

Notes From a Fan: Paulo Freire Comes to Idaho

by

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Known for his ideas about popular education in Brazil and around the world, Paulo Freire (1921-97) remains a minor figure in North America. Various reasons can be posited. One would include the insularity of US and Canadian cultures. In spite of extensive publicity extolling the benefits of international education, North America remains an island whose populations tend to focus on their own nations rather than looking outward towards other locales. A mere one percent of all US undergraduates travel abroad for study, and almost half of these choose the West European countries of England, Spain, France and Italy (Luedtke, 2006). Another reason for such insularity can be traced to the spread of neo-liberal economics and worldview since the 1980s. Espousing the benefits of free trade and globalization, advocates of neo-liberalism have pushed institutions at all levels to embrace conservative, if not reactionary, approaches to education. University administrators follow corporate models in their quest to measure production and raise public and private monies. The result has been the systematic marginalization of programs and initiatives that promote Freirean ideals such as “liberatory education” and social action (Heaney, 1995).

How did I get to know Paulo Freire? While in graduate school at the University of Connecticut, Freire visited Storrs and spoke to an audience of 500 persons. He entered the room, walked up on to the stage, quietly observed the multitude, and asked “what do you want to talk about?” Many in the audience hoping to speak put their hands high into the air. A dialogue ensued that lasted for one and a half hours. Freire often reflected for a moment before he responded to a question. His measured and quiet manner of speech forced the audience to listen closely to his comments. Never before or since have I attended a presentation that commenced or proceeded in such a manner. I walked out of that room knowing that I had to learn more about Paulo Freire. One year later, in 1985, I took my first trip to Brazil with the support of a Fulbright grant for Ph.D. research.¹

I arrived in São Paulo at a vibrant moment. Freire had been back in Brazil for five years, since 1980, after a 16 year political exile that started with the coup d’état in 1964. Now in the face of widespread popular protest, the military government that had ruled since the coup d’état agreed to a national election for a civilian president and a transition to democratic rule (Alves, 1985; Skidmore, 2001).

A Bit of Background

The 1964 coup d’état had not been kind to Paulo Freire. In the immediate aftermath of the military coup, police arrested Freire at his home in Recife, Pernambuco. This

¹ <http://www.fulbrightonline.org/>

occurred as a reaction to his politics. By the early 1960s, Freire had gained domestic and international attention for his leadership in literacy training and support for Christian base communities. In the year previous to the coup, Freire served as president of the National Commission of Popular Culture and coordinator of the National Plan of Literacy Training, these appointments made by the populist government headed by President João Goulart (1961-64). Conservative sectors in Brazilian society along with their allies in the military viewed Freire's ideas and activities as subversive, hence the arrest. Freire spent two months in jail. Soon after gaining political asylum in the Bolivian embassy in Rio de Janeiro he departed from Brazil. For the next sixteen years he resided first in Santiago, Chile (1964-69), where he worked on literacy programs oriented to *campesinos* residing in the countryside, then in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1969-70), where he taught at Harvard University, and finally in Geneva, Switzerland (1970-79). During this last period, while employed by the World Council of Churches, Freire traveled the world sharing his ideas about education and learning about educational programs and diverse cultures.

Soon after his return to Brazil, Freire helped to found the Workers Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or PT) in 1980 (all translations in this article are by the author). The PT had its origins in the labor movement of São Paulo, but also had links to other progressive sectors, including university professors and the Rural Landless Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, MST). Support for the PT quickly spread among Brazilians tired of corruption and incompetent military government. The Workers Party gained a reputation for efficiency and honest government (Sader & Silverstein, 1991).

The most famous person to emerge from the PT was Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, popularly known as Lula. Born into poverty in the northeastern state of Pernambuco, his family moved to the state of São Paulo in 1952. Trained as a metallurgist, Lula rose to become president of the metallurgist union in the industrial region of São Bernardo do Campo in 1975. This position propelled him into state and national politics. An outspoken critic of the military regime, Lula encouraged street demonstrations as a strategy to force democratic elections. After three failed bids as PT candidate for the presidency (1989, 1994, 1998), Lula won the presidency of Brazil in 2002. In 2006, he was reelected with a stunning 60.8 percent of the national popular vote (Bourne, 2008; Rojas, 2008).

The Workers Party garnered a large following in the city of São Paulo. Freire brought lots of positive publicity to the PT. Supervising an adult literacy project (1980-86), Freire demonstrated the commitment of the PT to educational reform. This difficult work at the grassroots paid off. Running as a candidate of the PT, Luiza Erundina de Souza was elected mayor of São Paulo in November 1988. She remained in this office until the end of 1992. Seeking to reform the public school system of São Paulo, Erundina appointed Paulo Freire as Municipal Secretary of Education. In accepting this position, Freire became responsible for 662 schools with 710,000 students and 39,614 employees (teachers, administrators and service personnel). The school employees made up 30 percent of the total number of persons employed by the municipality of São Paulo (Torres, 1994, p. 184). Determined to make public education accessible and relevant to the urban underclass, Freire faced a daunting task.

