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WHAT IS THE "DIALOGICAL METHOD" OF TEACHING?

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Shor and Freire discuss here the dialogical method of liberatory education. Dialogue is not a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results; dialogue is a means to transform social relations in the classroom, and to raise awareness about relations in society at large. Dialogue is a way to recreate knowledge as well as the way we learn. It is a mutual learning process where the teacher poses critical problems for inquiry. Dialogue rejects narrative lecturing where teacher talk silences and alienates students. In a problem-posing participatory format, the teacher and students transform learning into a collaborative process to illuminate and act on reality. This process is situated in the thought, language, aspirations, and conditions of the students. It is also shaped by the subject matter and training of the teacher, who is simultaneously a classroom researcher, a politician, and an artist.

A Prefatory Note from Ira Shor:

This excerpt from our book *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987) discusses the politics and aesthetics of dialogic teaching. There is now in the U.S. a growing interest in dialogic approaches to teaching. The liberatory pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire is inspiring attention to the current education crisis. This approach to critical pedagogy is filling some of the vacuum left by the official reports appearing in recent years.

Aware of the new crisis, Paulo and I decided in 1984 to do a "talking" book devoted to some key questions teachers ask about liberatory education. We wanted this book to be a dialogic presentation of dialogic pedagogy, a text rooted in discussions we have with teachers in many places. Using the form of mutual dialogue, our exchanges cover such issues as structure, discipline, and rigor in the dialogical classroom, how teachers and students transform themselves to liberating methods, what are the fears and risks of transformation, do "first-world" students need liberating, how can

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teachers overcome language differences with the students, and how to begin practicing liberatory ideas in the classroom. Based in these issues, the book emerged from dialogues and editing extending over two years. We hope this excerpt is of use to teachers; we would appreciate hearing responses, including suggestions as to what questions to focus on next.

Liberatory Discourse: Dialogue Transforms Communication

Ira: You've said, Paulo, that the teacher is an artist and a politician. However, the *politics* of dialogic pedagogy are clearer than its aesthetics. It is simpler to explain this method as *for* freedom and *against* domination, as cultural action inside or outside a classroom where the status quo is challenged, where the myths of the official curriculum and mass culture are illuminated. We need now to discuss how the dialogic teacher works so that he or she is an artist in doing these unveilings.

Why don't we examine first the heart of the process, "dialogue," and work through that idea to the aesthetics of the method. Teachers ask often about "dialogical education." They know some things about dialogue. Teachers have been students in courses using a socratic recitation following a lecture or a reading assignment, where the instructor asks questions to test students on the material covered. In addition, many teachers use nontraditional discussion-circles in class, to break down the formality. Still others engage students in conversation, and would consider that dialogue.

For the most part, though, teachers didactically lecture. In college, professors traditionally lecture to large numbers of students, who sit in big rooms either busily taking notes, or sleeping, or daydreaming, or doing homework from another course while sitting in this one, or talking to each other. A low-paid graduate student leads a recitation class afterwards, to review what the professor said or what the textbooks say. This is "cost-effective" education, minimum personal contact between professors and students. Professor-contact is reserved for graduate students, or undergraduate majors, or honors classes, or for students at the most costly universities, where money is invested in small classes for the elite. In the lower grades, richer school districts and private schools also offer their students smaller classes, to give students more personal attention.

You can see the problem here for dialogue. The *right* to have a small discussion begins as a class privilege. The more elite the student, the more likely that he or she will have a personalized, discussion contact with the professor or the teacher. For the rest, there are large college classes mixed with recitation sections staffed by poorly-paid instructors, or large classes in underfunded public schools. If public resources were transferred from the military to education to fund smaller classes, that would make dialogue

easier to have in school. Teachers and students would then have to confront our own inexperience in small-group, democratic communications. We are most familiar with "monologue" or teacher-talk, in the transfer-of-knowledge approach. Even in discussion groups, student voices are often restricted by a dull or imposing teacherly voice that inhibits critical challenges to the syllabus.

The privilege of small classes and the predominance of transfer-teaching are the realities surrounding us. How does the dialogical method present a different model of learning and knowledge? How does dialogical teaching transform communication?

Paulo: I think, *Ira*, that first of all we should understand liberating dialogue not as a technique, a *mere* technique, which we can use to help us get some results. We also cannot, must not, understand dialogue as a kind of tactic we use to make students our friends. This would make dialogue a technique for manipulation instead of illumination.

On the contrary, dialogue must be understood as something taking part in the very historical nature of human beings. It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. That is, dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more critically communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it. Something else: To the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to *know that we know*, which is something *more* than just knowing. In a certain manner, for example, birds *know* the trees. They even communicate to each other. They use a kind of oral and symbolic language, but they do not use written language. And they do not know that they know. At least scientifically up to now, we are not sure whether they know that they know. On the other hand, *we* know that we know, and we human beings know also that *we don't know*. Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality.

In communicating among ourselves, in the process of knowing the reality which we transform, we communicate and know *socially* even though the process of communicating, knowing, changing, has an individual dimension. But, the individual aspect is not enough to explain the process. Knowing is a social event with nevertheless an individual dimension. What is dialogue in this moment of communication, knowing and social transformation? Dialogue *seals* the relationship between the cognitive subjects, the subjects who know, and who try to know.

