

# Pursuing Civic Responsibility by Engaging Social Hierarchies in Critical Service-Learning

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As a form of democratic education likely to facilitate quality civic reasoning and discourse, critical service-learning is a timely and relevant subject for reflection in our undemocratic times.<sup>1</sup> Consistent with prior work on this topic, Tafadzwa Tivarange and Roudy Hildreth draw on Paulo Freire to differentiate between traditional and critical forms of service-learning.<sup>2</sup> The authors explain that Freire's contributions to critical pedagogy serve as a paradigm, which critical service-learning scholars and practitioners have employed to make sense of this instructional intervention, but a paradigm that is problematic because it insufficiently represents the complexity of social hierarchies operative in critical service-learning relationships, particularly given the increasingly heterogenous nature of college campuses. After troubling the dichotomous "oppressor" / "oppressed" categories put forward by Freire,<sup>3</sup> which Tivarange and Hildreth describe as "static dispositions," they explain how Pierre Bourdieu's<sup>4</sup> notion of social reproduction could be used to extend Freire's theorizing, because it "offers the kind of conceptual precision necessary to move beyond the fixed oppressor/oppressed dichotomy that has come to be associated with the Freirean approach."<sup>5</sup> This conceptual precision, they suggest, is especially necessary to respond to the intersecting identities of students engaged in critical service-learning who don't neatly fit into oppressor/oppressed categories.

This argument seems consistent with Freirean thinking for several reasons. First, one of Freire's key insights is that in order to "read the word" we must first learn to "read the world." Insofar as Bourdieu can help us read the world more precisely, particularly the world of our social identities and hierarchies, Tivarange and Hildreth's theorizing may help critical service-learning practitioners pursue transformative praxis more effectively, an outcome with civic implications which I will address further below. Second, the inclination to revise and contextualize Freire in creative ways is consistent with Freire's disposition toward his own work: "Paulo Freire, instead of lamenting the multiple and even

contradictory interpretations that his work provoked, welcomed multiplicity, hybrid understandings, and readers' carnivalesque intercultural translations and appropriations of his ideas and ideals."<sup>6</sup> So, contrary to the authors' claim that Bourdieu is "an unlikely source" to build on Freire "as a foundation for critical service-learning," their creative synthesis would likely be welcomed by Freire. Certainly, it is a logical extension of his theorizing.

As importantly, if not more so, Tivaringe and Hildreth's argument is consistent with the ethical concerns for civic agency that distinguished Freire's work. "[B]y making it possible for people to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects, *conscientização*,"<sup>7</sup> also known as *conscientization*, "enrolls them in the search for self-affirmation and thus avoids fanaticism."<sup>8</sup> To be a "responsible Subject" inheres both *consciousness*, an awareness of how the world is and one's place in it, and *conscience*, a capacity to ethically assess one's reality.<sup>9</sup> Together, this allows a person to act deliberately, expressing civic agency as a responsible Subject, to transform their world for the better. Such action, because it resists hegemonic forces that seek to maintain systemic oppression, requires civic courage.<sup>10</sup> To the degree that Tivaringe and Hildreth's pedagogical intervention seeks to enhance critical service-learning practitioners' capacity to read their world and thereby act as responsible Subjects in it, it aligns with the civic aims of Freire's theorizing. These civic aims are explicitly related to personal and group identity in Freire's theorizing—civic action helps one "search for self-affirmation," after all. This points to a feature of Freirean theorizing where I think, in trying to critique the current critical service-learning framework, which Tivaringe and Hildreth assert "merely overlays social identities such as 'students of color' and 'whites' onto an already bifurcated *oppressor/oppressed* dichotomy," they give Freire short shrift.

Freire's notions of identity and social hierarchy inhere more complexity and dynamism than the static binary Tivaringe and Hildreth suggest. Take, for example, the notion of duality. "The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being . . . . They are at one and the same time *themselves* and *the oppressor* whose consciousness they have internalized."<sup>11</sup> Duality is an internal identity conflict faced by those in an oppressed group, because they have been taught that to be fully human is to be like their oppressor. Thus,

as they try to live into their authentic identity, they are obstructed by their dual fear of and socialized desire to emulate their oppressor. This duality is immediately relevant to the struggle that Tivaringe and Hildreth suggest Students of Color face when engaged in critical service-learning under current frameworks; students who hold intersectional identities, at once part of the oppressed and oppressor groups, may find it more difficult to understand their social location, and derivative power and responsibility, relative to the communities where they are engaged in service, particularly when those communities share social identities (for example, race) with them. Accordingly, while they make a compelling case that students, especially Students of Color, would benefit from a more complex framework that draws on Bourdieu, Tivaringe and Hildreth would be more successful in extending the existing framework by integrating into it the fullness of Freire's theorizing, including his notion of duality.

Such complexity would also be consistent with Freire's pedagogical methodology. That methodology was anchored in *praxis*, action and reflection directed toward social change, and began with inquiry into a specific community's relationships with the world. To facilitate adult literacy education, an instructional "program" was prepared that responded to a local community's specific reality.<sup>12</sup> Put differently, Freire differentiated instruction according to students' social identities. Tivaringe and Hildreth recommend something similar in the conclusion of their paper, suggesting that their extended theoretical framework for critical service-learning could contribute to "First, training undergraduates to be more aware of and to be able to reflect on how everyday micro-interactions can reify or disrupt hierarchies. Second, a differentiated curriculum based on students' levels of awareness of issues of power and privilege better equips students to recognize micro-interactions of difference." Indeed, it does, which is likely why Freire recommended a similar course of action half a century ago, albeit for a less privileged set of students.

While there is much in Freire that could (and should) yet strengthen their work, fundamentally, Tivaringe and Hildreth make an argument that is compelling and relevant for our undemocratic times. Not only is critical service-learning an effective pedagogy to prepare college-age students for civic life in a culturally pluralistic and politically unequal society, like we experience here

in the U.S. today, but it is also an effective instructional intervention for K-12 students, including those from marginalized backgrounds.<sup>13</sup> Given the political resistance that many critical educators face today to delivering instruction that is culturally responsive and interrupts oppression, it seems not only responsible but necessary that we equip them with better tools to facilitate this essential civic work.<sup>14</sup> Using Bourdieu to extend Freire, and the critical service-learning theorizing he grounds, is one way we might support such efforts.

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## REFERENCES

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- 6 Gustavo Fischman and Sandra Sales, "The Freirean Factor," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 27, no. 4 (2018): 440.
- 7 "The term *conscientização* refers to learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (translator's note): 35.
- 8 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 36.
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- 10 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, trans.

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11 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45 (emphasis added).

12 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 45.

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