As Municipal Secretary of Education (January 1989 to May 1991), Freire put his ideas into action. Instead of placing emphasis on the construction of new schools in the city, he made infrastructure improvements a priority. When he commenced his tenure, 400 municipal schools had major structural problems, such as leaky roofs and bathrooms in disrepair. In the first 11 months, public funds paid for improvement projects at 26 schools and renovations began at 20 other schools. The administration provided 24,500 new desks and chairs, and repaired more than 6,274 desks and chairs (Torres, 1994, p. 197). Freire improved teachers' incomes. During 1989, teacher salaries increased by 112.5 percent. Those who worked in the poorest areas of the city received extra compensation. By this strategy, the Freire administration sought to encourage capable teachers to labor in the poorest parts of the city.

Freire designed pedagogical strategies that made education relevant to students young and old. Freire posited that educational content should be related to social and economic conditions in the *favelas* (urban residential areas inhabited by persons with little or no income). To articulate these themes, professors requested that students express their day to day concerns and interests. Topics suggested by students included concern about insecurity, lack of garbage collection, activities to pursue during free time, the ties between school and television, difficulties in human relations, and a lack of employment opportunities. In this manner, barriers quickly dissolved between teacher and student. This approach was entitled "The Interdisciplinary Project [achieved] via Proposed Themes [*Projecto Interdisciplinar via Tema Gerador*]. This educational model spread to several Brazilian cities (Zanetic, 2007).

Not surprisingly, Freire encountered big problems as Secretary of Education. Dissenters from within the Workers Party accused him of authoritarian practices as an administrator. Opponents in the municipal government criticized Freire for the inclusion of two of his books as required reading by teachers preparing for the examination they needed to pass to attain employment in the Secretariat. With the goal of making education more democratic and relevant, he proposed a statute requiring that school principals, vice-principals and directors of pedagogy to be elected by the "school community." Those eligible to vote included "parents [of students attending the school], children of ten years and older, administrative staff (including janitors, maintenance, and security), and faculty" (Torres, 1994, p. 202). Individuals could be elected at the most for two two-year terms. This meant that after four years, administrators would return to classroom teaching. This draft of the statute was rejected.

Journalists followed closely these polemics and debates. Some published harsh critiques of Freire's ideas and goals. Condemnation of Freire caused influential allies to come to his defense, including Lula (then a federal representative), the famed Brazilian intellectual Florestan Fernandes, and the PT mayor of São Paulo Luiza Erundina.

Freire's work in the schools of São Paulo appealed to me. Through effective teaching methods, he sought to inspire *conscientização* among students. Roughly translated as personal or political conscientization, *conscientização* meant that an individual with no or little formal education could become informed about *their own* histories and *their own* cultures. In this manner, persons who resided in the *favelas* (the *favelados*) could be affirmed (De Jesus, 1962; Levine & Meihy, 1995).² By analyzing

examples from their own lives, persons living on the fringes of society could gain an understanding of the reasons for their economic and political marginalization. In the words of education theorist Tom Heaney:

Conscientization means breaking through prevailing mythologies to reach new levels of awareness--in particular, awareness of oppression, being an "object" in a world where only "subjects" have power. The process of conscientization involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming a "subject" with other oppressed subjects--that is, becoming part of the process of changing the world (Heaney, 1995; Freire, 1975).

Freire wanted education to provide viable tools to enable the political mobilization of the underclass. Education became an integral component of a cultural project supported by Freire and the PT: the creation of conditions that would facilitate community and political participation by those traditionally excluded. In this way, they hoped that the urban underclass could transform their lives for the better. A major problem was that educational practices and institutions, like economic structures, could not easily be reformed. Those who sought this socialist transformation of the educational experience found most of their plans undermined by conservative *Paulistas* (inhabitants of São Paulo). In the words of Professor of Comparative Education, Carlos Alberto Torres, "the dilemma [was] how to achieve procedural democracy while also pursuing substantive economic and political reforms that will enhance the prospects for economic democracy" (Torres, 1994, p. 213).

The Rocky Road of "Formal Education"

Freire's ideas about urban education spread far beyond metropolitan São Paulo. In the early 1970s, I attended a private university in Boston, Massachusetts. My experience as an undergraduate student was a disappointment. Some lectures and a few courses were stimulating. For the most part, however, I found it difficult to make connections between the ideas articulated by a professor in a classroom and the outside world. Few professors encouraged discussion. I learned how to write exams so as to receive top grades, but I knew very little. Most importantly, my undergraduate education did not provide me with the tools for critical analysis. Professors expected students to take notes and repeat such information on exams.