Ira: From another angle, I'd add that speaking either confirms or disconfirms the social relations of the people who engage in such communication. That is, communicating is not mere verbalism, not a mere ping pong

of words and gestures. It affirms or challenges the relationship between the people communicating, the object they are relating around, and the society they are in. Liberatory dialogue is a democratic communication which disconfirms domination and illuminates while affirming the freedom of the participants to re-make their culture. Traditional discourse confirms the dominant mass culture and the inherited, official shape of knowledge.

Paulo: Yes, dialogue is a challenge to existing domination. Also, with such a way of understanding dialogue, the object to be known is *not* an exclusive possession of *one* of the subjects doing the knowing, one of the people in the dialogue. In our case of education, knowledge of the object to be known is not the sole possession of the teacher, who gives knowledge to the students in a gracious gesture. Instead of this cordial gift of information to students, the object to be known mediates the two cognitive subjects. In other words, the object to be known is put on the table *between* the two subjects of knowing. They meet around it and through it for mutual inquiry.

Of course, the educator has had a certain "gnosiological"¹ or intellectual experience in picking this object for study before the students meet it in the classroom, and in painting it or presenting it for discussion. This prior contact of the educator with the object to be known does *not* mean nevertheless that the teacher has exhausted all the efforts and dimensions in knowing the object.

Ira: The teacher selecting objects of study knows them *better* than the students as the course begins but the teacher *re-learns* the objects through studying them with the students?

Paulo: This is *exactly* the question! I could extend what you say in some conceptual language by saying, for example, that the educator *remakes* her or his "cognoscibility" through the "cognoscibility" of the educatees. That is, the ability of the educator to know the object is remade every time through the students' own ability for knowing, for developing critical comprehension in themselves.

What is dialogue in this way of knowing? Precisely this connection, this epistemological relation. The object to be known in one place links the two cognitive subjects, leading them to reflect together on the object. Dialogue is the sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study. Then, instead of transferring the knowledge *statically*, as a *fixed* possession of the teacher, dialogue demands a dynamic approximation towards the object.

Ira: The teacher can say in advance, I know the material, I know the science of oceanography, or this novel by Zola, or this lathe in front of us, or even the hamburgers we eat in the cafeteria, but in the dialogical process, I relearn the material when I study it again with the students.

Paulo: Yes! That is the point of dialogue-education. But look, let us take this point again, dear Ira. Why do some educators consider this perspective on the act of knowing *bizarre*? Something bizarre which came from the Third World? How is it possible to think like this? Dialogical education is an epistemological position, not a bizarre invention or a strange practice from an exotic part of the world!

What I do accept, for example, is that many people from the First World and the Third World say to me, "Look, Paulo, okay, it's beautiful, but nevertheless I don't accept such a position. Because, for me the role of the educator is to *teach* the educatee." I say, Okay, this is your position, authoritarian. Okay, this is your understanding of epistemology, but this is not mine. This kind of debate about the differences I accept. But, what I cannot accept is saying that dialogue is a bizarre way of learning coming out of the Third World, as if I were making propaganda with curious tools. No. This is a debate on epistemology, not on demonic arts from a picturesque location.

Precisely because there is an epistemology here, my position is not to deny the directive and necessary role of the educator. But, I am *not* the kind of educator who *owns* the objects I study with the students. I am extremely interested in the object for study. They stimulate my curiosity and I bring this enthusiasm to the students. Then, both of us can illuminate the object together.

Ira: You can imagine how disturbing this epistemology is to a traditional educator. I'm not surprised they want to call it bizarre. Think of the difference between describing a course as an expert syllabus, a long reading list, a series of lectures from a professor, a succession of question periods, and a final exam to test the knowledge, compared to a course where the professor enters knowing a great deal but leaves the course "relearned" because of the dialogue-inquiry, the rediscovery of the material *with* the students.

The lecture method sets up the teacher as an authority who transfers fixed knowledge to students. Knowledge is already formed and must be verbally delivered to the students. Students in the traditional mode are expected to absorb preset formulations spoken by the teacher.

In contrast, the openness of the dialogical educator to his or her own relearning gives dialogue a democratic character. The domination of the official curriculum rests on many things, but surely fixed, expert knowledge is one pillar. If the dialogical teacher announces that he or she relearns the material in the class, then the learning process itself challenges the unchanging position of the teacher. That is, liberatory learning is a social activity which by itself remakes authority. In this case, authority is the form of existing knowledge as well as the governing behavior of the teacher. Do you see my point? These challenges demystify the teacher's power, open

it up to change. They impose humility on the existing order. They invite the students to exercise their own powers of reconstruction.

Paulo: Yes, but nevertheless it does *not* mean that the educator first denies that he or she knows! It would be a lie, an hypocrisy. He or she has on the contrary to demonstrate his or her competency to the students. Secondly, it does not mean that every time, in every course, in every term, the educator changes his or her knowledge about this or that object. No.

For example, by discussing dialogue every day with students, I am not changing every day my understanding of dialogue. We arrive at the level of some certainty, some scientific certainty of some objects, which we can count on. What dialogue-educators know, nevertheless, is that science has historicity. This means that all new knowledge comes up when other knowledge becomes old, and no longer answers the needs of the new moment, no longer answers the new questions being asked. Because of that, all new knowledge when it appears waits for its own overcoming by the next new knowledge which is inevitable. Sometimes I say that if scientists were as humble as knowledge is, we would be in a different world.

