

RETHINKING PAULO FREIRE: THE ESSENCE OF LIBERATING EDUCATION AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

Education is a need for every individual who needs knowledge. Education has a strong foundation for thinking, namely the presentation of human values. Education that produces problems lacks a strong foundational basis. Education is a deliberate, programmed effort aimed at the learner and others. Education should be implemented with respect and appreciation of human values. Not education that makes learners like programmed robots by eliminating their self-awareness, making transformation difficult. Freire offers an alternative education based on the paradigm of intellectual and emotional freedom awareness that can ultimately produce social transformation. This education is also based on a rational, critical, dialogical framework so that the subject's creativity emerges and can communicate human values. Freire's education can still be accepted today, where education still treats subjects as objects that suffer or are oppressed.

Keywords: Education, Consciousness, Freedom, Value, Humanity.

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INTRODUCTION

Any educational enterprise or pedagogical process inherently leans toward transforming both individual actors and social structures. The transformation taking place within the public sphere operates fundamentally within the framework of humanizing humanity, ultimately yielding an educational process that liberates individuals from ignorance, socioeconomic backwardness, and systemic oppression. The imperative to humanize others serves as the bedrock of

existential life and educational practices. Historically and today, dominant power structures have positioned themselves as absolute arbiters of authority, often asserting dominance over marginalized populations. Educational endeavors have frequently been co-opted to serve specific socio-political interests, demonstrating that education can easily degenerate from a noble endeavor into an instrument utilized to fulfill the motives of ruling elites.

In principle, education exists in a continuous dialectical engagement with its surrounding environment, prevailing societal values, institutional structures, and underlying philosophical foundations. "Thus, remaining neutral in education is an impossibility, as we must continuously recognize that all educational policies and practices carry profound social implications" (Palmer, 2001). Education is inherently non-neutral; it must act as a catalyst for fostering critical consciousness within learners, enabling them to experience liberation as an essential human value and drive social transformation that prioritizes individual creativity. This aligns with Drost's assertion: "Thus, education originates with the deep respect for individual freedom, fundamental rights, and personal power." Through the exercise of freedom, learners are expected to harness their creative capacity to evolve into mature, autonomous individuals capable of critical reflection upon their lived experiences.

Furthermore, such individuals develop social behaviors that enable them to interpret complex social dynamics and take active responsibility for transforming the social order in which they exist and interact—encompassing processes of cooperation, healthy competition, and existential self-preservation. This can only be realized on the principle that every individual possesses inherent, inviolable freedom. Education is expected to yield conceptualizations of society undergoing structural evolution marked by systemic phenomena. Social transformations rooted in individual freedom and critical consciousness encompass the internalization of normative values, societal creativity, and structural integration, allowing individuals to navigate self-preservation responsibly.

A monumental figure in educational philosophy, Paulo Freire (1921–1997) from Brazil, introduced an optimistic, humanistic, and deeply philosophical vision of education. "Philosophy establishes underlying ideas and idealisms, whereas education represents the deliberate, planned effort to realize those ideas into concrete action, conduct, and personality formation" (Djunmransjah, 2006). This pedagogical vision connects individual creativity with freedom—the fundamental right of every individual to remain unencumbered by forces that induce intellectual and emotional oppression. It signifies an education oriented toward the learner's existence as an active subject equipped with creative potential and personal accountability. Individual creativity forms the cornerstone of epistemic

transformation, driving behavioral changes that fulfill basic human self-actualization needs. "Education, with all its philosophical intricacies, demands thoroughly philosophical answers—marked by efficiency, clarity, and systematic rigor." Philosophical issues emerge precisely because education is deeply intertwined with broader socio-political structures, foundational values, methodologies, teleological objectives, and political economy.