One attempt to tie my formal education in the university with the world around me was to teach Haitian employees to read English. From the 1950s, Cambridge and Somerville had become the home of several hundred Haitians who had fled the poverty and repression of their homeland. I encountered Haitians on a daily basis, as several labored as janitors at my university and in businesses around the city. When given the

² The films *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*) and *Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*) depict vividly the harsh social conditions and everyday violence experienced by inhabitants of the *favelas* of Brazil. See Tom Phillips, "Number One with a Bullet," *The Guardian Observer*, July 27, 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/jul/27/worldcinema>

opportunity to earn a few academic credits by teaching English, I seized the opportunity, even though I had no previous experience in the teaching of English as a second language. Most of the students spoke Haitian Creole (Kreyòl) and French. They wanted to speak, read and write English to help them to survive in the United States. We commonly read articles from *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and then discussed the essays. I learned much from this experience, including the impossibility of a middle class North American understanding poverty without having witnessed it first hand. Those friends from Haiti treated me with great patience.

Although I did not encounter Freire's writings as an undergraduate student, in my own way I was searching for the sort of insights which he provided. I sensed often that students and professors needed to embrace Freirean methods. Unfortunately, progressive theories and methodologies were hard to find. One reason for this lacuna could be traced to the discomfort felt in conservative sectors caused by the urban riots of the 1960s, radical expression (Students for a Democratic Society, Black nationalism, Women's rights, Chicano protests, Native American dissent, etc.) and protests against the Vietnam War. Little of the innovative ideas of the 1960s filtered into university curricula of the early 1970s. Another reason related to technology and science. In this period of the Cold War, a large segment of North American elites believed that social problems could best be resolved through scientific inquiry. University administrators and government leaders paid homage to scientists, engineers and technocrats. The humanities and social sciences were often viewed as "soft" disciplines associated with research not easily quantified and that seldom attracted funding equal to the "hard" sciences. Raising questions about corporate greed, US imperialism, who really killed John Kennedy or how best to encourage intellectual inquiry did not sit well in such a milieu. In receiving a diploma in 1974, I became, in the words of a Venezuelan intellectual, one of the "educated ignorant" (Fermin, 2007).

A decade later, in the 1980s, I attended graduate school. As quickly as possible, I wanted to comprehend the complexities of Latin American history, culture and economic development. As the revolution raged in El Salvador, I read extensively on the histories of Central America and Cuba and liberation theology in the Catholic Church.

Although Freire did not write about death squads and low intensity warfare, his ideas about personal growth and political discourse resonated with me. When it became clear to me that I wanted to teach and pursue research at the university level, I realized that Freire was someone whom I wanted to emulate. I knew beyond anything else I did not want to bore students. I was determined that the time spent in classrooms be relevant to students. I desired to make history come alive, similar to what the US historian Gary Nash espoused while engaged in the culture wars at the dawn of the twenty-first century (Nash, Crabtree & Dunn, 2000).

At present, I am a professor of history with an interest in pedagogy. My classroom experience includes secondary schools, private colleges, and private and public universities. I have taught history in the United States, Brazil, Spain and Venezuela. Since 1992, my home institution has been the University of Idaho.

Who are the students at Idaho? They are primarily white, which means that a majority have experienced certain privileges in their journey through life. "What sort of privileges do you speak of?" they quickly ask in response to such a statement. I point to a few of the benefits gained by being white in North America, including media portrayal,

hiring practices, who runs businesses and universities and the federal government, and the acceptance of whites into social circles less open to others (Morrison, 1993; Jensen, 2005).³ Students often react to such comments with hostility. They emphasize that they have worked at jobs to save money and searched long and hard for scholarships and loans. Any suggestion of having received special treatment or preferential treatment they consider to be demeaning and out of place. This topic commonly surfaces again during the semester, for example in discussions about affirmative action.