But, there are other aspects of dialogical situations which I think are important to add. The circumstances of a seminar where dialogue is the relationship between cognitive subjects and a knowable object is not a situation in which we can do anything we want to do. That is, it has limits and contradictions which condition what we can do. Dialogue does not exist in a political vacuum. It is not a "free space" where you may do what you want. Dialogue takes place inside some kind of program and context. These conditioning factors create tension in achieving goals that we set for dialogic education. To achieve the goals of transformation, dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives.

Nevertheless, a dialogical situation implies the *absence* of authoritarianism. Dialogue means a permanent tension in the relation between authority and liberty. But, in this tension, authority continues to be because it has authority vis-a-vis permitting student freedoms which emerge, which grow and mature precisely because authority and freedom learn self-discipline.

Something more: A dialogical setting does not mean that everyone involved in it *has* to speak! Dialogue does not have a goal or a requirement that all people in the class *must* say something even if they have nothing to say!

Ira: I see what you are pointing to. For them to feel pressured to speak even when they have nothing to add creates a false democracy, a fake moment of discussion. In a way, this is an imposition on the students, by a teacher who has made dialogue into a dogma, a technique instead of into a genuine open exchange

Paulo: Yes! In dialogue, one has the right to be silent! Nevertheless, one does not have the right to misuse his or her participation in the development of the common exercise.

Ira: You mean your right to stay silent does not mean you have a right to sabotage the process?

Paulo: That's a good way to put it. If for example, someone tries to sabotage the process precisely because the class is dialogical and gives them an opportunity to intervene, he or she must be punished. Not physically, of course, but prevented from abusing the openness of the class or from interfering with the other students and the teacher.

Participatory Learning: Dialogue and "Situated Pedagogy"

Ira: There is a necessary discipline in the dialogic class, which is not permissive. We spoke earlier about this. Here, we should talk more about what produces student participating in dialogue. Of course, we want students to accept the dialogic class, not stay silent or sabotage it. But, silence is their right and sabotage has to be prevented. Still, in my experience, allowing the students the right to stay silent can sink a dialogic class if a majority exercises this right. A dialogic class needs a critical mass of participants to push the process forward and to carry along those students who will not speak but who will listen.

This may be a good time to discuss "situated pedagogy," as one route to student participation. Teachers may follow the difference between lecture-socratic methods where knowledge is fixed at the beginning and liberatory dialogics where knowledge brought to the course is challenged and rediscovered. . . .

Paulo: I must repeat something here, in order to be absolutely clear. At the moment the teacher begins the dialogue, he or she knows a great deal, first in terms of knowledge and second in terms of the horizon that she or he wants to get to. The starting point is what the teacher knows about the object and where the teacher wants to go with it.

Ira: Yes, the teacher starts with knowledge, a learning process and goals. This is her or his competency, and also the place where his or her politics are revealed. On the one hand, the teacher knows a lot about the object to be studied and the teacher has more familiarity with conceptual scrutiny. On the other hand, the teacher has a destination, or an horizon as you said. This is the learning process that moves the whole project forward. I understand that you want to emphasize the directive responsibility and the competency of the teacher who begins a dialogical class.

The question I want to raise now is how competency, knowledge, and horizon, and training in scientific method get situated in the dialogical

process. The teacher's accumulated strengths can inhibit instead of promote the students' critical emergence. The idea of situated pedagogy is useful here, for investing the teacher's competencies in a participatory process, so maybe I can say a few things about it.

My understanding is that dialogic inquiry is situated in the culture, language, politics, and themes of the students. Teachers have some familiarity with experiential objects or materials for study. They bring in magazines from mass culture, or show popular films and TV shows. They ask students to write about events from their daily lives. But, in situated pedagogy we discover with students the themes most problematic to their perception. We situate the critical pedagogy in subjective problem-themes not yet analyzed by students. This gains intrinsic motivation from subject matter of key concern to students while also giving them a moment of detachment on their previously unreflected experience. In dialogic pedagogy, this turn towards subjective experience must also include a global, critical dimension. That is, we don't only look at the familiar, but we try to understand it socially and historically. The global context for the concrete, the general setting for the particular, are what give students a critical view on reality, what I refer to as "extraordinarily reexperiencing the ordinary." In this way, situating pedagogy in student culture does not merely exploit or endorse the given but seeks to transcend it. That is, the themes familiar to students are not thrown in as a manipulative technique, simply to confirm the status quo or to motivate students. There is this dual danger of confirmation and manipulation because material familiar to students can by itself stimulate more attention. But, then, does a critical challenge to the material and to the students' reaction follow? Do the material and questions open an investigating dialogue through which we reexamine the subject, until it is no longer the routine matter which absorbed uncritical attention before? We gain a distance from the given by abstracting it from its familiar surroundings and studying it in unfamiliar critical ways, until our perceptions of it and society are challenged.

I see a tension here between familiar objects and unfamiliar critical scrutiny. I see another tension between the routine curriculum of school which makes reality opaque and the critical classroom which tries to break through the official opacity. There is a third tension between the students' prior experiences of authoritarian education and the new liberatory class which proposes dialogue and self-discipline. Even more, there is a tension between the liberatory teacher's reflection on the themes and the students' own analyses. These are what I think of as the developmental forces in a dialogic class. They set the pedagogy in opposition to the disempowering logic of school and social experience. They also establish a relationship between the students' critical thought and the students' experience, as well as between the teacher's critical thinking and that of the students. Tradi-

tionally, familiar materials are studied in opaque or abstract ways, or else academic material is presented unrelated to reality. Either way, the curriculum is not situated inside student thought and language. Transformative tensions emerge if the study is situated inside the subjectivity of the students in such a way to detach students from that very subjectivity into more advanced reflections.

