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Toward Pedagogies of Freedom

Solange de Azambuja Lira and William T. Stokes

Solange: An idea that permeates all of Paulo Freire's work, including this lecture and his last book *Pedagogia da Autonomia*, is that teaching cannot ever be separated from learning--both belong to a broader process of knowing. The production of knowledge is intrinsically connected to the idea of teaching and learning. This thought is affirmed over and over again throughout his work.

Bill: In so much writing in education, it is said that teaching and learning are inseparable, but there is a different quality in the way that Paulo Freire makes a commitment to teaching and learning as aspects of the processes of knowing. It is the epistemological element which seems to be lost when others write about the interactions of teachers and learners. They seem to be talking only about methods. It does not, as you said, extend to the broader processes of knowing and the production of knowledge.

Solange: Yes! Paulo Freire gives power to both the teacher and students. We often say that in conservative, traditional education the teacher alone has power, however I don't think that many teachers really feel empowered. Teachers are not aware of that knowledge created in the classroom and so they repeat the models that they were taught. In most cases, it's a "banking model." Their lectures are based on only what they read, what they heard from their advisors in graduate school, and so on. There is no creation of new knowledge. Nobody seems to have the power, and I think Paulo Freire does that -- he puts the power where it belongs -- in the classroom. (Editors' note: the "banking model" refers to education understood to be merely the transfer of pre-existing "knowledge" from teachers to students; in a sense teachers make "deposits" into the relatively empty accounts of the students; those deposits take the form of "cultural capital" which when accumulated confer the privileges of traditional education.)

Bill: I think that in most talk about teaching and learning, there is a focus on process and a focus on method in which the teacher is, in fact, viewed as a transmitter of existing knowledge. The teacher is not viewed as an agent in knowledge production either. The teacher is only a kind of clerk who is transferring information from the experts (through the textbooks) to the learners. Let me take the example of writing. We have many teachers who purport to teach writing, but they are not themselves writers. One would be reluctant to take piano lessons from someone who didn't actually play the piano, but we do have many teachers who presume to teach writing, but don't engage in the process themselves except in the most automatic sorts of ways. We have

teachers acting like clerks transmitting pre-determined material. There is no knowledge production by the teachers.

Solange: Yah. Paulo Freire reminds us that we have to be open, we have to be involved and engaged to learn. The whole concept of 'engagement' is French, you know the idea of being involved in the process, and being alert and ready to learn. And I think that if you think of banking education, you see the students, they are dead, and the teacher is the only one that is alert. Paulo Freire's idea of teaching and learning and creating knowledge is that we are all in the process, and teaching is not transference of knowledge to students; it's not putting packages of knowledge into the students' heads. He uses the word 'prontid<o' in Portuguese, which is a word used more often in the army, and it means to be in a state of readiness, waiting for something to happen.

Bill: In English, it comes across as alertness and openness. He uses the word openness several times, and also the terms "critical curiosity" and "epistemological curiosity." I remember he was uncertain whether or not it was an appropriate English phrase, but it certainly stimulated my thinking when he spoke of "conviviality with knowledge." The effective teachers are genuinely excited about what they are teaching and the knowledge that they are investigating continuously. Conviviality with knowledge seems to suggest a kind of delight and delight is important. Otherwise it's just something to dread.

Solange: Yes. At the same time, he talks about the qualities that the teacher has to have. She has to respect what her/his students bring and Paulo Freire has a lovely term. He says that students have a "provisional incompetence." This incompetency is transitory, and we all have been in that position. Teachers have to be aware that they are not superior to their students who are in a state that he calls "transitory" incompetence.

Bill: The notion of provisional incompetence, it reminds me that when we speak about children's passage through a particular stage, we should value it as both a moment and a passage. It is, in itself, right now, a proper thing for the child or learner to be doing, but it's also a passage to the next state. Therefore, there is no deficit implied in the moment, because it is also going on to the next possibilities. Later in the talk, Paulo Freire brought up the idea that education is directed toward something beyond itself. He used the word "surge" at one point. And, it seems to me related to this too; if there is a provisional incompetence, the way we deal with that is not to repair it, but to gather it and move forward.

