

Postcards to Paulo: Enacting Critical Pedagogy in the Action Research Classroom
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Postcards to Paulo:
Enacting Critical Pedagogy in the Action Research Classroom

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> Only human beings are praxis—the praxis which, as the reflection and action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation.... It is as transforming and creative beings that humans, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods—tangible objects—but also social institutions, ideas, and concepts.
>
> —Paulo Freire, 1970, pp. 100-101

As a culminating experience in a three quarter Action Research sequence at the University of Cincinnati, a group of 16 students led by Professor Mary Brydon-Miller engaged in a collaborative reflection on the life and work of Paulo Freire. Our project was motivated by two concomitant goals: to engage in the practice of Action Research (AR) and to reflect on the impact that Paulo's work had on each of us in a creative and meaningful way. This natural connection between Action Research and Paulo's participatory pedagogy provided the impetus for our work. We were driven by our dedication to breaking out of the traditional mold dictated by the "banking concept of education" that continues to dominate many college classrooms. Our momentum came from a framework that reflected Paulo's notion of praxis, embodied the core values of action research, and recognized the experiences and assets of individual participants equally. This is our story.

Our Education for Critical Consciousness

Each of the doctoral students in our Action Research course came

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with varying levels of exposure to Paulo's work and unequal familiarity with the application of critical pedagogy. With the importance of "humans as praxis" as our model, Mary Brydon-Miller—our professor, facilitator, and friend—proposed the idea that the class craft a plan that would acknowledge the needs of all students and simultaneously incorporate and scaffold the ideology of theory within our class framework. Our journey of action research and critical pedagogy began when Mary was asked to consider submitting her thoughts to this special edition of the Journal of Thought in honor of Paulo. The idea of Postcards to Paulo was born as a way to pay tribute to Paulo's work in a manner that would most closely embody the central tenets of his work. And so we launched more than an assignment. We checked our fears at the door, clutched our trust in our leader close to our chests, joined hands, and took the first step into the deep water of Paulo's praxis together. And, in the spirit of action research, the process remained as important as the end result. Our dynamic and flexible framework contained the mechanism for forming a collaborative understanding of Paulo's theories, incorporating them into our everyday lives as educators and social justice advocates, and reflecting upon the idea of putting theory into practice. The following is a more detailed description of the action research process we conceived to reach our shared understanding followed by examples of our tributes to the work of Paulo Freire.

We Made the Road by Walking

Action research is an iterative process in which all participants are actively engaged in the process of developing a shared understanding of a body of knowledge. This precept provided the catalyst for our group exploration of the broad corpus of Paulo's work. We built our framework as we moved through it, redesigning it as necessary to suit the needs of the group and the diverse set of individuals that comprised it. We each selected to read one of the following books written by or about Paulo Freire: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970); *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Freire, 1974); *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990); and *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love* (Darder, 2002).

We then borrowed from each other's suggestions, based on our own individual pedagogical experiences, to create a process for exploring his work. Two specific processes were triggered from student suggestions, and both met our criteria for reflecting the principles of action research and Paulo's work. The first method, called the "Think Aloud" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), takes students through six domains of reflection: explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and

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self-knowledge. The second, called the "Jigsaw Method" (Aronson, 1978), created a template for sharing these reflections across a wide classroom audience. We hoped that employing these methods would take us beyond the interpretation of theory to a place of authentic knowledge about Paulo's work that would be powerful, meaningful, and memorable for all and equally acknowledge the value of each individual's perspective in reading the word and reading the world. At the inception, it was hard to visualize how it would all come together, but in the end, our instincts were correct.

We enthusiastically embraced these methods and experimented with them as we worked through the readings. Initially, the Think Aloud method was used within each "home group" discussion about the common book read by each of the group members. Each member in the group shared ideas and insights that they found represented in the readings. The group members attempted to reach consensus about important themes of the book, implications, and how ideas looked in application. Then, in order to share our book and mutually learn about the other three, we used the Jigsaw Method by sending a representative of our home group to a new heterogeneous "task group." The task groups consisted of one member from each of the previous groups so that each of the group members had read one of the four different books. Once again using the Think Aloud process as our framework, we informed our new group members about the books we had each read and the important themes and ideas that had been discussed. In the spirit of action research and of critical pedagogy, we had each contributed to the learning of others while simultaneously learning more ourselves. After intellectualizing about the books and reflecting on how each had touched our minds and spirits, we began to discuss ways to express our enhanced depth of shared understanding.