Choosing problem-themes from student culture is one pedagogical option. Studying academic or formal subjects in a situated manner is a second option, that is, inserting biology or history or nursing or economics into their social contexts. I don't think of situated study as only using familiar materials, or as using them because they are "hip" and students can "turn on" to them. There is something more oppositional here. Maybe it involves what you wrote about in other places, "limit-acts" and "limit-situations." Situated study presents subjective themes in their larger social context, to challenge the givens of our lives and the surrounding system dominating daily life. These limits or givens are re-perceived eventually as confining membranes around us, historical borders, politically constructed Great Walls, which we contact to discover vulnerable points for breaking through. Simply recognizing that we are surrounded by political membranes is an advance. Then, finding means to go beyond its limits is a social action goal of the dialogue.

There's another way I think of situated pedagogy, not only in terms of the object of study. I often think of it as located in the authentic levels of development presented by the students as the course begins. This means I'm researching my students' cognitive and political levels at the course's opening, to see what kinds of critical thinking, literacy and political ideas are operating. This informs me of the developmental situation in the class, the real starting point for making a liberatory invitation.

Paulo: I'd like to think out loud with you here about some of the things you mentioned for situated pedagogy. But, first, Ira, I think I have to begin to fly before I can land on the question! (Ira and Paulo laugh)

Many, many times I have thought about the following aspect: Our experience at the university tends to form us *at a distance* from reality. The concepts that we study in the university can work to amputate us from the concrete reality they are supposedly referring to. The very concepts we use in our intellectual training and in our work are abstracted from reality, far away from the concreteness of society. In the last analysis, we become excellent experts in a very interesting intellectual game, the game of the concepts! This is a "ballet of concepts."

Then, our language risks losing contact with concreteness. The more we are like this, the farther we are from the masses of the people, whose language on the contrary is absolutely linked to concreteness. Because of this, we intellectuals first describe concepts while the people first describe

reality, the concreteness. This is my first moment of flying on the question of "situated pedagogy" before landing.

When I insist on dialogical education starting from the students' comprehension of their daily life experiences, no matter if they are students of the university or kids in primary school or workers in a neighborhood or peasants in the countryside, my insistence on starting from *their* description of *their* daily life experiences is based in the possibility of starting from concreteness, from common sense, to reach a rigorous understanding of reality. I don't dichotomize these two dimensions of the world, daily life from rigor, common sense from philosophical sense, in the expression of Gramsci.² I don't understand critical or scientific knowledge which appears randomly, by magic or by accident, as if it did not need to meet the test of reality. Scientific rigor comes from an effort to overcome a naive understanding of the world. Science is super-posing critical thought on what we observe in reality, after the starting point of common sense.

Ira: The moment you begin to seek a scientific understanding of your naivete, you are no longer naive.

Paulo: Yes! If I am no longer naive, it means that I am no longer *acritical*.

Ira: You've made the first transition to critical consciousness, seeking a systematic understanding of your impressions.

Starting With Reality to Overcome It

Paulo: Let's go back to the question of the starting point. First of all, I am convinced that epistemologically it is possible, by listening to students speak about their understanding of their world, to go with them towards the direction of a critical, scientific understanding of their world.

I should say something here about a great friend of mine from Brazil, a physics professor at the University of Marcio Campos, who talks to me constantly, especially when we make our car trip of 90 minutes together from Sao Paulo to the University. I told him many times how frustrated I am that I am not able to audit his course and be one of his students. The course is "From Astrology to Astronomy," a kind of history of scientific rigor. By comparing astrology to astronomy he tries to grasp what rigor in science has meant, especially by analyzing the historicity of science.

One day, he said to me, "Look, Paulo, constantly I ask the physics students in the beginning of the course to do a simple neighborhood research over a weekend. I ask them to go to an area of common people and talk with fishermen, workers, peasants, people in the streets, to speak with them about how they understand the world, what is their cosmological vision, what is *the sky* for them? What do stars mean to them? What

distance do they think there is between us and the stars? What is the world from their eyes? I also ask the students to put their own understanding down, to make some comparisons." This in a physics course!

This physics professor studies science with his students by beginning with their research into popular thinking about reality. When students come back the next week to his class, they report on how people think about night and day, the moon, the seasons, the tides coming and going, and compare all these things to their own positions. The assumption is that the students' own positions will be *less* magical, and they are.

Then, he begins to think scientifically with them on this material. For me, there is no problem here with situating the course in these concrete materials. Critics of such an approach might begin to worry about the program. What can we do with such contents, they may ask. The regular curriculum is more important, they say, the regular way of teaching physics. I say to them that I am not against a curriculum or a program, but only against the authoritarian and elitist ways of organizing the studies. I am defending the critical participation of the students in *their* education. Do you see? They have the right to participate and I don't have the right to say that because they might reject participation, then I assume the position of totally giving them their formation. No! I must recognize that students cannot understand their own rights because they are so *ideologized* into rejecting their own freedom, their own critical development, thanks to the traditional curriculum. Then, I have to learn with them how to go beyond these limits, beyond their own learned rejection of their rights.