Solange: Right. He also uses this word "directivity." Education has direction toward greater competence. It's really important. It's a process.

Bill: Right. It's a developmental process, not a remedial process. Yet, in this country,

the more the learners are from lower socio-economic groups, the more their education is viewed as remedial.

Solange: Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogia da Autonomia* about the notion of humility. The teacher, the progressive educator, has to be humble. He adds that there is one thing he is certain about and that is that nobody is superior to anybody. We need to be humble, we need to be able to listen and that is the only way. So, the question that he asks in the lecture, and that we also are often asked by our students or by other colleagues. Are teachers the same as students? Are they equal?

Bill: Right! It seems to me that in my generation the students were regarded as utterly inferior to the teachers who had full command of all it was possible to know, and our responsibility as learners was to acquiesce and to absorb. Later, there was a rebellion against that and I see in some of my colleagues the opposite tendency to ignore the fact there are indeed differences between the teacher and the learner. Those colleagues tend to reduce everything to a kind of utter permissiveness, where anything goes, all opinions are equal, or one can't dare to challenge a student seriously about something that student has said, because it might somehow or other diminish the student's self-esteem.

Solange: And that is something you know, it's another pair of concepts that people have trouble understanding. What's the difference between having authority and being authoritarian? Freire talks about this distinction in his lecture but he did not elaborate that much. However in his new book *Pedagogia da Autonomia*, he writes about how the teacher acquires authority and how different it is from authoritarianism. He writes that teachers acquire authority by having confidence and security, professional competence and generosity. He says that without professional competence, you cannot be a teacher. However, there are enough teachers with professional competence but that are not generous, secure or confident. Your confidence is given by your professional competence, but at the same time, you have to be generous and humble. Paulo Freire often thinks about education in terms of general education. He talks about parents and teacher, and he says that often when you have teenage children, for instance you know that sometimes they are making bad decisions, right? You know but parents do not have the right to tell the teenager " No, you can't do that!". However, parents have the obligation of being involved in the process of getting together with the child and telling the teenager in this case of the possible consequences of the decision to be made. However, we have to allow our children to make their decisions by themselves. They only learn how to make decisions by making them. It's a process. This example made the distinction between having authority and being authoritarian very clear to me.

Bill: Surely, any investigation of the authoritarian teacher and the permissive teacher would lead to the conclusion that there must be an alternative. What is that alternative,

however, what does it consist of? It seems to me, that is where Paulo Freire becomes specific. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, he criticized the authoritarian, which he likened to the banking approach where the teacher takes on a position of the absolute authority in the determination of what is to be known, what it is to be learned, and how it all has to be accomplished. He also critiques the teacher that he calls the "uncritical idealist" who reveals irresponsible permissiveness toward attitudes and practices. At the lecture, he said the teacher and the parent have a "duty" to exercise authority. The teacher and the parent are indeed more competent than the child or learner in many respects. The child as learner has the provisional incompetency. It is, in fact, the adult's duty to exercise authority, but that authority is a critical one; it recognizes a kind of dialogue between the one who knows more and the one who knows less about a particular subject or object of study, but Freire says again, I remember he said in *Pedagogy of Hope*, that the teacher "never cancels, crushes or hinders the development of the learner."

Solange: Yes. He talks about the concept of freedom in a way that it is beautiful! Freedom, you know, is a process. It's something to be, to become. It doesn't occur on a set date. For people to understand what freedom is, they have to go through the process. We have sometimes to make bad decisions, so you have to sit down and allow them to be made. Sometimes you see students going down a path... You know that path because you have been there already. You can't tell that student 'don't do that' because they won't learn. It's a process. They won't learn if they don't go through the process.

Bill: I think too, when he speaks of knowledge production, it is not just the matter of students finally getting what the teachers have in mind, but it is a matter of students progressively reinventing or reconstructing knowledge, understandings, and competencies. There will be mistakes, over-generalizations and refinements. So again, I take that "provisional incompetence" to suggest that kind of successive approximation toward greater competence.