Students who attend the University of Idaho come from rural and urban backgrounds, some are well prepared for university studies, others need help with their reading and writing skills when they arrive. Numerous offspring of Mexican immigrants to the US attend the university with the support of government fellowships (College Assistance Migrant Program, known as the CAMP program). In fall 2007, Hispanic students numbered 493 out of a total of 11,636 students at the university. Idaho attracts Native American students from Idaho and the Pacific Northwest (137), and the African Americans who attend come mainly from the West (123). Due to its reputation, several hundred “international students” attend the university (481).⁴

An important lesson for me as a white man is to be sensitive to diversity in all of its manifestations. It is critical not to make quick judgments or forge an opinion based on simplistic impressions. While teaching at an elite private college in Hartford, Connecticut, I lectured before an audience of 100 students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. I have also taught numerous classes at Idaho composed of a near majority of white persons. In several instances, greater diversity could be found among the Idaho group than the Hartford group. This can be traced to class origins. Numerous students in Idaho are the first generation in their family to attend college. A few never had running water until they slept in university dormitories. Several resided with one parent or a relative and depended on food stamps to purchase supplies. By paying close attention, professors can affirm such diversity and use it for beneficial ends. Although north Idaho is a long way from Brazil and other fourth world environments, nevertheless Freire’s insights have proved to be invaluable to me as an instructor. Hundreds of student evaluations have affirmed the benefits of Freire’s strategies.

Engagement

For a classroom to be vibrant and alive, professor and students need to interact in creative and uplifting ways. A significant number of students arrive at US universities seeking entertainment. They reflect the culture in which they were raised and the parents who contributed in the shaping of their worldview. Many are conservative and some religious. They believe that they are consumers, and the professor is an employee whose main responsibility is to create a friendly environment.

Many students desire good if not outstanding grades as the way to advance in the most direct route to graduate school or employment. Intellectual discourse which

³ See “Deconstructing Whiteness: A Select Bibliography” at <http://www.uwm.edu/~gjay/Whiteness/Whitenessbib.html>

⁴ www.uidaho.edu

diverges from such a path is seen as a diversion. Indeed, an exchange of ideas that is not easily measured or poses difficulties in interpretation is viewed with disdain. Students know that at the end of the semester, if the professor has not performed or provided information in a suitable manner, they can write an anonymous student evaluation to express their dissatisfaction (Edmundson, 1997). Such attitudes add to the burden of committed professors seeking to create challenging learning environments.

Freire offers numerous tools to respond to such tensions. A great class depends on great content. Certainly there is a structure created by a syllabus which includes the title of the course and weekly readings. But a syllabus needs to be flexible, particularly in the humanities. Topics or themes of relevance inspire critical thought. What I like to describe as “intellectual space” merits inclusion. This allows for dialogue and reflection. Discussion among students enables them to share their perspectives and experience with one another without inhibition and without feeling they are being measured. If both teacher and students are committed to a course and its evolution, creative discourse can ensue.

A good example of allowing for a class to be shaped by student input is the theme of rural life. Idaho is a huge state with lots of open space, farms and forests. To provide a perspective, Idaho’s 83,700 square miles is almost two-thirds the size of unified Germany’s 137,900 square miles. Idaho’s population is 1.5 million people; Germany’s population is 82.4 million. Comments about maintaining a farm or harvesting crops or fighting forest fires surface in classes in various disciplines at the university. Individuals raised in cities often do not see the countryside through the same lens as a person raised in a rural setting. Indeed, individuals from an urban background often exhibit arrogance towards rural folk and values. This has deep roots in US history and the history of the Americas (Burns, 1980). It is important to examine such biases. Readings and discussion that demonstrate the complexity of the countryside do much to break down naïve ideas about small towns and rural life. For example, the availability, quality and transport of food crops tend to be of great concern for everyone, no matter their background or worldview.

It is really important to make connections among local, regional, national and international events, particularly for students who have never been outside the US. Alluding to topics covered in the media can provide useful connections and comparisons. In the Pacific Northwest, forests have been decimated due to clear cutting. Recovery of such forests has been slow. Environmentalists who have called for an end to clear cutting have been portrayed as anti-development, anti-growth and anti-capitalist. Such topics provide a great entrée into a discussion of how best to protect the rainforest on the east coast of Nicaragua, the cultivation of “Fair Trade Coffee” in Guatemala, and the water pollution caused by cattle farms in Idaho and the across the Americas. As an historian, I constantly emphasize the insights and tools of analysis afforded by comparative and global history.

Core Curriculum

For the past decade, the administration of University of Idaho has been committed to a core curriculum for all first year students. This is a year long course that seeks to prepare students for their university education and experience. Core courses encourage critical

thinking, verbal communication and writing skills.⁵ Each section has a cap of thirty students.

For seven years, I taught the course entitled Contemporary American Experience (CAE). The number of sections of CAE has ranged from four to six. Instructors of this course meet to discuss content and planning. This provided me with a great opportunity to work with professors from various disciplines, including English, Anthropology, Sociology and Media Studies. The major themes of this course include race, class, gender, a sense of place, family and religion.⁶

During one of the first class meetings, we take a tour of the campus. This is not the same sort of campus tour offered to visitors or prospective students. Instead, we look closely at buildings and statues. I always ask the group to ponder the messages expressed through architecture. For example, what do the stone heads of men with football helmets tell us about the history of a gymnasium and university? How do buildings fit into environments? How has the history and culture of war influenced decisions about the design and placing of statues?