Ira: This physics course is a good example of challenging the students' learned passivity, which is one starting point of their study, while the opinions of working people on the moon and stars is another. The students' situated research moves them beyond the limits that restricted them before. They take on responsibilities which are unfamiliar to them, outside the traditional curriculum. They become active researchers *prior* to listening to a lecture on reality. They are also university students who make serious contact with common people, to consider mass culture as a research problem. More than that, the democratic aspect comes from them having to consider their own thought a research problem, which they analyze comparatively with material from the street interviews. The interviews ground their academic training in reality, rather than in conceptual abstractions invented on campus. This is a textured situation of teaching. It opposes the passive and silencing methods of transferring knowledge. Students share in the illumination of several realities. I like this example because it is a dialogical method for a course in *science*, something with a very imposing body of knowledge. The question on my mind now is, can we say that this physics course which begins from several realities it tries to overcome actually "empowers" the students?

Empowerment Is A Social Act

Paulo: Yes, perhaps we can say that the physics course "empowers" students, but it is interesting to me how people in the United States are so preoccupied in using this word and concept "empowerment." There is some reason in this, some meaning to it. My fear in using the expression "empowerment" is that some people may think that such a practice simply empowers the students, and then everything is finished, our work is done, over! I wish I could better express the feeling deep inside me about this desire to use the word "empowerment."

Ira: Do you worry that "empowerment" gives us too easy a way out? Does it lead us to think of the teacher as a kind of lamp-lighter? The teacher walks into a classroom, provokes some illumination, like turning on a light-switch, and then walks out, mission accomplished. On to the next class, where once again the teacher lights some lamps and calls it "empowerment."

Paulo: You understand my feeling. It may make the situation seem too easy when it is not. And another thing: Let us even accept that the kind of experience which my friend the physicist offered to his students, which he invented himself, not because he read my books or wants to follow Freire, which he believes in as a scientist who knows that he is *not* the owner of the knowledge he has, or is having, let us suppose that his pedagogy develops in students a certain level of independence. What I want to say is that this level of autonomy is not enough to transform them for making the necessary political and radical transformation of Brazilian society.

Ira: Can I explore this reservation you have? In the U.S., one school of Progressive thought seeks to develop "self-directed learners." In this pedagogy, the teacher is a "resource-person" and a "mentor-on-demand" when the student asks for something. The teacher is expected to come up with bright ideas and to untangle knots when students work themselves into a corner. Students are expected to design their own learning contracts and to be responsible enough to follow them and to ask for help. In many instances in the U.S., educators will point to the self-directed learner as an empowered student, a person who does not have to be watched, supervised, or graded. Now, this ability to self-organize your studies is real autonomy from authority-dependence. It is one form of education for people who disagree with authoritarianism, who see the autonomy of the individual learner as the measure of democracy and empowerment.

Paulo: But it is not my conception of democracy and empowerment! It is *very* good that you put this question on the table. For example, when I am against the authoritarian position, I am not trying to fall into what I spoke of earlier as a *laissez-faire* position. When I criticize manipulation, I do not want to fall into a false and nonexistent nondirectivity of education. For me, education is always directive, always. The question is to know

towards what and with whom is it directive. This is the question. I don't believe in self-liberation. Liberation is a social act. Liberating education is a social process of illumination.

Ira: There is no personal self-empowerment?

Paulo: No, no, no. Even when you individually feel yourself *most* free, if this feeling is not a *social* feeling, if you are not able to use your *recent* freedom to help others to be free by transforming the totality of society, then you are exercising only an individualist attitude towards empowerment or freedom.

Let me go more into the question of empowerment. Let us take again the example of the students working with my friend the physicist. Even though they can feel and perceive themselves after the semester as first-rate students, more critical students, better scientists and better people, it is still *not* enough for the transformation of society, this *feeling* of being free.

But now, I want also to justify, to support the dialogical class of the physicist and also the efforts I make in this field. While individual empowerment or the empowerment of some students, the feeling of being changed, is not enough concerning the transformation of the whole society, it is *absolutely necessary* for the process of social transformation. Is this clear? The critical development of these students is absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society. Their curiosity, their critical perception of reality, is fundamental for social transformation but is not enough by itself.

Ira: It is one ingredient that needs others to complete their promise. The students' dialogic learning needs a relationship to other elements taking part in the larger transformation of society. If I understand, you want to ask here again for whom and against whom do they use their new freedom in learning. How does it relate to other efforts to transform society?

Paulo: Those are the questions I have in mind.

Ira: I feel how important this problem is in a culture like mine. Education for social change was a popular idea in the 60s. But, historically, the notion of empowerment in U.S. society has been captured by individualism, by private notions of getting ahead.

With our deep roots in individualism, we have a Utopian devotion to "making it on your own," improving yourself, moving up in the world, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, striking it rich by an ingenious personal effort. This is a culture in love with self-made men. Here, a lot of rich land and no backward aristocracy made the economy very dynamic. Also, the exploitation of black slaves helped build up the country's wealth, and the liquidation of Native Americans opened up the huge interior to pioneers, thieves, and adventurers. The very economic dynamism of this society has had an impact on pedagogy, putting a lot of force behind

individual empowerment, self-help, self-improvement, self-reliance, in the lower grades and in adult education. This emphasis on "self" is the educational equivalent of the capitalist infatuation with the lone entrepreneur, that romantic and fading factor in an economy now monopolized by giant corporations.

In the U.S., there have been openings for clever individuals, enterprising white men especially, and commercial connivers. Even more than the *limited* ability to move up compared to the *unlimited myth* of the American Dream, there was a restless economy that produced an always changing culture, a dramatic modernization in the way each new generation lived. Class, race and sex inequalities remained but each generation could see visible changes in the style of life. So, individualism was fueled by a furious pace of modernization and economic growth. Even more, individualism triumphed here in economics and pedagogy because social movements had limited success.