Meaningful behavioral shifts stem from educational processes that honor personal autonomy rather than external imposition. Every individual is an independent subject who must never be reduced to an oppressed object or dependent entity. "Human beings must mutually recognize one another as persons; an individual must never be objectified or reduced to a commodity, but must be affirmed as an autonomous subject" (Hartoko, 2006). Furthermore, within instructional settings, students possess distinct individual backgrounds shaped by family dynamics and social structures, evolving through learning into independent, mature entities. Mature individuals possess intrinsic intellectual and emotional liberty unmanaged by external forces. Responsible adulthood and collaborative capacity are initially cultivated within primary domestic environments under parental guidance. "Parents thus serve as the primary and essential foundation for formal schooling." Institutional education must reinforce parental efforts by honoring the child's developing autonomy. "In short, families that respect the child's individuality recognize that even while dependent, the child must be treated as a distinct person." Freire's pedagogy transcends contingent circumstances, honoring human dignity and fostering mature individuals who remain open to their environments and capable of cooperative action to institute social change.

Freire specifically emphasized education tailored for the impoverished and disenfranchised. "He labored extensively to assist men and women in overcoming their powerlessness, enabling them to act decisively in their own interest" (Collins, 1999). Freire fought within the academic sphere against an educational apparatus that was historically restrictive and inaccessible to the marginalized. Academic institutions often failed to benefit people experiencing poverty, leaving marginalized populations isolated from transformative education and relegated to servitude without understanding their human dignity. Stripped of intellectual agency and emotional freedom, individuals experience severe identity erosion and struggle to form a coherent sense of self.

The oppressed and impoverished frequently suffer from deep self-alienation, hindering independent creative agency. Subordinated within societal hierarchies, they often internalize their oppression as an unalterable reality. They become suffering objects within an educational framework tailored exclusively to serve

ruling elites. Recognizing these historical realities, Freire sought a radical overhaul of prevailing pedagogical structures. Rather than adhering to rigid, exclusionary systems, he championed an educational framework aimed at unfolding human potential grounded in humanistic values.

For Freire, education served as the primary mechanism for the socio-economic and existential liberation of the marginalized, fostering a dignified existence built on unconditional respect for human values. Social transformations that abandon core human values during self-actualization fail to build harmonious social relations, resulting in premature structural change.

Freire's background informs his philosophy: "He was born on September 19, 1921, in Recife, a coastal city in northeastern Brazil." Raised by Joachim Themistocless Freire and Edeltrus Nevas Freire in a middle-class household, his family experienced economic hardship during the Great Depression. Relocating to Jaboatão in 1931, the family faced further hardship following his father's passing.

Freire pursued higher education at the University of Recife, studying law, philosophy, and language psychology, while also attending lectures at the Tristão de Athayde Institute. He married Elza Maia Costa Oliveira in 1944. After completing his law degree, he served in the Department of Education and Culture as Director of the Social Service Division in Pernambuco. In this role, he worked directly with disenfranchised urban populations who were socio-economically marginalized.

By 1960, Brazil faced heightened socio-political instability. Socialist groups, student movements, labor unions, and Christian activists actively pursued distinct socio-political reforms. Following João Goulart's ascension to the presidency in 1961, peasant unions and non-governmental organizations initiated widespread adult literacy campaigns across the nation to address high illiteracy rates. Concurrently, religious movements led by bishops expanded the Basic Education Movement (BEM). BEM sought to foster intellectual and emotional independence, cultivating the critical consciousness required for structural social transformation. This foundational approach emphasized human subjectivity and personal agency through the realization of freedom and creative expression.

These literacy programs targeted marginalized populations, including tenant farmers, laborers, socio-economically disadvantaged adults, and school dropouts. Literacy was envisioned not merely as a technical skill, but as a path toward economic improvement, healthy self-image, and critical agency. Freire sought to cultivate self-worth and confidence within marginalized populations historically objectified by powerful institutions. He emphasized that marginalized individuals must develop a coherent identity, emotional resilience, and

intellectual autonomy, transitioning away from being passive instruments in systems that favor elite interests.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative literature review to analyze the primary subject matter and its broader implications; the authors systematically review relevant literature to examine general educational principles alongside Paulo Freire's pedagogical framework. The primary research instrument is the researcher (human instrument) working in conjunction with literature resources. Ultimately, the authors derive practical implications based on scholarly arguments, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of Freire's educational concepts within contemporary academic discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Foundational Framework of Thought

