

Commemoration of Paulo Freire

Bimal Phnuyal

- **Introduction**

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, was one of the most influential philosophers of his generation. His classic work, ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’, was published in 1972 and he died in São Paulo, Brazil in May 1997. Freire’s thoughts and vision help us to clarify many complicated questions related to life, learning and liberation. In the same way the struggles involved in his own life give impetus for us to continue the journey of life and, in Freire’s words, “not to die in life”. Freire has been a key influence on the development of REFLECT. This article aims to provide an overview of his life and work, introducing some of the key concepts that he developed which are significant for both PRA and REFLECT.



Breaking silence through empowered learning behaviour

In May 1998 there were many commemorations of the first anniversary of Freire’s death. Reports from different continents suggest that Freire’s

thoughts and actions are becoming more relevant than ever before. It is encouraging to witness that, in a recent colloquium in Bangladesh, many commemorators warned against the danger of the ritualisation of Freire. The empowered learning behaviour of the commemorators suggested that it is more important to apply Freirean learning spirit rather than following Freire as a dogma.

- **Learning from life**

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Recife, in the north-east of Brazil. Recife was characterised by sharp dichotomies between poor and rich, powerful and powerless. Paulo’s father was a low level officer in the military who prioritised his children’s education. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, Paulo experienced hunger and learnt first hand, from the deteriorating living situations of the working and middle classes, the politics and realities of life.

As a child, Paulo was thought to have learning problems; his teachers told his parents that he had a “mild mental retardation”. This judgement proved far from accurate and Freire trained as a lawyer, a profession which he never wanted to practice. He had been influenced by the growing Catholic Action Movement (later known as the liberation theology movement). The process of understanding life and reality encouraged him to explore the possibility of changes in reality, drawing on the strengths and potential of oppressed groups of people, particularly their ability to learn and develop.

Freire married Elza Maria Costa de Oliveria in 1943. On many occasions he has said that she contributed significantly to his educational thoughts and action. He says that he learnt to

love from both his parents and Elza and this made him emphasise the importance of love in life and work. Without a feeling of love, hope and attachment, an educational process cannot be liberatory. Love is instrumental in humanising the self and humanising the world. Developing a critical consciousness helps people to love and respect human beings - leading them to fight oppressive relationships and practices.

While stressing that a person is fundamentally a social being, Freire also emphasised that each individual is unique. ‘Be yourself’ and respect other peoples’ ‘self’, he would say. He further developed this insight later and linked it to social and educational processes. Transforming the world means humanising the world and it is important to humanise the self in order to humanise others’ reality. Currently, we talk about the ABC (Attitude and Behaviour Change) of PRA which mirrors Freire’s thinking from many years previously.

After abandoning law, Freire became responsible for planning education programmes for the rural poor and industrial workers in marginal areas of the state of Pernambuco. This experience helped him to develop issues of ‘the pedagogy of the oppressed’. As he explored why rural poor and industrial workers are illiterate, he came to understand how literacy and education are social and structural questions - which are fundamentally linked to unjust social relationships. In 1954 he resigned his post and went to teach history and the philosophy of education at the University of Recife.

In 1959 came a new turn in Freire’s life. With the election of a new and progressive mayor in Recife, Freire headed the Popular Cultural Movement, an active adult education programme, aimed at bringing education to the rural poor and developing their critical consciousness. Peasant associations, known as Peasant Leagues, were growing and they were mobilising their members for organising co-operatives and implementing land reforms. Literacy and adult education were linked to these processes as people needed to be empowered to understand and demand their rights. Peasants were organised in “cultural circles” and adult education became a form of “cultural action for freedom”. From this, Freire learnt that education which aims to achieve

liberation and enhance democracy, needs to be participatory and liberatory in itself.

Given the success of the popular education programmes in Recife and the advancement of progressive politics nationally, Freire went on to take responsibility as the head of a new cultural extension service for popular education in the region. In 1963 he became Head of the National Literacy Programme of the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Culture. Freire worked both as a philosopher of this new practice of adult education and as an operational co-ordinator, developing various techniques to manage its implementation. From this experience he highlighted what were to become key concepts for his later writing:

- it is not possible to split theory from action;
- learners must be given the space and capacity to develop their own theories;
- top down transfer of knowledge does not work; and,
- people’s involvement in the creation of knowledge through struggle is the key to ensuring a proper learning process.

The year of 1964 was a turning point for both Paulo Freire and Brazil. A military coup hindered the progressive reforms and innovations in popular education. Along with more than 100 key national figures involved in national reconstruction initiatives, Freire was imprisoned and underwent 83 hours of interrogation by military officials. They declared him a traitor to Christ and to the people of Brazil and after 75 days of imprisonment, he was forced into exile. This was perhaps the biggest lesson in Paulo’s life - revealing how vested interest groups react against popular initiatives in society.