Individualism did not drop from the moon and land in the U.S.; history was the midwife. As a result of our historical experience, the ideas of social intelligence and political empowerment have less credibility than individual efforts. Even more than individualism being a strident pillar of capitalism, self-absorption also serves the system's need to divide and conquer common people, whom it attempts to organize into a commercial, conformist culture, contradicting the very individualism it proposes, but at least displacing class solidarity with mass identity.

Class and Empowerment

Paulo: This is a very good moment for us to come back to the question. Is it possible for us here in North America to use a dialogical method that came from the Third World? How do you use this kind of liberating pedagogy here? For example, I will make a statement going beyond what you said in understanding "empowerment" as a social activity. You began to analyze how difficult it is for the average American or teacher to understand this social context, because of ideology which by itself is not an abstraction but has been generated in very concrete historical situations. Now, I will go beyond, not *too* much beyond, in trying to explain better my comprehension of empowerment as "social class empowerment." *Not* individual, *not* community, *not* merely social empowerment, but a concept of "social class empowerment."

This statement may risk being even *more* outside the comprehension of average Americans and teachers. They may say that they do not understand this man. They may claim that such a kind of empowerment has nothing to do with them. Why? Because it is *one* thing to make a class analysis in Latin America, and it is something altogether different to make

the same kind of analysis in the States. In an enormously complex society like the North American one, it is hard to make a class analysis. It does not mean that U.S. society is without social classes. There are classes here, but not with the almost geographical frontier, the powerful reality we have of social classes in Latin America. I always say that in doing class analysis in the U.S., Marxist instruments of analysis were valid once but now need to be refined, in order to be useful to such a complex society like the American one.

Another thing we should say is that when my understanding of empowerment has to do with social class, I am not trying to reduce *everything* to class, as some narrow Marxists do. I don't want to do that. I recognize that this preoccupation I have with "class" has to be recreated for the States. The question of social class empowerment involves how the working class through its own experiences, its own construction of culture, engages itself in getting political power. This makes "empowerment" much more than an individual or psychological event. It points to a political process by the dominated classes who seek their own freedom from domination, a long historical process where education is one front.

Ira: Social class empowerment is a problem of analysis as well as a problem of pedagogy. About class-relations, I find clarity and confusion in students at the same time. Consciousness is *not* uniform from student to student or group to group. Consciousness is often inconsistent within the same student. In my classes, you can hear students speak about the class division of wealth and power in the U.S. At the same time, you can hear others deny that this inequality is a big deal. Whether they acknowledge or deny class divisions or racial prejudice or sexual inequality, few feel that history presents limits or tasks for transformation. Then, in the next breath, you can listen to their sense of oppression, maybe disgust or disappointment or even cynicism, that a country proclaiming democracy should be full of inequality, deception, and elitism. Not long after that, some students can passionately defend the American Dream while others will criticize it as a myth that isn't working. A teacher in my college can hear all these contradictory statements from students and must design a pedagogy that inserts itself into the tangle.

This repeats, I think, the potentials and limits of liberating education. If the course is an illuminating one, it is empowering insofar as it connects to other efforts in society for transformation. Also, any one course is only part of a long educational experience. I wonder again if teachers in my society feel the need for quick results in the classroom to support their confidence and morale. Perhaps U.S. teachers are unusually impatient because of our commercial and individualist culture, quick fixes, dynamic changes, fast cures, practical methods, manageable remedies. The problems of society will not be resolved soon or in a single classroom. But, there

is a nobility to this impatience because it drives us forward towards answers, so it is not only a trap that can lead to fake solutions or to cynicism in the absence of easy answers.

Paulo: But there is another point to this question of individualism, environment, and pedagogy. I don't know if you will agree with me, Ira, as an American, if I take environment above all as an instrumentality, an historical force, which weaves our cultural circumstance. For example, the quantity of books we find in the American bibliography on "how to get happy," "how to be happy making love," "how to get a good job," "how to make friends." Sometimes I think it should be a very interesting issue for a dissertation, to make a research into the books coming out in one year in the States about self-improvement. The project could be to make an ideological analysis of the books. On the one hand, they intensely stimulate individualism. On the other hand, they are consistently prescriptive.

Ira: I agree. Also, various self-improvement programs become fads followed *en masse*. You are enveloped into a mass exercise for improvement via the appeal to individualism. Our discussion here has strongly characterized self-improvement as an interference to critical consciousness. Does this North American phenomenon of individual answers stand in the way of social empowerment?

Paulo: Exactly! Such a literature and cultural endeavor are the opposites of a critical effort for social transformation.

Ira: Just imagine the complications here in the U.S. for the notion of social class empowerment. This was a rich terrain inhabited by native peoples whose technology was no match for European gunpowder and diseased blankets. White settlers seized the land from the American Indians, exterminated them, and then millions of black slaves involuntarily developed our agriculture, while millions of poor white immigrants streamed into the new factories. Such a vast enterprise required great expectations, great capacity for cruelty and inflicting hardship, and the courage to endure hardship and cruelty. This historical experience rested on private dreams of prosperity and freedom, not ideas of class like in European and Latin cultures.

Individual dreams of freedom and prosperity in slaves and immigrants as well as in slaveholders and captains of industry molded this society. Getting free of slavery or the crushing poverty of early factory life meant dreaming big about your future or your children's future. Transformation was demanded by our historical experience. But, the privatization of this demand, the deflection of its social aspect, created among other things a vast market for self-help books, weak popular organizations unable to restrain the destructive power of monopolies, and a problem for dialogical education.