We returned to the idea of individually creating handmade "Postcards to Paulo." If you could send a postcard to Paulo telling him how his work has informed your practice and your life, what would you say? The end product of the postcard would act as a synthesis of all of our ideas into an artistic and self-expressive format. They provided a way for us to each synthesize our shared ideas into an individual piece of art that would represent and reflect an idea that had unique meaning to each of us.

Reinventing Paulo Freire through Artistic Reflection

We set aside a class session to create our postcards. On one special Monday evening in the early spring, we gathered to apply theory by experimenting with colored and textured papers, scissors, crayons, markers, used magazines, recycled materials, fabric, and glue. The diversity of our

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classroom once again came to the forefront as some students shared their apprehension while others relaxed comfortably into their artwork. We reflected on our own pedagogy and learning styles and each embarked on our own artistic journey with Mary's reassurance and the guidance of a former classmate and current art educator who rejoined our group to help us interpret our thoughts into concrete, artistic expression.

Students walked around the classroom to select the right materials to use for their postcards. We tried to visualize a certain aspect of Paulo's ideas that we found particularly illuminating or meaningful. We also talked with each other, offering ideas and suggestions. Some with more artistic talent physically helped others conceive certain artistic aspects of their postcards. For further inspiration, background music was provided. There was food. There was laughter. There was a real sense of camaraderie, support, and appreciation. Overall, it was a pedagogy that honored all students, and the ideas and abilities that they brought with them into the classroom. Mary shared that Paulo would be honored and proud. In this short class session, we had truly embodied his ideas of emancipatory education in content and in form. In addition to sharing our individual postcards with the class, we reflected on our experiences stepping outside of pedagogical convention and celebrated our collective success and individual contributions to the collaborative whole.

The postcards we created are representations of our interpretations and thoughts about Paulo Freire, his thoughts and theories, and how it all translates into our lives and professional practices. So, what did we each have to say? Each individual postcard and expression showed the diversity of class participants as people, and that interpretations and expressions are as varied as the participants themselves. Some people focused on a specific word such as liberation, or consciousness, or freedom, or education and others chose phrases that touched them in some way. All of the postcards contained images that either worked as the foundation for the whole of the artwork, or worked to elaborate and further express our underlying personal experiences in relation to Freirean thought.

The postcards were photographed and reviewed to see which would maintain their qualities as a black and white image for reproduction in this publication. Once they were selected, the artists were asked to write a testimonio (Brabeck, 2001) as a way to further reflect upon their experience. Like the Think Aloud and Jigsaw methods employed in the earlier phases of our process, we felt that the testimonio format would serve as a similarly meaningful method that reflected action research and Paulo's praxis.

Testimonio is a form of narrative writing about one's experiences with oppression and hegemony, like that which has and continues to

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accompany colonialism, and is recognized as originating with oppressed peoples in Latin America, a form of writing brought to the forefront of theoretical thought and action by John Beverley (2004). In searching for a simple definition, Elizabeth Fields (2006), a student in education at Wake Forest University, defined testimonio as follows:

> 1. "Testimonio is a story told by a witness who feels the NEED to tell the story because of an urgent situation."
>
> 2. "The experience of one person represents the experience of all of those oppressed."
>
> 3. "The point of the testimonio is to denounce the oppression going on or to set right official history—expose the voice of the once voiceless."
>
> 4. "Also called 'resistance literature.'"
>
> 5. "The memory of the survivor is very important. In these narratives the personal is also political."

Kalina Brabeck (2001) suggests that, "testimonio is a translation of the hegemonic discourse into the language of the colonized which privileges collective reality over that of the individual," and that colonized people resist being victims by placing the "responsibility for injustice …on the shoulders of those to whom it belongs, alleviating the guilt and shame of the speaker" (9th paragraph). The history of the colonizer is resisted by the refutational characteristic of testimonio. In a way, our efforts of writing Postcards to Paulo speaks to Brabeck's (2001) notion that, "the speaker breaks not only her/his silence, but also speaks the voices of those silenced through death and fear" (9th paragraph). Because Paulo is no longer physically with us, it has become our responsibility as educators and advocates for social justice to continue to voice his ideas and to provide testimonios about oppressive experiences of our students and ourselves.

A Poly-Vocal Testimonio

(created from contributions by all class members)

This project targeted the oppressive nature of some courses that epitomize the banking concept of education, where the all-knowing expert shares the gift of knowledge with ignorant students. This creation was so freeing. So many people around me helped in actually creating the work. Collaboration is such a big part of action research and the pedagogy of the oppressed and knowledge grows through community

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experience. Trust is necessary. All people have the capacity to work together as a community for participation and emancipation.

