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What I Learned From My Grandmother, My Mother, and Paulo Freire

Fernanda Ferreira

I wasn’t the first in my family to go to college. I was the second. My grandmother could barely write her name. When she did, it looked like a little kid – and not a grown woman – had scribbled the letters to form the name “Maria” on a piece of paper. When she attempted to read from her Saint Anthony prayer book, she would say the words hesitantly. She wasn’t a good baker at all because she never followed a recipe. Yet, she was a remarkable cook, who knew exactly just how much salt to add to savory foods, like her stewed fish in creamy coconut sauce.

My mother, on the other hand, could not cook anything. She became an elementary school teacher and later received her PhD in education from Vanderbilt University. In Brazil, she was a professor in the same university where I got my undergraduate degree. Having my mom with an office right across from the building where I attended classes was actually reassuring. Indeed, I had inside knowledge of university life even before passing the university entrance exam. One could say that I knew the “ins and outs” of academia even before attending my first undergraduate class. However, it was disconcerting to have my mother as a professor in the same university I attended. I knew that if I messed up, my mother would have access to my degree audit!

Iracema Pires, as she was known, specialized in curriculum and programs. Much of her academic work was guided by the revolutionary ideas of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* At one point in her career, she was the educational consultant for the government of Suriname, the former Dutch Guiana. She lived in Paramaribo for six months, helping Surinamese educators develop their curricular programs, based in part on Freire’s ideas. She was so enthusiastic about his revolutionary theories of education that she successfully pushed for and created the “Paulo Freire Center” at the Federal University in Pernambuco. She wanted all her graduate students to have easy access to his works. In 1993, the “Paulo Freire Desk,” as it was called then, was just a section of the university library. During the ribbon-cutting ceremony, attended by Freire himself, my mother must have been thinking about the implausibility of her own life. She was the daughter of a woman who struggled to read and write, yet she was also someone who later became a university professor, an expert in education. Today, close to three decades after her untimely death, the Paulo Freire Center is a much larger institute that offers scholarships to aspiring scholars and is an integral part of that Brazilian university.

So, when my colleague Kevin McGowan (Academic Director of the Martin Richard Institute for Social Justice) asked if I wanted to be part of a book club reading Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* I jumped at the chance. Life would be coming full circle for me. I had just started my three-year Alternate Professional Responsibility as Faculty Associate at the MRISJ in the fall of 2021. My goal in that capacity was (and is) to help the institute fulfill its stated mission. Specifically, the MRISJ aims to build knowledge about social justice, develop skills for advancing social justice (individually and collectively), and serve as a catalyst...
to BSU’s commitment to social justice. These goals connect with Freire’s work because he was profoundly committed to social justice insofar as he wanted to find solutions for high rates of illiteracy in Brazil. The failed educational system of the 1950s and 1960s meant that most of the Brazilian working class did not finish school and could not read or write. Thus, Freire’s ideas about education were conceived around his efforts at adult literacy.

Freire starts by opposing the dichotomy of “educator-student” in which the teacher has all the knowledge, and the student is the passive recipient of said knowledge. That “banking system” of education is outdated, he declares. Instead, he proposes that knowledge is rooted in the whole human experience and literacy is but a stage in a larger project of “becoming aware” for the learner. The idea is to guide the nonreader in becoming an agent of their own learning, by means of having them think critically about their own situation as a “maker” of reality. How does that translate in concrete terms in the classroom? It means, for example, that in selecting a keyword to start the literacy process, the learners themselves come up with that lexical item. Instead of learning how to read a sentence (typically found in the old primers) such as *Ivo viu a uva* (“Ivan saw the grape”), a learner, who might be a bricklayer for example, will want to learn how to read and write the word *tijolo* (“brick”) or the word *voto* (“vote”) in order to grasp the syllables that make up significant words for them.

Hence, Freire sees learning to read and write as part of a person’s “conscientization.” This Portuguese neologism – *conscientização* – is challenging to translate (Andreola 1993). It does not mean simply “awareness” or “consciousness raising” as some have suggested. In Freire’s own words, conscientization means that “learners need to perceive that they can ‘write’ their life and ‘read’ their reality, which will not be possible if they do not take history into their hands, and make it, and be made and remade by it” (Freire 1977, 16). In other words, literacy is not purely a mechanical endeavor; it is a political act; an act of self-discovery and personal agency.

In my own pedagogy, I try to avert the “banking system” by asking students – usually heritage language learners of Portuguese – to tell me what words or semantic areas they want to learn. What do they long to know, as they recapture their ancestral language? How can I assist them in their efforts to be fluent in the language of their close relatives? From that perspective, I attempt to be part of that dialogic process of teaching and learning.

As I attempted to make my grandmother’s fluffy rice at home, I reflected on the philosophical writings of Paulo Freire. I understood that knowledge includes the entirety of human experience and that it is intrinsically connected to action. Freire reminded me that my grandmother, despite being a nonreader, was a “maker” of cultural knowledge. In Freire’s view, her attempts at literacy were part of a larger pursuit for self-actualization. That idea was, in and of itself, revolutionary.