Solange: And that's how you create knowledge too because in that process you create new things. Here we can see the difference between for instance, the progressive and conservative teacher. The progressive teacher is the one who is open to new situations and new knowledge, and the one he calls the conservative, the mechanistic teacher, the bureaucratized mind is the one that tries to stop change. The kind of mind that gets completely lost if you change the rules of a game in the middle of it. You are together with your student; you are creating new knowledge. Some knowledge may be new to you too and you have to be open to "oh, yes" and a banking kind of teacher, non-progressive teacher doesn't allow that to happen. They want to control everything. They don't create knowledge.

Bill: To use a linguistic metaphor: Freire suggests that under the banking approach the teacher, as subject (or agent), teaches the students, as (direct) objects, to shape them

into some particular form in the image of the teacher. Instead, Freire proposes that we speak also of the learner as a subject or an agent. As you said, one only learns to make decisions by making them. For the learners to become agents in their own lives, they have to be subjects (agents) in the engagement with objects to be studied. It is not so much that "teachers teach students," but rather that "teachers and learners examine objects and events in the world," so that they are both subjects in the investigation. This is subjectivity in the sense of agency. One of the great challenges to the critical educator is to respond critically when a student speaks out of the student's own experience. That student does have authority regarding his or her own experience, but it is important to investigate whether the student is being critical of his or her own experience, the internalizations of power structures and power relationships. That is, when to intervene? How does one respect the learner and also challenge, intervene, and possibly disrupt the constructions of reality that have been achieved to that particular moment?

Solange: Now, he talks about listening, but he talks about active listening. And he speaks of the distinction between "speaking to" and "speaking with." You might even be able to "speak to," but it has to be in the direction of "speaking with." That's very important. Sometimes it's necessary, as part of your role, to speak to your students. However, you always should be going toward speaking with, and he says that to do that you have to listen, right? Only by listening to students, the teacher can learn how to speak with them.

Bill: You mentioned the importance of being humble, and that's intimately tied with the idea of being a listener. One of the goals I place for myself as an educator, and also as a middle-class white male educator, is to try truly listen, and in listening I value my students and their experiences. If I listen long and well, then I can, in a sense, gain authority to speak. I can say, "now I want to suggest..." If I listen seriously, then students will in turn listen to me and perhaps be challenged by something I would say. Then, in that instance, I can first "speak to" in a sense of providing a kind of challenge, but really in the hope of "speaking with." Genuine dialogue involves that quality of "speaking with."

Solange: In the lecture, he talks about pausing, being silent, giving some time for people to speak. He says that silence doesn't mean that you are stopping your voice. It means that you are giving time for people to speak, to converse, to answer, to ask. You are not stopping yourself from speaking. You are listening. It's active listening.

Bill: He also talked about how he understood that while he was speaking and everyone else present was silent, he was conscious of trying to join his speaking with our silence in such a way as to make a conversation. He was not just speaking to an empty room or speaking to passive listeners. He was speaking with active listeners who even within their own silence are engaging in a conversation with what he was saying. I think that's

an aspect of recognizing that there are moments, there are times and places when as the teacher, the one with certain experience or authority, it's appropriate for the learners and for the others to listen... but it's active listening and respectful listening and the kind of listening that in fact should be critical and dialogic.

Solange: Exactly, and he put so much emphasis on this idea of listening, and he spent a lot of time talking about it. Actually, in *Pedagogia de Autonomia* he writes that the essential requirement for somebody to be a progressive teacher is to be able to listen. However, he points out that to listen you have to have love for life and others, to respect others, to have tolerance and humility. You have to have openness to change and the determination to struggle. You have to refuse failure and identify with hope. All these qualities are essential for a teacher.

