiently strong to free the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire, 1968/2018). Discomfort and further actions in depth will lead us to an enduring liberation, where men and women have enough hope, love and faith to confront a culture of domination.



Figure 2
Pedagogy of the oppressed



The diagram above is very ambitious and dares to synthesize the pedagogy of the oppressed posed by Freire. As mentioned before, Freire stated this pedagogy could be divided in two different stages. Each stage is also a cycle, once the situation of oppression is unveiled, continuous actions in depth are required; we go through the cycle again until the situation is transformed and we can move forward to a new positionality. Stage 2 is also cyclical, we go through discomfort and deep actions as many times as it is necessary until this dynamic is rooted in us, the people, and then we could all be taking steps towards an enduring liberation.

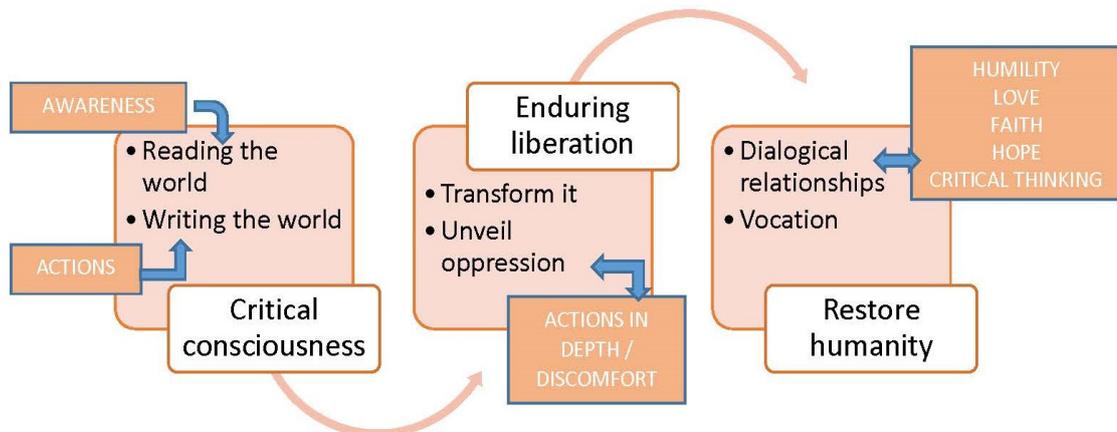
The way I see it, the continuum of these two stages should lead to a confrontation of a culture of domination. And I think this is the problem that happens in lots of contexts of vulnerability for different reasons (external or internal). We seldom move forward from stage 1 to stage 2, therefore, we keep ourselves living in a culture of domination.

Final reflections: Restorers of humanity

Writing this paper has been an exercise of conscientization for me, as I have decoded from the abstract to concrete, describing my lived experiences and looking back at my reality in order to understand myself and be able to comprehend my why's and my sense of urgency (Freire, 1992/2014). Recognizing my process until now and its importance have been key elements in my own reflection practice. We should all ask these questions at some point: What is the path I have gone through? What are the steps taken to go from here to there? What have been the stones on the way and how have I overcome them? If we are educators, who are the participants in our dialogical relationships? Are these relationships egalitarian or is there room for oppressed and oppressors' relationships? How can we engage the oppressed to transform the oppression conditions? How do we avoid the danger of being "savers" and become new oppressors?

This leads me to a final diagram I want to present in this paper. A diagram that depicts how I see our reading and writing the world leads us to an enduring liberation, through critical consciousness and dialogue, as transformative educational practices that can be implemented on a daily basis.

Figure 3
Restorers of humanity



By reflecting on these two processes: critical consciousness and enduring liberation, and keeping in mind the five elements necessary for dialogical relationships: hope, love, faith, humility, and critical thinking (Freire, 1968/2018), we could become and help others become restorers of humanity, by having faith in others, faith in their power to create and recreate and faith in their (our) vocation to be more entirely human. Helping our students find their vocation, guiding and giving them the necessary tools to find it, will defeat dehumanization and will stop the violence of the oppressors. As Freire said, we cannot accept dehumanization as a mere hopelessly given destiny (1992/2014). Dehumanization can be defeated if we transform the conditions of an unjust system, and, even though a lot has to do with political decisions, we cannot be oblivious of the situation and we need to take active part.

I started this paper describing what utopia is. For me, it is this imagined place where all educators and students become restorers of humanity. As Galeano said, we might never reach it, but it is there, in the horizon, to keep us moving forward. After reflecting on my own lived experiences as an educator in different contexts, there are still several aspects of pedagogy that still need to be reflected about as they have not been approached here; however, from my point of view what has been discussed in this paper can guide us as educators to start the path of incorporating liberatory educational practices. The processes in the diagrams look easy; we all know in real life, they are not, but the key concepts are there as reminders of what can be done and should be done in our everyday lessons. As for me, I want to keep looking at the horizon, and keep moving forward, keep feeling the urgency and desire of a transformed reality through critical consciousness, dialogical relationships, and actions reflected deeply, actions filled with love.

Notes

¹ mphuayamave@upei.ca

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