During “the tour,” we walk through the University of Idaho Arboretum. With luck, we get a glimpse of the great blue or white herons who spend months by a secluded pond. We visit the numerous marble benches that have been constructed on the hills and in the valleys of the arboretum. These benches are paid for by alumni. They include the names of individuals and families and often quotations from well known individuals. One family chose two sentences from the poem “Woods” penned by the Kentucky poet Wendell Berry, alluding to the tranquility often found in the shade of trees. “I part the out thrusting branches and come in beneath the blessed and blessing trees. Though I am silent there is singing around me” (Berry, 1985).⁷ Often at that place we take time out to discuss themes related to trees, birds, the use of space, conservation of environments, water use and unplanned urban development (Berry, 2008). This is a short trip of 75 minutes, but this tour often brings good results. It provides an opportunity for students and instructor to share ideas in an informal manner.

During most class meetings of the core class, we sit in a circle. Such a circle can easily accommodate thirty persons. A circle makes it difficult for anyone to withdraw or hide behind someone. The instructor is sitting with the students at exactly their same level. Somewhere Paulo Freire wrote that he thought it best if the teacher sat at a lower level than the students in the circle. In this way, ideas or biases of an instructor would never be imposed upon students. Sitting lower than the students is not easy to do! Certainly, however, creating a circle that includes the teacher facilitates discussion among equals. Such a strategy ensures that the physical positioning of the instructor does not influence the way in which ideas are articulated or interpreted.

By choosing insightful readings, teachers can do much to enhance a class. Every year, the syllabi of the CAE courses are revised to experiment with different publications.

⁵ A description of the core curriculum at the University of Idaho can be reviewed at <http://www.students.uidaho.edu/default.aspx?pid=92364>

⁶ Syllabi for this course can be reviewed at www.class.uidaho.edu/Graden

⁷ The concluding sentences of the poem are “Though I am dark there is vision around me. Though I am heavy there is flight around me.”

We read essays and books, and then analyze them. Why have the professors chosen the reading? What does the author say? Why did he or she write the words and stories that we have read? How might the perspective of the author be biased? We delve deeply into such topics in our sections. These core sections offer great opportunities for students to learn new ideas. Many such ideas are complex and challenging.

The book *Mountains Beyond Mountains* inspired lots of discussion (Kidder, 2004). Not surprisingly, this work has been widely used at colleges and universities throughout the United States during freshman orientation week or in first year courses. We have employed Freirean logic to analyze Dr. Paul Farmer's ideas about health care, structural and economic impediments to reform, poverty, international aid and the differences between the first world and fourth world.

Another book of interest was bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (hooks, 2000). A feminist scholar who has written extensively on race and gender, hooks graduated from Stanford University in 1973 (Rogers, 2001). Raised in rural poverty in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, her first visit to Palo Alto included her first rides on an airplane, escalator and a city bus. While at Stanford, hooks read the works of Freire, Fanon, Gramsci and Malcolm X. Her experience at Stanford profoundly influenced her views about class.

In *Where We Stand*, hooks notes the difficulties posed for her of moving between different class environments, for example the elite culture of Stanford University and a working class town in rural Kentucky. hooks posits that consumer culture in the United States undermines the capacity of an individual or group to comprehend and challenge racism, exploitation and domination. The evolution and maintenance of class difference in the US is a great unknown. It is a topic seldom breached in US classrooms. Hence, we have deemed it imperative to include class analysis in a first year core curriculum course focusing on contemporary US culture.

Modern Latin America

Just about every academic year I teach an upper-level undergraduate course entitled Modern Latin America. It attracts between 40 and 60 students, hence poses different challenges from a first year core curriculum course that is capped at 30 students. In such a setting, it is impossible to create circles for discussion. Instead, students sit in immovable desks set in straight horizontal rows that go upward from front to back. In spite of the seating constraints, I have used Freirean strategies with great success in this class.

Modern Latin America covers the period from the independence wars of Latin America (1810-1825) up to the present. As such, there are a myriad of topics, events and personalities to choose from. The majority of students enter this class with minimal background in the history and culture of Latin America. Some have traveled south of the Rio Grande River, but for the most part these are trips to vacation resorts on the coasts of Mexico or on church missions. Hence, I attempt to articulate the major contours and goals of the course in the syllabus. I emphasize my desire that the class will be one of the most interesting of their lives. I also point out that the success of the course depends as much upon the participants as it does on the instructor.