Bill: He also talked about the formation of teachers, I think he used the French pronunciation "formation". The idea of progressive change, and elsewhere he talks about continual professional development. These are qualities, almost saintly qualities, that necessarily won't be all present when one first undertakes an effort to teach. But, the teacher also is developing; the teacher is also a learner, becoming a more confident teacher and achieving more of these qualities in engaging in that process of formation, as an ethical teacher. The whole process of self, as he said, has an aesthetic dimension. There is a beauty in teaching and becoming a teacher.

Solange: Yes, that's really important too. In the lecture, he talked about the content you know, a lot of time people say " I am a biology teacher. How am I supposed to be talking about all these 'things' and teach biology? He says that we teachers can't separate content from the ethical formation of the teacher. That is impossible...

Bill: We've already spoken about the distinction of "speaking to" and "speaking with", so the next issue is the character of our speech, or the quality of our speech. How our speech may give away some of our own inconsistencies... the tendency we have to reveal the discriminations we have internalized, the prejudices, the oppressive character of our speech that can betray us. Paulo Freire spoke at length about the example of the person who says "but."

Solange: Yes, he said, for example, "Do you know Antonia? She is black, but she's an excellent person." Paulo talked about the fact that we have to be aware of the power of ideology and the traps. We have to be ready--there are going to be traps. You have to be sure that there is going to be a trap around the corner, and you have to be ready not to go into the trap. We are under this power and we have to be aware of what we say.

Bill: I take it that what he means is that all discourses are invested with ideology. Since we internalized our discourses as young children before we can actively critique them, we carry around all those ideological formations that are embedded in our home discourse or primary discourse; so he is asking us to begin to critique our language.

Solange: And to not contradict ourselves; to be consistent and coherent with what we say we do and what we do. He gives an example: He is at home and somebody calls him (whom he doesn't want to speak with). He has a child near him, and he says to the child, "Oh, I'm not here." You are teaching the child that what you are saying doesn't have any relation to reality. It is a dangerous thing to do. We have to be aware; we have to be against any form of discrimination.

Bill: Yes, he talked about how we speak of the excellence of democracy, but meanwhile there is discrimination against many groups: women, African Americans, Chicanos, and others. There is a tendency to attend to what we aspire toward, but in doing so to ignore what is going on. We need to exercise our language, our consciousness; we have to analyze to sustain that consistency between our speech and our actions. He also said there is no way to kill an ideology, to overcome an ideology except through the exercise of another ideology. There is always ideology. It is an essential theoretical element in critical theory.

Solange: Yes, to teach is to recognize that teaching is ideological. Teaching requires that the teacher take a stand.

Bill: So many of the students I encounter in the elementary education program want to adopt a non-political position. They are there because they love children and they don't see that everything they do has political consequences, so they adopt what they think is a neutral position

-- a value-free position. What is very difficult to convey is that that is itself a political position. Solange: There is no such thing as a value free position.

Bill: Exactly, so when they adopt an overtly non-political position, what they are doing is supporting a silence on various matters that need to be investigated.

Solange: Exactly. We know that institutional racism is rampant; if we think we are adopting a non-political position, we are really adopting the ideology of those in control. That is the way the schools replicate the status quo.

Bill: I think that so many of the students have already internalized the dominant expectations for young women entering education. It is very difficult to suggest to them that they know as much as they do, that they have experienced as much as they have. They tend to have very low respect for themselves, certainly with respect to their intellectual capacity to think of themselves as intellectuals -- and that they have the obligations of intellectuals: that what they are engaged in is knowledge production. They reject the idea (that much of the public seems to hold) that they are little more than child care providers. They reject their low status (among professionals) in society. On the other hand, they are not willing to grab hold of the other possibility -- that they

are indeed intellectuals, that they are indeed engaged in the creation of knowledge, and that they are indeed engaged in that choice between replication and reconstruction.