Educational paradigms generally fall into three primary approaches: conservative, liberal, and critical. "Formal and non-formal educational processes play a pivotal role either in legitimizing and perpetuating existing social structures or, conversely, in acting as catalysts for equitable social change" (Fakih, 2001). Within this context, Freire grounds his liberating pedagogy on humanistic philosophical foundations. Philosophical humanism positions the human individual as the central, organizing principle. It employs human values as its baseline logic, treating the learner as an active subject. Humanism is understood as "a conceptualization of the human being as the center of existence, wherein external structures lose significance unless they actively serve human development". Consequently, humanism introduces an anthropocentric orientation that derives subsequent arguments directly from core human values.

Human values are grounded in individual consciousness and subjectivity, which must never be objectified or subjected to depersonalization. When depersonalization occurs, human existence retreats into mechanical self-defense. "Humanism degrades into naturalism when intrinsic human capacities are reduced to mere instinctual mechanisms for survival" (Hardiman, 2012). That is, humanism devolves into naturalism if natural capacities are reduced to mechanical instincts. Freire proposes a critical, subjective pedagogy geared toward mature individuals who exercise their emotional and intellectual capacities based on true freedom. The capacity for critical reflection is an intrinsic human quality that cannot be stripped without causing severe oppression, alienation, and subjugation. "Freire's philosophy emerges directly from concrete realities: a vast portion of humanity suffers unjustly while a

minoritarian elite profits from their labor." Society is thus split into oppressors and the oppressed, dominant forces and subordinated populations.

Freire argues that oppression strips individuals of their fundamental dignity and freedom, reducing their internal capacity for self-liberation. Oppression results in dehumanization the systematic erosion of core human values. True humanization, by contrast, requires realizing one's humanity without exploiting others. Individual rights must not be converted into oppressive obligations for others. The foundational assumption remains that all individuals possess equal human value, constructed upon normative critical consciousness and freedom. This humanizing process stands in direct opposition to dehumanization.

According to Freire, authentic individuals act as active subjects of their actions rather than passive objects suffering alienation. As active subjects endowed with rational and emotional freedom, individuals work toward collective social transformation. Shared responsibility in preserving human dignity requires internalizing human values, rather than submitting to systemic oppression that diminishes critical reasoning. Freire asserts that individuals must realize their role as active agents capable of confronting oppressive conditions through transformative praxis. "Human beings are masters of their own destiny; thus, intrinsic human nature is inherently tied to liberation, representing the ultimate goal of Freire's humanizing project." Liberation serves as a foundational human value that must be respected across all social interactions, driving positive social evolution. Universal liberation also incorporates existential and spiritual dimensions that transcend pure instrumental rationality. "For a humanist, freedom is not attained by removing the Divine from consciousness as divine mystery provides the horizon for liberty but through recognizing existential contingency in relation to the Absolute."

This indicates that individual freedom operates within temporal and physical limits, rather than seeking absolute dominion over the supernatural. The ultimate reality confirms that human freedom is authentic, embedded within lived experience, and bound to interpersonal responsibility. Freedom is an intrinsic quality that persists throughout an individual's life and social interactions. Intellectual and emotional freedom aims to build a more dignified, responsible, and creative social order. Freire emphasizes that marginalized populations must actively dismantle dependency structures created by oppressors. Left unchecked, institutional systems are easily exploited for private gain, functioning as oppressive mechanisms that undermine human values.

The process of humanization is reflected in educational goals that liberate learners from institutionalized dehumanization. Humanization seeks to restore human values degraded by systems that disregard intrinsic human nature. "An individual is properly termed a humanist when defending human dignity against ideological exploitation." Humanists who internalize these principles must actively oppose injustice, coercion, oppression, and objectification in all forms. Individuals are called to recognize their responsibilities toward themselves and their broader communities. This responsibility stems from a coherent perspective on human values universal metrics through which individuals exercise responsible freedom. These values are realized through structured, goal-oriented educational practices, rather than restrictive systems accessible only to privileged elites.