Pace is important. The first two classes provide an introduction and overview of a few key events from the 15th to 18th centuries. I use every bit of energy to create an open and hospitable environment in the first week. During the semester, several classes are lectures, which I try to make insightful and interesting. By means of dialogue, I encourage comment and discussion at any time during the lectures. Various films and documentaries are also viewed.

Students are required to write three book critiques during the semester. These three are chosen from five or six books that are listed as required readings in the syllabus. On the day the critique is due, we discuss the book. I lead the first discussion. The first book on numerous occasions has been E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Burns, 1980). This historiographic essay touches on themes related to culture and economic development. For example, who wrote the histories of Latin America in the nineteenth century? Why such tension and bias between inhabitants of the city and countryside? How did European values influence the worldview of urban elites? Who were the rural folk and how did they view their environments? Why did Burns choose the title? Who was E. Bradford Burns?

A student chosen at random by me leads each of the subsequent discussions of the books assigned in the course. This means that during the semester on five occasions a student comes to the front of the room, sits down at a desk, and leads the class. I try to defuse any tensions or fears by explaining my motives for such a request from the first week. Obviously in my quiet way I am searching for a great candidate to set an example of how to lead a stimulating discussion. This is a strategy straight out of Freire's writings, in that it empowers everyone involved. Such an approach allows the students to analyze ideas of their choosing in depth. The word in Portuguese is *aprofundar*, to go deeply into a topic or theme. It has given me immense pleasure to observe the tangible results of student-led discussions. Some of the quietest individuals, those who listen but seldom speak, have proven to be sensational when asked to lead the discussion.

The readings for Modern Latin America are often changed. This enables me to observe which books and essays spark interest. I will note one that has proven to be a useful teaching tool: Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (Barnet, 1994).

Biography of a Runaway Slave is based on taped interviews with Esteban Mesa Montejo who, at the age of 103, most likely understood that he was the sole living runaway slave on the island and that his words and memories might be considered important enough to be published. For that reason, he delved into topics of particular interest to himself and to the interviewer Cuban ethnologist Miguel Barnet. These included forms of African religious expression and Montejo's recollections of life as a fugitive slave hiding for several years in the forests of Cuba (early 1880s). The book includes what appear to be quotes from Montejo along with sentences and paragraphs shaped by Barnet to provide a readable account of the life of a black man in Cuba during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Graden, 1996).

The book raises several questions. How did the interviews transpire? What sort of questions did Barnet ask? Did Barnet write down the exact words of the former slave Esteban Montejo, or did he reshape the story to suit his ends? The interviews took place soon after the Cuban Revolution of 1955-59. As an intellectual sympathetic to the Revolution, Barnet sought to appeal to the new revolutionary leadership. Hence, several pages are devoted to the heroic resistance of Cuban soldiers during the Spanish-Cuban-

American War of 1895-98. Strangely, the story ends in 1905. Given that the testimony is of a black man who survived the tumultuous events of the first half of the twentieth century, surely they ought to have included the widespread massacre of blacks that occurred in 1912 on the island. Most likely Barnett decided that inclusion of this dark moment in Cuban history would detract from the appeal of the testimony.

Biography of a Runaway Slave merits close scrutiny. The book has inspired rich discussion and insightful book critiques. The intellectually curious have sought out other testimonies to learn about a few of the controversies related to this genre (Arias, 2001; Guédez, 2001; Menchu, 1993; Stoll, 2007; Tula, 1994).

Politics and Opinion

Paulo Freire viewed education as a means of empowerment. Indeed, Freire believed that “knowledge is power” (Freire & Macedo, 1987; see also, Brown, 1991). Literacy and reflection can become tools for understanding politics, economics and history. Through engaged discourse, Freire hoped that all participants would benefit in an exchange of ideas. Raised in poverty in the city of Recife, he recognized that an individual with origins in one class often sees the world differently from someone of a distinct class background. He believed that if a person could listen to the “other”, really listen, he or she might be able to empathize with difficult social conditions faced by others. Such an approach calls for a thorough analysis of politics and uninhibited expression of opinion.

