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Rethinking the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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The Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire remains the teaching philosophy that guides critical pedagogy. Whether implicitly or explicitly, critical educators draw from the work of Freire to emphasize the fact that the minds of students are not empty slates for the banking of facts and the withdrawal of exam answers by teachers; rather, the students are social agents able to pose and resolve problems in dialogue with fellow students and the teachers.

However, educators should not adopt *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* uncritically given some debates about the suitability of Freire’s work in rural Brazil for industrialized countries. In this response to Stephen Sterling, who used the word “pedagogy” multiple times in his [statement of the problem](#), I will revisit the original formulation by Freire and indicate critical ways that we need to transcend it in order to meet the demands of higher education today!¹ Freire prescribed his educational philosophy mainly for those engaged in the education of people like illiterate workers and peasants in Brazil and later in Tanzania and Guinea-Bissau. But his liberation pedagogy has since caught on around the world and been adopted in many different disciplines.

Goals and Objective

Africana Studies emerged out of the revolution of the 1960s and continues to define itself as a field that privileges critical scholar-activism that is centered on the experience of people of African descent globally.² It may seem paradoxical that I would contrapose Africana Studies with Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed, with its emphasis on the maturity of the students, their complete humanity despite attempts at denigration from some quarters, and their privileged

location in academia in spite of the persistence of oppressive practices. However, Africana Studies, from the inception of its institutionalization in predominantly white universities, was never intended as a field exclusively for black students and continues to serve as diversity content for a diverse student population.

Moreover, such black students are far from the illiterate peasants of Freire and must be recognized as among the “talented tenth” of W. E. B. Du Bois who are privileged to receive higher learning for the purpose of serving to help and uplift the less fortunate in society. The university is not isolated from, but is reflective of, societies structured in race-class-gender dominance. Freire warned that educators must be careful to combat the will to power that makes the former oppressed peasant aspire to become like the oppressor whenever entrusted with power. Critical scholars must recognize the extent to which we are privileged as cultural activists and avoid oppressive discourses that may contradict our praxis.

Discussions

I had been using Freire in my educational philosophy rather uncritically until I visited a historically black college in the US to give a job talk. The toughest question came from a graduate student who asked how I had gone beyond Freire in the application of his methods. After pausing to reflect on the question, I responded by saying that I had modified Freire’s philosophy in two ways to fit the reality of higher education today.

First, I no longer use the word pedagogy to describe the process of learning because university students, and adult learners in general, are no longer kids to be subjected to the pediatric processes of pedagogy. In *For their Own Good*, Alice Miller argues that pedagogy, as child-rearing, was predominantly abusive in Western cultures, resulting in the production of amoral monsters like Adolf Hitler. Today, I would prefer the word “androgogy” when teaching adults or “Afrogogy” when teaching about people of African descent. Pedagogy does not adequately capture what we do in higher education, in my own opinion. However, this change of words is not adequate either without a shift in assumptions and practices.

I attended an “Androgogy Workshop” for teaching adult university learners in the Caribbean, and I was surprised to hear participants defending the behaviorist pedagogy which assumed that students were experimental animals to be motivated with grades towards better achievement or be punished with grades to deter bad behavior. I see my students as colleagues, not as Pavlov’s dogs salivating at the anticipation of sugar lumps. Grades are not rewards but achievements earned by students, and they are not to be used for disciplinary punishment.

Secondly, the above suggestion also questions the argument by Freire that illiterate adult learners were dehumanized by oppression and exploitation, waiting for his pedagogy of the oppressed to re-humanize them or to make them more fully human. University students are far from the oppressed illiterate peasants in rural Brazil, Tanzania, or Guinea-Bissau. They are rather a privileged lot. They are far from being illiterate and have a lot of power over their professors, at least in the form of classroom assessments. Some of them have family allowances that are more than professors’ annual incomes, some drive the most expensive cars, and some go on to become rulers of countries.

Students, especially adult ones, are not less human than intellectuals who arrive with the knowledge of how to humanize them or to make them more fully human with pedagogy. There is no such thing as a “less human” human being, certainly not in the university; socialization is a better term than humanization, and Androgogy sounds a lot better than pedagogy in Africana Studies.

Africana Studies emerged in the 1960s when Freire was formulating his philosophy of scholar activism, and this discipline embodies that philosophy more than most. It was launched by students who were protesting against the Eurocentric banking concept of education, with its view of students as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. Critical students and their community supporters rallied to demand critical, activist, and Africa-centered scholarship. Although entrenched interests resisted the demands of the students and tried to ridicule their preferred philosophy of education, the fact that the discipline has thrived for more than forty years in the US is an indication of the vibrancy of Freire’s approach that may have been influenced by the activist students and by the civil rights movement in the USA.

When we admit that the minds of university students are not blank slates, we will be more open to their input on the revision of the curriculum, innovation of new fields, and discovery of new

theories and perspectives. Other emerging fields like Women's Studies, American Indian Native Studies, Hispanic Studies, Labor Studies, Asian American Studies, Lesbian and Gay Studies, and Critical Whiteness Studies benefited from this Africana approach. The problem that I would like to pose to educators and learners today is how we should tackle the problem of decreasing black male participation in higher education. Is there such a thing as positive masculinity, what would it look like, and what role could education play in its reproduction or socialization?³

To help us to answer these questions, let us require our students to volunteer for at least 15 hours with relevant organizations in the community and write essays linking the knowledge gained through service beyond the boundaries of the classroom to issues discussed in class. During the COVID-19 lockdown, this has proven even more challenging, but my students have managed to learn about prisoners and about malaria by fasting for 24 hours to simulate what hunger-strikers and malaria patients go through and also to raise funds for organizations working on such issues while also learning more about themselves with technologies of the self.

Endnotes

1. This essay is based on an updated version of Biko Agozino, "The Androgogy of the Privileged: A Reassessment of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed" in *Conference on Higher Education Pedagogy Proceedings*, ed. Peter Doolittle (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 2010). For more on Freire, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, translated by M. B. Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970); *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, translated by C.S.J. Hunter (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978).
2. Africana Studies is also referred to as African American Studies, Africology, Black Studies, African and African American Studies, and Pan-African Studies.
3. Biko Agozino and Augustine Agu, "Taboos of Masculinity: Positive and Progressive Masculinities," *Taboo: The Journal Of Culture and Education* (Winter 2021), <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol20/iss1/5/>.

About the Author



Biko Agozino is a Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies at Virginia Tech. He is the author of such books as *Critical, Creative and Centered Scholar-Activism: The Fourth Dimensionalism of Agwuncha Arthur Nwankwo*, *ADAM: Africana Drug-Free Alternative Medicine*, *Counter-Colonial Criminology*, and *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System*. He is the co-editor of *Routledge Handbook on Africana Criminologists* and *African Issues in Crime and Justice*, as well as the director-producer of "Shouters and the Control Freak Empire," Winner of the Best International Short Documentary, Columbia Gorge Film Festival, USA, 2011. He was appointed Professor Extraordinarius 2021-2024 by the University of South Africa.

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