Paulo: It is absolutely necessary to say how this fantastic country and this tremendously contradictory reality is also full of surprises, full of

richness. This may be easier for me to see or to speak about than you, because I am a Brazilian, an outsider who looks in, and you are an American. It is a mistake, a *big* mistake, to think that everything in the States is stabilized. No! This would be impossible! First of all, *no* reality is stable. For example, I tell you it is not easy to find another city so challenging, so full of creativity, as New York. What fascinates me in the States is the conviviality of the myth and the reality, the way they congenially live together. Evil and Good, Devil and Angel in one culture, in such close relationship, caught together in a tremendous vitality.

The first time I came to the States, I came because of Elza, my wife. When I was invited, I said to Elza, I will not go because what can I learn in such an imperialist country? Elza said to me, smiling, "How contradictory you are, and how naive. It is impossible to think that this country is just imperialist. It is impossible for it to be exclusively like this. You have many things to learn there." Immediately, she convinced me and I came. Since then, I never stop coming here. I come every year and I always learn something, even if I only learn how difficult it is to learn about this culture!

Ira: Even if you are born here and grow up here, it is also difficult to learn how this society works. It is a huge country with extreme divisions of regions, climates, races, religions, classes. The consistent culture of self-improvement, for example, has always coexisted with periodic social movements for transformation. In our history, self-help has been the predominant ideology, but we also had periods of great political upheaval where the social fabric had to be rewoven. We've had several waves of women's liberation, decades of action for racial equality, labor movements, eras of progressive school reform. This spoken book we are doing stands on the egalitarian shoulders of the 60s movements. That political era shaped me and many others in thinking about school and society. At some moments, the dream of freedom is a collective vision and also an idea whose time has come. Then, the individualist American Dream, the Utopia of self-improvement, becomes absorbed into a movement. In the 60s, when I was a student, it was common to act for individual and for social transformation at the same time. The conservative restoration of the 70s and 80s split this political marriage of personal and social change by promoting the notorious "me-decade."

The Teacher As Artist

Ira: In terms of empowerment and pedagogy, I want to raise here another issue, the question of the teacher as "artist." The role of art in transformative teaching interests me greatly, so I'd like to say some things about it before hearing your perspective.

Saying the teacher is an artist can easily lead to misunderstandings. Artists work in predictable materials like oils or marble or music. In what ways are teachers like sculptors, painters, conductors, and composers? One way I see this aesthetic aspect of teaching is posing the classroom as a plastic material already shaped into one thing and capable of being reshaped into another. This is another way of saying that liberatory learning involves desocialization. Students and teachers in a classroom are not educational virgins. We are very socialized beings in our schools and colleges. We have long been practicing an elaborate school script of how each is supposed to behave (and misbehave). This routine script is the traditional relationship between supervising authorities and alienated students. The liberating teacher has to study this routine scenario in the classroom, see how the socialized limits express themselves concretely, and then decide which themes are the best entry points for critical transformation. From these access points to the inside of the situation, the teacher then has to represent the material he or she knows of student culture or of the object to be studied. This re-presentation of a student theme or of an academic context or of a moment from society is the problem or "codification" posed to the class for inquiry. This is an artistic process, uncovering key themes and access points to consciousness, and then recomposing them into an unsettling critical investigation, orchestrating a prolonged study.

I've needed in the classroom a creative ingenuity to adjust the pedagogy for each new group of students. As each course begins, I have to start exercises which develop the students' critical literacy at the same time they develop my knowledge of the students. If I learn the key themes and words from their consciousness soon enough, I then have to problematize that material so that we both gain a systematic appreciation of the material. I'm referring here to situating critical literacy inside the themes and language of the students, but I think creative formats for studying academic bodies-of-knowledge also require the teacher to be an artist. For example, your friend the physics professor in Brazil was being creative when he asked students to research the consciousness of common people, as the way to begin a history of science course. Reformulating academic knowledge so that it absorbs the students' subjective position takes a lot of imagination on the teacher's part. Also, another creative dimension is including in this reformulation a critique of society.

The creative disruption of passive education is an aesthetic moment as well as a political one, because it asks the students to re-perceive their prior understandings and to practice new perceptions as creative learners with the teacher. Maybe we can consider ourselves dramatists when we rewrite the routine classroom scripts and reinvent liberating ones. The syllabus is as much a script as it is a curriculum. The classroom is a stage for performance as much as it is a moment of education. The classroom

is not only a stage and a performance, and not only a format for inquiry, but is also a place that has visual and auditory dimensions. We see and hear many things there. How can we adjust the sights and sounds of this moment to stimulate unfamiliar critical attention in students? In terms of verbal texture itself, I think of aestheticizing the classroom by varieties of utterances. Human voices speak in many modes: questions, statements, generalizations, specifics, images, comedy, pathos, sarcasm, mimicry, sentimentality, etc. How much of this texture appears in any course? When does comedy appear? Where is deep feeling?

Let me be concrete about this question of verbal texture. The routine script of the classroom has the teacher speaking *very loudly* about official subjects marginally interesting to students. The remote curriculum and the authoritarian relations of the classroom require the teacher to speak loudly and a lot, to command some attention in the face of student resistance. On the other hand, if teachers are used to speaking a great deal very loudly, students are used to saying very little very lowly.