2. Dimensions of Liberating Education

Humanization relies fundamentally on dialogical methods. Dialogical approaches aim for consensus regarding subjects of inquiry, drawing on freedom, rational-emotional creativity, and normative praxis. This methodology treats all participating components as functionally equal. "Freirean dialogue represents an ongoing reflection on the human-world relationship, rooted in the discovery of human existence within and alongside the world." Consequently, recognizing individual reality and social relations forms the core orientation of the dialogical method. Yunus highlights Collins' analysis: "Freire's thought is informed by five classic intellectual streams: Personalism (notably via Mounier), Existentialism, Phenomenology, Marxism, and Christianity" (Yunus, 2004). His framework is often characterized as an eclectic synthesis tailored to address contemporary social challenges.

The dialogical method clarifies that individuals occupy distinct, non-interchangeable positions as both subjects and objects. Rather than establishing a rigid psychological dichotomy, this approach connects subjective consciousness (teachers and students) with objective reality (the world). Subjective awareness enables individuals to process objective reality into structured knowledge. This subjective awareness reinforces Personalism by emphasizing actionable agency requiring individuals to drive constructive changes for themselves and others rather than retreating from reality. Concurrently, Existentialism asserts that individuals act as conscious subjects exercising freedom, even while navigating external realities. "Existentialism underscores human freedom to choose and act decisively." However, freedom detached from social responsibility degenerates into self-absorbed individualism. Phenomenology affirms that Freire's pedagogy is rooted in

concrete human experience. Bagus, as cited by Yunus, notes: "...in a specific sense, phenomenology is the study of phenomena as they present themselves directly to human consciousness." Educational practices are thus constructed around observable phenomena and applied toward meaningful social transformation. Subjective freedom underpins understanding social conditions, opposing oppression, and promoting human dignity. Without critical consciousness, individuals cannot foster meaningful societal progress. Educational systems must therefore explicitly target intellectual and emotional freedom as primary learning outcomes.

Subjective awareness and objective reality interact dialectically, mutually informing one another. "This dialectical relationship does not focus on proving one side right or wrong; rather, it seeks to align and harmonize complementary perspectives." Simply put, Freire's method balances two primary positions: the conscious subject and the object of knowledge (the cognitive and the cognizable).

Additionally, Freire constructed his pedagogical philosophy using universal Christian ethical metrics. He advocated that Christian values should promote liberating education rather than justifying passive endurance of suffering under the guise of religious duty. "Freire was a committed Christian directly involved in liberating the marginalized and socio-economically oppressed. He consistently fought against oppression, enduring political exile imposed by authoritarian regimes." Freire sought to construct educational frameworks rooted in personal agency, encouraging religious institutions to champion liberating educational practices. Such education fosters intellectual freedom, emotional maturity, individual creativity, and constructive social change. Religious institutions must avoid serving as instruments of authoritarian power that suppress human liberty. "Freire calls upon all people to build a more humanized social order, free from oppressive elements." He recognized that systemic reform requires collective effort and institutional support to establish educational practices that advance human dignity globally.

3. The Essence of Liberating Education

Freire sought to reform contemporary educational practices through a humanistic framework that positions learners as active agents of rational transformation. His humanistic philosophy emphasizes empowering individuals to become free, responsible agents who can make meaningful contributions to society. Freire critiqued traditional educational systems as institutionalized mechanisms of oppression and dehumanization. By suppressing creativity and critical thought, these systems reduced student

agency to zero and served elite political interests. Consequently, learners could not realize their intrinsic value or exercise individual freedom, leaving them alienated and incapable of driving personal or social transformation.