Holly's Testimonio

I was born with a wooden spoon in my hand, metaphorically speaking. I often wonder exactly how I can prove my working-class self in the face of multiple credentials. Should I go by the jobs my parents have held either in the past or at this moment (this is how schools define children)? Or should I go by the jobs I've held—mopping floors, cleaning banks,

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driving school buses, managing a convenience store, selling shoes? I refuse to hide my working-class self. It unites me and protects me from "takers" in the world and validates my allegiance with the majority of the population, the cooperative "givers."

I don't think I ever expected to have a silver spoon in my mouth, probably because I didn't have knowledge of such things until teenage and adult years. No, I definitely had a wooden spoon, grasped (or placed) firmly in the palm of my hand and curl of my fingers. Wooden spoons represent and are for do-it-yourself work and people; silver spoons are for the take-for-yourself people from those who do the real work. In my Postcard to Paulo, I am at the helm of my body and thoughts (the kite and string), and my conscious and subconscious is the wooden spoon battalion that backs me up as I shout, "FREEDOM AND LIBERATION ARE THE KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND ABILITY TO BE AND CHOOSE TO ACT, AS A NECESSITY!!!!" I shout it from fields of stability and sustenance. And my battalion is not strictly bounded or organized. You will not find straight lines, nor ordered, unison marching. You will find a formidable front that defies being powerless by not looking away. This battalion makes eye contact.

My liberating education, the kind that Paulo Freire worked for daily, occurred because I learned that I am allowed to filter the information that bombards me. Like a slotted wood spoon that drains unnecessary, annoying, or useless liquid, my mind filters my life, and leaves me with some really solid, chunky stuff to chew on and digest. In the process of my liberation, I am able to liberate other people and things in return. Although at the helm of the kite string, my most important intent was simply to get the kite into the sky; I can let go at any time. I can liberate and be liberated in one action and relationship with something else.

"Hope of liberation does not mean hope already. It is necessary to fight for it, within historically favorable conditions. If they do not exist, we must hopefully labor to create them. Liberation is possibility, not fate nor destiny nor burden. [The less hope there is for] the oppressed…the more peace there will be for the oppressors." (Freire, in Darder, 2002, pp. 86-87). Starting life with a wooden spoon in my hand represents for me not only hope and possibility of liberation, but also the knowledge that I can "labor to create" anything I damn well wish to stir-up or wade through.

Sue's Testimonio

Coming from China last year, I expected to learn more about education but I never imagined that I could have fun in learning at doctoral level. Mary's class had been different—I felt secure, being valued, and learned

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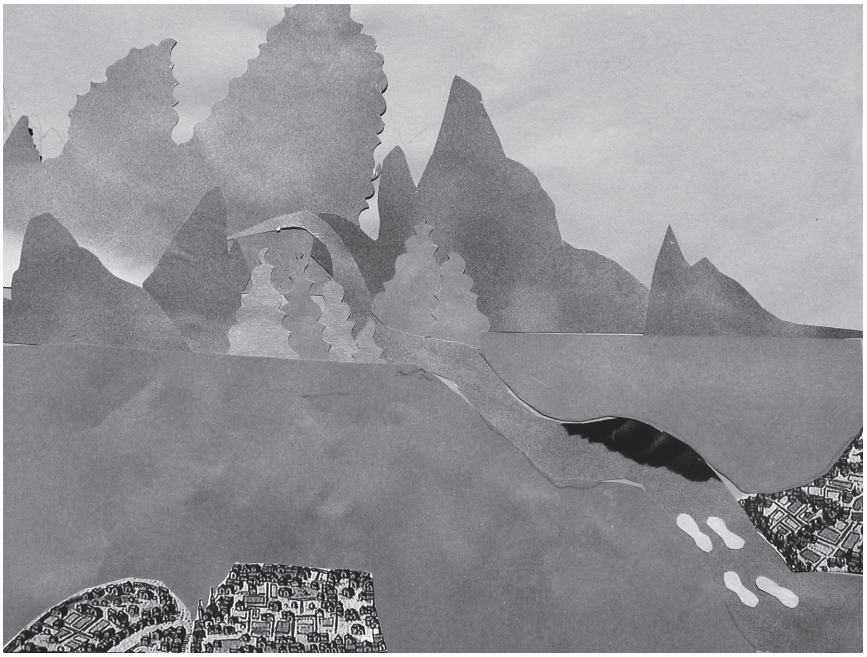

a lot. However, when Mary said we could make postcards to Paulo, I was not sure privately. Or to be honest, deep inside, I was scared.

I love the book I read, *We Make the Road by Walking*, but while many of the classmates soon started working, I didn't know where to start. I am not artistic at all. I could retell the information I got, but making a postcard was far from me. Fortunately with the help of classmates, Mary and especially our art educator, Amy, I finally decided to visualize the title of the book because I thought the title was very meaningful to me. It was an exploratory experience.