Paulo (Laughing): Yes, that is the way in the classroom.

Ira: I enter the classroom with a loud voice and have a lot to say, if I am the teacher. I speak my words clearly separated from each other, to make it easier to take notes, if I am the teacher. I speak from the front of the room, barricaded behind a desk, and verbally emphasize the key words in my sentences which I want students to memorize, in preparation for a short-answer exam coming up soon. Now, if I am a student, I enter the classroom and sit as far from the teacher as I can. I speak as little as possible in as low a voice as possible, slurring my words, because no one is really listening to me, or taking notes from what I have to say, or worrying about a test based on my words, and the whole discourse is aimed at the correct short-answer anyhow, so why go on?

If I know these things as a liberating teacher, I begin my creative reversal in the speaking moments. I modulate my voice to conversational rhythms rather than didactic, lecturing tones. I listen intently to every student utterance and ask other students to listen when one of their peers speaks. I don't begin my reply after the student ends her or his *first* sentence, but ask the student to say more about the question. If I'm asked what I think, I say I'd be glad to say what I think, but why don't a few more people speak first to what the student just said, whether you agree or not. If I don't have a reply to what a student said, or don't understand a series of student comments, and can't invent on the spot questions to reveal the issue, I go home and think about it and start a next class from what a student said before, to keep signaling to students the importance of their statements. These small interventions contradict the verbal domination which has driven students into resisting dialogue. If I am recreating the teacher as a speaker and listener here, I am also inviting students to recreate

themselves as listeners and speakers in a new classroom script. I think the art here is verbal reinvention, vocal recreation through dialogue.

Student silence is created by the arts of domination. Students are not silent by nature. They have a great deal to say, but not in the script of the traditional classroom. Reinventing the visual and verbal aspects of the classroom are two ways of addressing the destructive arts of passive education. Discovering a key student theme and then orchestrating it as a motif, variations on the theme to explore its character, is also an artistic use of dialogue.

From another angle, I would add that humor is one more creative moment, as a mutual comedy between students and teachers and not only a comic performance by an amusing instructor. One of the funniest and most revealing moments for me is the power of students to mock and mimic their superiors. When I walk down the halls of my college, I eavesdrop on student conversations, to learn how they talk to each other. I hear them making fun of teachers, bosses, etc., in wonderfully creative mimicry. If I ask them in class to write *my* introductory speech to *them* when the course begins, they are able to produce good renditions of teacherly voice. They also can read this didactic voice from their pages with colorful characterization. They know how to sound like professors.

Paulo (Laughing): Yes. They know how we talk.

Ira: Yet, we often say they don't know Standard English or correct usage, even when they can mimic a professor. They know something about this official language of the authorities. They don't use it or study it consistently because correct usage is not their organic language, not organic to their subordinate development in school and society. They will perform in standard usage for creative moments when they want. Here is an example of critical aesthetics that teachers as artists need to draw out.

Paulo: I agree absolutely with you about this question of the teacher as an artist. I would just add two elements to it.

One is that no matter if education is exercised informally at home or formally at a school, through informal relationships between parents and kids or formally in primary school between teachers and students, education has to do with a permanent process of formation. Even though it is not strictly the task of the educator to form or to shape the students, no matter what the level of education, I am in my perspective a helper of the students in their process of formation, of their growing up. This process is necessarily an artistic one. It is impossible to participate in the process of getting shaped, which is a kind of rebirth, without some aesthetic moments. In this aspect, education is naturally an aesthetic exercise. Even if we are not conscious of this as educators, we are still involved in a naturally aesthetic project. What can happen is that, being unaware of the

aesthetic aspect of education, we become very bad artists, but artists of a kind nevertheless, to the extent we help the students enter a process of permanent formation.

Another point that makes education once more an artistic event is precisely when education is also an act of knowing. For me, knowing is something beautiful! To the extent that knowing is unveiling an object, the unveiling gives the object "life," calls it into "life," even gives it a new "life." This is an artistic task because our knowing has a life-giving quality, creating and animating objects as we study them.

All the things you said participate also in this aesthetic nature of knowing and forming. Gestures, intonations of voices, walking in the classroom, poses: We can do all these things without being conscious all the time of their aesthetic aspects, their impact on student formation through teaching. What I think is that the aesthetic nature of education does not mean that we explicitly and consciously do it all the time. I think that from the moment we come into the classroom, at the moment you say, Hello! How are you?, to the students, you necessarily start an aesthetic relationship. This is so because you are an educator who has a strategic and directive role to play in liberating pedagogy. Then, education is simultaneously a certain theory of knowledge going into practice, a political and aesthetic act. These three dimensions are always together, simultaneous moments of theory and practice, art and politics, the act of knowing at once creating and recreating objects while it forms the students who are knowing.

I think, then, if the educator becomes more and more clear about these characteristics of teaching, he or she can improve the effectiveness of the pedagogy. Clarity about the necessary political and artistic natures of education will make the teacher into a better politician and a better artist. We do art and politics when we help the formation of students, whether we know it or not. Knowing what we are in fact doing will help us do it better.

Notes

1. See the Foreword of our book for a discussion of "the gnosiological cycle" of knowledge, the two moments in making knowledge, producing new knowledge and knowing what we have produced.
2. See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (Baltimore, 1973). Gramsci wrote about the educational role of intellectuals whose work organically interacts with people in daily life: "it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity" (p. 330). See also Gramsci's *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (International Press, New York, 1970).