How does all this theory fit into classrooms at a rural university in north Idaho? It is striking the conservative worldview of a majority of undergraduate students. Most arrive and depart believing in two major ideas. First, that democracy is functioning well in the United States, and second, that capitalism is functioning well in the United States and around the world. These are words that young persons have heard thousands of times from various sources. Democracy (commonly followed soon after by the word Freedom) and Capitalism are words that inspire positive images. “Town Hall Meetings” as seen on CNN and Fox Network suggest that the voice of the common folk is heard by influential leaders. There are common-folk inspired progressive forces at work. Unfortunately, “special interests” and huge sums of money most often impede progressive ideas being translated into policy. Young people have been shaped by their televisions, parents, schools and churches to interpret current events through an optimistic lens. University curricula perpetuate such a worldview. Few students are willing to grapple with the way in which international capitalism has perpetuated economic inequality, poverty and racism in the US. Many desire that history and politics be simplified. I was one such student in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

A close examination of controversial topics and professors expressing their political opinions has caused alarm across the land (Horowitz, 2006). Rather than presenting a list of such topics and opinions, I will note one. In the summer of 2003, I offered a course entitled “9/11: History and Motive”. I attempted to provide various viewpoints through readings and discussion. I explained that I found it sobering that a majority of educated citizens failed to grapple with the question of why the attack occurred. It did not happen in a vacuum. Several of the conspirators were, using a common cliché in the West, “well educated”.

What might have been the motives for such a horrendous act? Might the origins and motives for such an attack be traced to decades of US foreign policy? Could it be possible that most US media and educational institutions present biased portrayals of international events and the policies of other nations? If so, why, or who benefits from the bias? Such questions are complex. They require a capacity to think critically and globally (Chomsky, 2001; Scott, 2008; Wright, 2007). These are exactly the sort of tools of analysis that Paulo Freire sought to develop through his writings and teaching.

Events in Moscow, Idaho offered a case study that we integrated into this course. On February 26, 2003, an estimated 120 US agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Homeland Security and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) appeared on the campus of the University of Idaho at five a.m. in the morning. They arrived fully armed in riot gear, after having landed in two C-17 military aircraft at a nearby airport. Agents knocked on the door of Sami Omar al-Hussayen, a Saudi graduate student in Computer Science and arrested him. Agents also visited the apartments of several other Muslim students. For seven hours, two FBI agents and one agent from Homeland Security interrogated a Pakistani Muslim graduate student. The latter provided tea to his visitors and called a professor at the UI Law School requesting legal advice. For two hours that memorable day, agents interviewed UI Professor of Computer Science John Dickinson, faculty advisor to al-Hussayen. "They kept saying his Ph.D. program [al-Hussayen] was a front and that the person I [Dickenson] knew was only the tip of this monstrous iceberg; that there was all this other information that was going to come out" (Egan, 2004; Schmitt, 2004, p. A20).

The US government charged al-Hussayen with conspiracy to promote terrorism and visa and immigration fraud. The prosecution claimed that al-Hussayen had provided "computer advice and assistance, communications facilities, and financial instruments and services [he had opened six bank accounts in Moscow, Idaho] that assisted in the creation and maintenance of Internet Web sites and other Internet medium intended to recruit and raise funds for violent *jihād* [terrorist acts in support of Islamic holy war] particularly in Palestine and Chechnya" (Egan, 2004). The first person to be charged in the US under provisions of the Patriot Act (passed in October 2001), the government employed an expanded definition of "material support" to terrorists to include those individuals who provide "expert advice or assistance to the cause of terrorists." Based on evidence gathered during a 30-month long investigation that included FBI taps on 20,000 email messages and 9,000 phone calls, the US government accused al-Hussayen of illegally designing web sites in conjunction with the Michigan-based Islamic Assembly of North America.

After spending 17 months in jail, al-Hussayen came to trial at a US federal court in Boise, Idaho. The prosecution called some 60 witnesses. The defense, led by David Nevin (who aided in the defense of Randy Weaver in a famous 1993 trial in Idaho), called one expert witness, a retired Chief of the Near East Division of the CIA named Frank Anderson. Anderson rejected the government claim that people are motivated to carry out *jihād* based on information provided at web sites. The jury acquitted al-Hussayen on the terrorism charges, but could not agree on three counts of false statements and five counts of visa fraud. The federal judge declared a mistrial, and al-Hussayen agreed to be deported back to his home in Riyadh.

Freirean logic encourages close scrutiny of power relations. In the days following the arrest of al-Hussayen, high-ranking officials throughout the state of Idaho defended the actions of the US government. Then governor Dirk Kempthorne stated in a news conference, “When this sort of thing happens in a state like Idaho, in a community like Moscow, where no one would expect activities like this would occur, then this network exists across the United States” (Shukovsky, 2003). The majority of students in our course (which met three months after the arrest of al-Hussayen) agreed. They claimed that the government had the right to read emails and listen to phone conversations to ensure national security. Two students wondered why al-Hussayen could not return to his apartment in graduate housing at the university to wait for his trial with his wife and children. Surely he was not a flight risk. This had been the original decision of federal judge assigned to the case, but one immediately overturned by a federal immigration judge. All of the students agreed that distrust of Arab students and the Arab world might make it difficult for al-Hussayen to receive a fair trial.