Freire did not stop exploring what he had initiated. He went to work in different parts of the world and advocated for the pedagogy of the oppressed. As well as sharing the Brazilian experience, he also became involved in many new initiatives in other parts of Latin America. His message was that oppressed and ordinary people have the capacity to learn, to develop and to change both themselves and the world. This was not just some abstract ideal, but the practical conclusion from his own life experience.

Educationists of the world could not ignore him. Either they appreciated him or they objected to him. For Freire there is no middle way: either an education process helps people in their empowerment or the education process helps maintain the status quo. No education process can be neutral and, likewise, no participatory process can be neutral.

Paulo was able to return to Brazil in the 1980s. He re-engaged in various popular education practices and became a founding member of the new Workers' Party of Brazil, a new type of left wing democratic party in South America, which aimed to promote democratic practices at the grassroots and within all its own processes.

• Key learnings from Freire

- Each person has the capacity to learn and participate and has right to do so;
- Education processes cannot be neutral; either they help to 'domesticate' people or help to liberate them;
- If education is to have a liberating outcome, the process itself needs to be participatory and liberating;
- 'Knowledge' cannot be imposed upon learners, rather an environment needs to be created for everybody to explore, analyse and synthesise;
- Real liberation is possible only through popular participation and a key to popular participation is popular education;
- Liberation needs to be conceived as both a process of transforming the self and a process of creating a new society; and,
- Changes are needed in both individual behaviour and social power relations.

The role of hope

In the course of revising his classic "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Freire produced another important book: "Pedagogy of Hope". Reflecting upon 25 years of experience since the publication of the previous book, he concluded that hope is a key element for liberation and life. A liberating education process should help people to overcome their situation of apparent hopelessness. Hope is needed, both at the individual and collective levels, for basic survival. Experience of PRA and participatory development confirms this, showing that a

participatory process cannot work unless it brings hope to both participants and development practitioners. But hopes and dreams cannot be imposed, rather they need to be generated in a democratic process.

Henry A. Giroux, one of Freire's friends and an educationist himself, summarised what is liberating education. In a participatory liberating education process, participants learn a "language of critique" of existing power relations and also a "language of possibility" for creating a new society. REFLECT practitioners have tended to term this *political literacy*, linking awareness with action. Freirian jargon of "conscientisation" can be understood in these terms, as meaning the process of acquiring the language of critique to gain a genuine hope and to engage in new social struggles. Some PRA practitioners call this process "rediscovering reality" or "starting new initiatives for development". Thus, there is a common thread here between PRA and REFLECT as both highlight the use of visual methods to help participants systematise their knowledge and analyse their lives with a view to initiating a process of change.

Freire suggests that the process of action-reflection-action (better/improved action coming from reflection and reflection having to be rooted in action) is the means by which conscientisation becomes possible. This action-reflection-action is also called "Praxis". The role of a progressive teacher in such a praxis is not to teach "answers" but to create an environment for proper reflection in which each learner-participant can share and analyse his/her experience and draw new learnings. In praxis the role of a teacher is to engage in "dialogue" or "a dialogical process". This is quite similar to the process of facilitation in PRA whereby a facilitator is also a learner and explorer. In REFLECT this concept of dialogue is very much centre stage.

Culture of silence

Another interesting concept developed by Freire is "cultural action for freedom". Under an oppressive social system and practice, few people are powerful and many others are powerless. Not only do some people possess a great amount of wealth whilst others are poor, but some are regarded as "superior" and others

as “inferior” human beings. Oppressors are the “authority” and are supposed to be cultured and know everything, whereas the oppressed people are “illiterate” and do not know anything - therefore they should remain silent. These oppressive relations lead even the oppressed people to believe that they know nothing and that they should not speak out. Freire calls this the “Culture of Silence” of the oppressed - and it reflects the oppressor’s world-view.

A liberating education practice helps people to break the culture of silence and identify their true potential in new learnings and by engaging in new social struggles for a better life. Any transformation of culture involves moving away from holding the oppressors’ world-view to the oppressed developing their own perspectives and world-view. PRA and REFLECT practitioners might use different terms for this, such as developing a “local perspective”, a “poor people’s perspective”, or a “child’s perspective”. This involves recognising that there is not one reality, but a huge diversity of possible realities. By gaining awareness of the dominant reality one can initiate a progressive transformation of the reality.

Empowerment is about breaking the culture of silence - through empowered learning behaviour. We need participatory and empowering learning processes to change both ourselves and the world. Freire most clearly articulated this analysis and he continues to be an inspiration across the world. However, we must not be dogmatic in following Freire. His work should not be “ritualised” but should rather be re-invented. Freire himself emphasised this point:

“The only way that anyone has of applying in their situation any of the propositions I have made is precisely by re-doing what I have done, that is, by not following me. In order to follow me it is essential not to follow me.”

(Freire and Foundez, “Learning to Question”, Continuum, New York, 1989)

Let this be a homage of commitment to Paulo Freire !

- **Bimal Phnuyal**, International Education Unit, ActionAid, Hamlyn House, MacDonald Road, Archway, London N19 5PG, UK Email: bimalp@actionaid.org.uk,