Freire famously critiqued this traditional framework as the "Banking Concept of Education". In this model, students are treated as passive receivers who absorb deposited information without opportunities to apply or critique the material. Learners become passive repositories of knowledge, lacking an understanding of how to apply concepts within their daily lives. Educators hold absolute authority over passive students, who are expected to comply without question. This dynamic positions educators as dominant authorities and students as passive consumers of knowledge. Students are discouraged from independent analysis or synthesis and remain reliant on external instruction. Deprived of rational freedom, learners are unable to develop the critical awareness necessary for meaningful self-actualization. "Educating individuals by providing predetermined answers fails to stimulate genuine curiosity, which is essential to cognitive development; instead, it prioritizes mechanical memorization" (Freire, 2001). Rather than fostering freedom, banking education reduces learners to objects of rote learning, suppressing the intellectual and emotional creativity required to transform social reality. Conscious subjects, by contrast, use their freedom to transform their social environments actively.

For Freire, banking education inherently oppresses learners by treating them as tools to fulfill institutional or instructor goals, exacerbating self-alienation. Students become profit-generating objects for institutions that prioritize financial gain over educational quality. Schools operating under this model often fail to foster positive personal development, leaving students without clear direction. Education is reduced to serving commercial or institutional interests at the expense of student growth. Rather than cultivating subjective freedom and personal dignity, these practices replace human values with rigid, mechanical systems. This accelerates social injustice by denying learners access to critical consciousness and emotional maturity.

Educational processes that fail to foster personal freedom or self-actualization represent a regression in pedagogical practice. Trapped in abstract idealism, such models fail to encourage the critical thinking necessary for personal and collective development. Freire argued that education must focus on liberating self-actualization, free from institutional coercion or authoritarian control. Pedagogy should not reinforce teacher dominance or monopolize knowledge creation. Systems that suppress student agency

produce alienated individuals who lack self-awareness and the creative capacity needed for personal and social transformation.

Alternative educational models emerging from dialectical interactions among teachers, students, and their shared reality cultivate the critical awareness necessary for social progress. "Furthermore, Freire maintains that open dialogue is essential to raising critical consciousness." Authentic subjective awareness develops through constructive dialogue that encourages critical inquiry. Teachers and students function together as conscious subjects (cognitive), while world realities serve as the shared object of study (cognizable). Fostering individual intelligence and personal agency enables students to participate meaningfully in public discourse, serving as a cornerstone of liberating, creative education. Self-awareness helps individuals understand their historical agency. "According to Freire, human beings are the active creators of their own history." Individuals possess the freedom to shape history and share their perspectives publicly. Acting as historical agents requires active consciousness and creative engagement; without these capacities, meaningful agency remains unattainable.

Freire argued that humanizing education must focus on liberation rather than social and cultural domestication. Liberating education reshapes individual reality by encouraging mutual learning between teachers and students and establishing a shared humanizing dynamic.

Instructors present material for critical evaluation, testing their ideas against student insights in a reciprocal process. This establishes a subject-to-subject relationship focused on exploring shared realities, rather than a subject-to-object hierarchy. This collaborative dynamic creates an open environment for dialogue, advancing humanization through liberating educational practices. Realizing liberating education requires all participants to take active responsibility for understanding their shared educational goals.

Freire emphasized that liberating education builds internal confidence, helping individuals overcome the fear of freedom. Humanization and true liberation are achieved when individuals become aware of their personal autonomy and environmental realities. Conscious of their potential, individuals work toward balanced self-actualization. Freire also developed a functional literacy framework consisting of three primary phases. The first phase, codification and decodification, introduces basic concepts through concrete and theoretical tools like visual media and cultural narratives. The second phase involves cultural discussions within small, focused learning groups to examine relevant social issues. The third phase, cultural action, translates learning into practical engagement within real-world contexts.

Freire's framework encourages learners to analyze socio-economic contradictions and take decisive action against oppressive conditions. He asserted that learning requires a systematic critical attitude and practical intellectual skills gained through direct experience. Critical thinking cannot develop within a banking education system, as rote models suppress curiosity, enthusiasm, and personal creativity.

Freire outlined five key strategies for developing a critical approach to learning: 1. Learners must understand their role as active participants in the learning process. 2. Educational practices must treat the surrounding world as an immediate reality to be critically engaged. 3. Studying requires engaging deeply with relevant literature and connecting concepts across disciplines. 4. Learning involves a dialectical relationship between reader and author, reflected in the core themes of a text. 5. The learning process requires intellectual modesty and openness.