In an attempt to offer diverse perspectives about what had occurred, I invited a Saudi graduate student to speak to our class. We sat in a circle. He described his life in Saudi Arabia and reasons for coming to student in the US. He noted the fear felt by Muslim students in Moscow, Idaho and nearby Pullman, Washington (home of Washington State University) after 9/11 and particularly in the aftermath of the arrest of al-Hussayen. Several Muslim students had gone into hiding in the days after February 26 for fear of interrogation. Describing al-Hussayan as a devoted father who had publicly condemned the attack on the World Trade Towers, our guest noted his respect for al-Hussayen. He graciously and insightfully answered several questions posed by the students. He emphasized that like the Christian Bible, the Koran teaches non-violence. Our guest suggested that the radical views of some of the hijackers (15 of 19 were Saudi) did not represent the vast majority of Muslims. For most members of the class, it was the first time they had met a Saudi citizen or conversed at length with a Muslim. Although I doubt few individuals changed their opinions about 9/11 or the actions of the federal agents at the University of Idaho, I know (based on written student comments at the end of the class, to which I pay close attention) that most appreciated hearing the perspectives of this soft-spoken man, a Saudi “other,” doing his best to remain diplomatic and open in a hostile environment.

Visual Materials

I use visual materials in various courses. This evolved out my experiences as a student and high school teacher. One of the first great documentaries that I watched was “Harlan County” made in 1976. Directed by Barbara Kopple, this documentary covers a coal miners’ strike against the Duke Power Company in Kentucky. During filming of the strike, the director interviewed miners made ill by inhaling the dust of the mines. She deftly included footage of a company bureaucrat in New York City stating that there was no evidence of a connection between laboring in mines and black lung disease. From that moment, I knew that a documentary could provide great material for analysis and discussion. During graduate school, a sociology course entitled “Social Revolution in the Third World” provided a wealth of information about which I knew little. Although Paulo

Freire did not write about the use of documentaries and films for teaching (that I know of), he certainly paved the way for use of these genres.

After viewing a documentary, we discuss it at length. What are some of the difficulties in producing a documentary? Who paid for it? How does the director seek to provide a particular viewpoint? Is the content biased? What sorts of materials were used in making the documentary? A documentary raises complex questions about media, disinformation, police and military repression, and political economy (Graden & Martin, 1998; Graden & West, 1998).

A Final Reflection

Many students arrive at universities in North America confident in their academic preparation and capacity to learn efficiently. Technology has contributed to such a worldview. Computer skills and the ability to absorb information from websites are considered essential tools for education. Profoundly influenced by media, they possess a conservative and ethnocentric worldview, oftentimes not realizing it. What has become glaringly obvious is that a large segment of North American students is unable to process information from various sources so as to make informed decisions. A key dilemma facing professors is how to teach learning skills that in turn might inspire genuine intellectual inquiry. Paulo Freire offers several suggestions in this regard.

Freire emphasized that environments influence perceptions and learning. Making connections between a physical entity (a necktie, a house, a piano) and cultural expression (politics, historical memory, social hierarchies) can change the obvious into something thought-provoking and multi-faceted. Affirmation of everyday personal experiences (employment, hobbies, garbage collection, opinions about municipal government) can help to overcome inhibitions and draw students into discussions. Where students and professor are situated in a classroom can have a huge impact on the quality of the discourse.

It is the responsibility of a teacher to remain open to diverse ideas and values, and to encourage others to do the same. Paulo Freire wrote that

Educators who are mesmerized by the neoliberal pragmatic discourse are not educating in the full sense of the concept. When these educators accept the notion that what is important is the acquisition of facts without the educational background to critically analyze these facts, they produce a type of training that reduces students to narrow technical professionals. It is worth saying that an educational practice void of dreams, dissent, and pronouncements is neutral and accommodating (Freire, 1996, pp. 99-100).

A liberal discourse has filtered into higher education to a small extent. After the disastrous involvement of the US in the Vietnam War, Senator J. William Fulbright and others called for increased government support to enable US citizens to study outside the US. The five best-selling United States history survey texts are far more interesting and far more inclusive of social history than fifteen years ago. Leaders of influential medical schools have acknowledged that doctors need to know science but also learn how to listen

to the perspectives of their patients. Service learning, “outreach” and interdisciplinarity have become mantras across the land. Far more needs to be done.

Paulo Freire hoped to make learning a vibrant process. Whether it be a physics course at a university, adult education in a *barrio* or debates over public policy, Freire hoped for engaged dialogue. He believed that individuals possessed the capacity and will to communicate. He focused on creative approaches to learning. By embracing some of his ideas and techniques, he hoped an individual could gain greater self-awareness and understanding of one’s society. In this way, education could be a meaningful endeavor that provides the tools necessary to transform the world.

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