Looking back, the process of postcard making also represents a theme in the book: we just have to do it, trust ourselves as well as others along the way. As Freire (1990) said, "we cannot wait to create tomorrow, but we have to start creating" (p. 56). I started with hesitation and uncertainty, but I was not alone on the way. Surrounded by support and trust, I finally got over the idea that I could not do it. It was a liberating experience, a memorable moment in my life. It is fascinating that I did this in a class where Paulo's ideas were enacted. By doing a postcard to Paulo, I had deeper understanding of his work. By doing this as part of the whole learning experience, I had a better understanding of action research. It is real learning and learning can be fun. I want to share this with my students when I graduate and go back to teaching.

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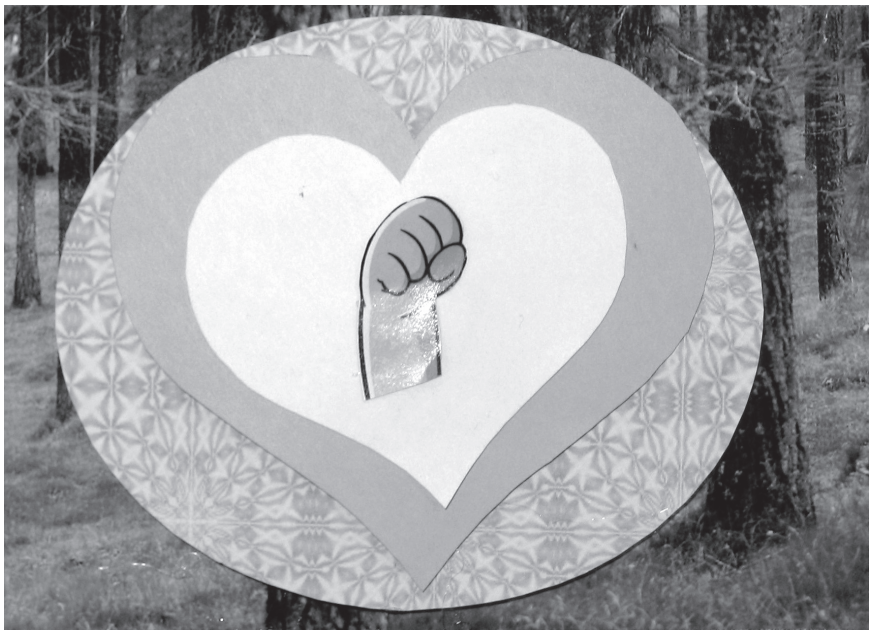

Bernie's Testimonio

When asked to reflect on my postcard to Paulo Freire I knew right away that the first thing I had to say was that I really perceived him as a rebel without anger. I do believe that Freire presents his ideas on education with great energy and emotion but he did so from his heart, with love for his students and his adversaries. This attribute is not a sign of weakness. It is a reflection of a human being living fully the philosophy of courage and tolerance that he teaches (Darder, 2002). The symbols presented in the postcard present the heart of a human being who is multi-dimensional, standing out in the wilderness that is the world with the strength and power of his convictions.

Pedagogy of the (no longer) Oppressed

In the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) begins with a discussion of the nature of oppression and the quest for liberation. He asserts that "we must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49) and reminds us that "this can be done only by means of praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). At the onset of our project, our simple goal was to

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develop an understanding of the key principles such as these that form the foundation for Freire's work. What we could not predict was that our actions would not only lead to this end, but also that our actions themselves would become a tribute to Freire's critical pedagogy. Our consciousness of his principles was raised and we found multiple ways to put them to work. We liberated ourselves by breaking outside of the normal oppressive molds of public education through our action research methods of understanding Freire's work. We transformed the "limiting situation" of pedagogical convention into a new framework for learning that places shared construction of knowledge at its core. In doing so, we feel that the best gift we can give back to Paulo Freire is our own praxis. By reflecting on his view of the world, we are further motivated to take action to transform it. And for that, the world is eternally grateful.

Note

[1] The members of the University of Cincinnati Action Research Team, in reverse alphabetical order are: Bernand Young, Janice Wyatt-Ross, Holly Winwood, Sue Wang, Jodi Stephens, Karin Schumacher-Dyke, Carri Schneider, Amy Rich, Sally Moomaw, Paul Miller, Helene Harte, Kerry Coovert, Debra Carson, Christina Carnahan, Mary Brydon-Miller, Elif Bengu, Johnnie Barmore, and Cecelia Aikhionbare.

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