Educational quality is reflected directly in the depth of a student's engagement with learning. Learning quality is not measured by the volume of pages read over a given timeframe, but by cognitive mastery, emotional maturity, and practical application. Learning is an active process of generating and refining ideas, rather than passively consuming them. Authentic study focuses on deep comprehension and clear articulation, rather than simple rote memorization.

Oppressive educational practices position teachers as sole active authorities while keeping students passive. This rigid structure is often treated as the default standard for classroom instruction. Such practices avoid discussing underlying social structures and treat existing models as fixed realities. Traditional approaches often resist changing established classroom roles, even when passive structures limit student development. By restricting student creativity, these systems limit the development of responsible personal freedom. At the same time, institutional educational practices are often shaped by specific worldviews about religion, human nature, and destiny.

In contrast, Freire's liberating pedagogy provides an alternative to traditional banking models. His general framework follows three primary phases: investigation, thematization, and problematization. The investigation phase examines human consciousness across different stages, ranging from naive or superstitious thinking to critical awareness. Thematization analyzes thematic contexts through reduction, codification, and decodification to uncover core generative themes. Problematization identifies systemic limit-situations and develops actionable strategies to address them, driving ongoing cultural liberation.

4. Contemporary Relevance of Freire's Pedagogy

UNESCO has recommended Freire's educational model as an effective alternative approach for under-resourced, rural, and developing communities. Consequently, his methods have been implemented across various developing nations with international support.

Teacher-centered instruction remains common today, often leaving students disengaged from their own learning processes. Modern education still needs dialogical, critically analytical systems that promote student autonomy and engagement. "Freire emphasizes that dialogue is essential to resolving traditional teacher-student hierarchies. Through open communication, students take active responsibility for their learning, becoming critical co-investigators alongside their teachers." Dialogical systems foster intellectual and emotional freedom, enabling students to develop critical thinking within collaborative learning environments.

Certain contemporary educational practices continue to overlook core human values, requiring students to conform strictly to rigid institutional structures. Under the guise of discipline, strict compliance, or traditional seniority, these approaches can suppress critical thinking and individual agency. Educational processes that fail to respect human potential ultimately struggle to foster genuine well-being or personal fulfillment.

Modern education must prioritize humanistic values that emphasize mutual respect and individual dignity. Learners should be supported as active subjects developing their personal identities, rather than passive recipients of static information. "Freire sought to position education as a means for personal and collective humanization through conscious action to transform the world." This principle remains relevant for contemporary education focused on respecting human dignity and fostering collaborative relationships, rather than treating peers as competitors to be sidelined.

Educational institutions today must support individual and social transformation through open, critical dialogue that encourages responsible reasoning. Modern systems should avoid focusing solely on financial returns at the expense of student growth. Prioritizing profit over educational quality risks leaving marginalized groups without access to liberating, high-quality learning experiences (Saidah et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the contemporary relevance of liberating education demands technological adaptation to ensure equitable access. For instance, the implementation of digital-based services in student admissions demonstrates a practical effort to improve accessibility and transparency for all social groups (Jember, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Freire's liberating pedagogy offers a direct critique of traditional, banking-concept educational systems. Traditional models position teachers as dominant authorities and students as passive recipients, suppressing creativity and critical engagement. In contrast, Freire proposes a humanizing framework that fosters self-awareness, responsible creativity, and personal growth. Developing intellectual and emotional freedom enables individuals to drive meaningful personal and social transformation.

Freire's concepts provide valuable alternative models for under-resourced populations, offering accessible education that supports self-reliance. Adult education initiatives derived from this framework offer important secondary opportunities for individuals underserved by traditional schooling.

Freire connected literacy and general education directly to comprehensive human development, emphasizing critical thinking as a tool for understanding and improving social conditions. His approach focuses on practical intellectual skills and personal growth over formal credentials alone, addressing both felt needs and real needs. Developing critical consciousness through flexible, dialogical methods proves far more effective than relying on rigid, single-method systems that limit student freedom.

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