Solange: They have to question the status-quo. The problem is that most teachers are white and middle class, and they are part of the system. They always have power, and they don't realize what it is not to have power. It is not a conscious thing. It is very hard to accept that because they have power they are taking away: the power of other people. By automatically having power they are making other people powerless, but they do not accept this. It is very hard to talk about that. For example, I brought to class information about SAT scores and its correlation to salaries

-- high salary, high scores and so on. I had a student say to me, "How do they dare to do such comparisons? Why would they ever think of doing such a thing?" And I said 600,000 scores were examined, and it was found that there was a (highly significant) correlation. It is demonstrated that the SATs are rewarding upper to upper-middle class white children. I try to present this information, but it is very hard. I find that to confront these issues is very important. I am teaching second language acquisition, and I spend a lot of time talking about unemployment, as well as the relationship of salaries and (skin) color, because they are going to need to deal with those issues in the classroom.

Bill: To those who are themselves already in positions of privilege, but they are so unprepared to accept the fact they are indeed in positions of privilege. It is so much easier for them to see that they are not making as much money as an attorney or a physician; they see their relative lack of privilege, but they are blind to the extent of privilege and power they already possess in relation to the majority of their students. Not seeing that puts them in the position that their own ideological assumptions, which include class distinctions, are perfectly obvious to the students.

Solange: Freire reaffirms that we cannot separate teaching from the formation of teachers. We have to talk about power, who has power, who does not have power, why people have power. Whatever we are teaching, we have to teach those things, because those are directly happening in the classroom. If you are not aware of them, you are going to be exercising power over your students, and you will not be allowing them to grow and be aware of what is happening.

Bill: Freire says that eventually it has to do with ethics. Again, so many of our students are totally absorbed in concerns about methodology; how to do something, rather than the investigation of why and with what consequences. That seems to them to be a waste of time; it's too theoretical; it is not enough about putting the blocks in the right sequence in order to teach some particular mathematical operation. It is so hard to convey that if you have thought seriously about the ethical, the ideological, the historical, then issues of method largely take care of themselves. And, method need not be raised into something so mysterious. I think that most teacher education presents

"method" as if it were excruciatingly difficult. That it is a tremendous mystery (especially in regard to classroom control and discipline). Whereas research, even competing research, indicates that there is hardly any difference between alternative methods. They all work or don't work to roughly the same extent. What gets lost in all of this is thinking about the ethics. Why are we doing what we're doing? The philosophy and history and ideological analyses are relegated to the corners, to the fringes. It is the course that none of the students want to take.

Solange: Exactly. At the end of his talk, Freire offers his thoughts on what is the meaning of education. When we think of education, he said, we think about knowledge to be taught, to be learned, to be created, and education is a cognitive experience, and he talks about dreams....I have been reading Kohl lately, a book of essays entitled *I won't learn from you* and Kohl and Freire are speaking about the same things. The dreams, the hope, it is so incredible. I was reading Kohl and saw that this is what Freire is saying: the hope and the beauty. The educator who believes that all students can learn and if they are not, then it is our mistake. We are not finding ways to teach them.

Bill: I think that one of the things that Herb Kohl has put his finger on is students' resistance to the institutional structures of schooling: schooling as opposed to education. Too often schools are not places where education can thrive. There is not the directivity that Freire talks about; that surge of education implying something more than itself. He talks about the importance of dreams, of utopia. If we are not aspiring toward that, then toward what do we aspire?

Solange: It is a powerful idea that there should always be change in education. That is what Kohl also says. We have to find ways to teach and to learn with students.

Bill: And the third point he offered in the definition of education concerns the beauty inherent in being an educator, in participating in teaching and learning; it is an aesthetic experience. If it is understood as an aesthetic experience, then teaching is understood as an art. That may challenge the obsession with method. Certainly there is craft, but art also transcends craft. Art has its own quality of always becoming, not merely reproducing. As each artist finds his or her own voice, each teacher in that sense needs his or her own voice and not just the replication of somebody else's methodology.

Solange: Each group of students we teach, we have to create anew. The people are different. It is artistic because we have to create something different, a new climate, new words...

Bill: And he talked about the theater of teaching. In serious theater, it is said that in addition to all the lines spoken by the actors, the final lines belong to the audience. It is the audience that has to engage with what the actors are trying to do. The audience has certain responsibilities. In this instance, our teaching is always new if we are engaging in conversation with new students.

Solange: Yes. He also has said that it is not easy to teach but it is possible. I think what he is talking about is (in part) that sometimes there is resistance. When you try to engage them in conversation, where they really have to be creative or come up with their own ideas -- where you are trying to exercise your authority by not being authoritarian -- there may be a great deal of resistance. Sometimes it is hard to keep doing it, but it is worth it. But it is not easy sometimes, because students come from the model where they are given everything and they just want to sit back and be filled. You have to keep fighting that.

Bill: I think he also said that teaching is to take risks. We have to find the moments to challenge the students. To move them out of that lethargy, that passive resistance (as distinct from a more active rebellion). They have been trained to be students, so they will act in the role of students. How we get them to begin to examine that is to challenge them in that role, even as we challenge ourselves in the role of teachers. There was one point he made very clearly the last time he visited -- the point about the obligation of the teacher to teach. It seems so simple, but what he was suggesting was that too often some liberal or some radical teachers in their effort to be one with the students are too permissive. Anything goes. They would be facilitators rather than teachers. No, it is still the obligation, the duty, the responsibility of the teacher to teach. We are coming back around to that distinction between speaking to and speaking with. There are times when it is necessary to speak to, but it is in service of speaking with. It comes to the question of possibility, of directivity.

Solange: In *Pedagogia da Autonomia*, he talks about language. We are aware that there is a language of the educated, a language of the school, and there is the language of the people. We have to affirm and accept their language. But we must also understand where the power lies. We have to teach the students the difference between the one and the other. They need to be aware of the differences. There are two languages, and they have to learn the other language to succeed. We cannot decide that from now on we are going to speak Black English in class, and we are not going to teach the other.

Bill: Right. That would be, as Lisa Delpit says, ignoring the language of power.

Solange: Ignoring the language of power. Paulo Freire makes it very clear that we cannot do that either. We have to question; we have to share the tools to challenge and be successful.

Bill: And, that brings us to his final point about what education is. There is no education without the ethical. Education is cognitive, it has directivity, it is directed toward possibility, it has beauty, and it is ethical. It has to do with values, with ideological understandings of power relations in our society.

Solange: I think that is the final message: the power of education - it is cognitive,

utopian, artistic and ethical. He did not really have time in the lecture to elaborate on the matter of ethics of the modern world. But, in *Pedagogia da Autonomia*, he writes about the ethics of globalization. It is the ethics of the market. It is not the ethics of what he calls "the universal ethics of the human being". I have some concern about the term universal, but I understand that he means. He is referring to the basic needs of men and women to have food and shelter. That is what he means by universal ethics. He writes about the ethics of globalization and the need to challenge that. That ethics is not concerned with men and women, but with the market. It is a very important part of his book.

Bill: I found that too in the earlier book, *Pedagogy of Hope*. He wrote at great length about those forces in our society that tend toward dehumanization versus those things which humanize us. The appeal to the market forces is generally an excuse to dehumanize, to justify poverty, to justify the exploitation of people and the exploitation of the land in the search for profit rather than in the search for community, of those things which humanize us.

Solange: The final message is that educators have to be aware and talk about those things. We want the education of the students to be a force for change. That is ideology again. We have to be aware of what is going on in order to fight for a better life for everybody. That is the message that Freire leaves with us: as educators we have the obligation to cause change, to make life better for everybody.

Bill: He has said that all of us are living our moments in history and understanding that historical process puts before us the obligation to choose. There is always the possibility of choosing, of transgressing. Reminds me of bell hook's book, *Teaching to Transgress*. That by transgressing we become ethical beings.

Solange: Freire wrote, "I am a teacher against the current capitalistic order; it has invented an aberration, which is extreme poverty under conditions of abundance." Teaching is engagement. That is such a powerful message.

Bill: As he said, being a teacher is not easy, but it is possible.

Solange: Yes.