

Freire and Whitehead: Any Difference? Yes.

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Freire and Whitehead: Any Difference? On its face, this is a startling title with an easy answer: Yes. The reverse question, Freire and Whitehead: Any Similarity? is less startling, but probably equally easy to answer. Yes. However, in good scholarship, as in life, the devil is in the details. Robert Roemer quickly concedes the many important differences between Freire's and Whitehead's educational theories. The bulk of the essay is devoted to arguing that, despite these differences, there are important similarities in these two views; similarities important enough to claim that Freire and Whitehead share a "common framework in their thought about education" and have "the same substance without the political overhead." Much of the essay involves a comparison and interpretation of textual passages and thus the plausibility of these claims depends upon the cogency of these arguments. My response will consider several of these in turn.

BANKING METAPHORS

Freire uses a banking metaphor to describe oppressor education, a pedagogy that stifles creativity and agency. Whitehead uses a metaphor of depositing to describe passive pedagogies that rely on instilling inert ideas that can not be transformed into useful tools for dealing with the world. While this is true, this basic vocabulary is probably the most common way that most educational writers of the last 150 years or so have distinguished between traditional and modern education. I suppose one could make a research program out of this (Whitehead/Freire vis-à-vis Rousseau, Froebel, Pestalozzi, Dewey, W.H. Kilpatrick, John Holt, Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, Henry Giroux, bell hooks, etc.), but this is uninteresting in any philosophical sense and can not be the point of the essay. Something important is missing. While Freire and Whitehead share this modern vocabulary, Whitehead's pedagogy is, according to Roemer, "focused on the individual and without Freire's reference to dealing with others." This is obviously a crucial difference. For Freire, the whole point of agency is that it is grounded in and depends upon a transformation of a set of power relationships and thus the very possibility of liberating education depends upon a particular practice of dialogue. The whole point of the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is to get to the claim that the correct educational method is dialogue. Roemer writes, "for both thinkers, good pedagogy enables students to reach an understanding of their existence adequate to managing their life circumstances." This is a serious misinterpretation of Freire whose aim is not equipping learners to manage their circumstances, but rather empowering them to transform them. Roemer writes, "the politics of oppression seem wholly absent from Whitehead's writings on education" and further "Freire explains bad pedagogy as a function of social imposition, Whitehead simply finds the human failing of laziness." A correct analysis, well stated, which argues for a fundamental difference in the root unit of analysis between these two educational writers. After all, we could

argue that Freudian and neurobiological therapists both share the common aim of helping people lead satisfying and productive lives, but still recognize that their diagnoses and the prescriptions make it necessary to distinguish them as theoretical positions.

WATER METAPHORS

Roemer notes that both Freire and Whitehead use “water metaphors” to describe learning. Perhaps true, but the differences are startling. Freire writes that pedagogy begins with “individuals who were submerged in reality, merely *feeling* their needs, emerge from reality and perceive the *causes* of their needs.”¹ Whitehead writes that an idea must be utilized by “relating it to that stream, compounded by sense perception, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life.” For Freire, problem-posing pedagogy is designed to help the oppressed *emerge* from an oppressor reality in which they are submerged, to become conscious of their own reality, to become conscious that they are *merely* feeling their needs, and to become conscious of the *causes* of their needs. For Whitehead, go with the flow, relate ideas to the stream of perceptions and feelings surrounding and shaping us, and adjust to them. So, yes, both Freire and Whitehead ground pedagogy in a historical moment. For Freire, this reality is the source of oppression and must be overcome through consciousness and action for transforming the world. For Freire, the dependent variable in an educational encounter is the transformation of the world. For Whitehead, the starting point is the background stream to which we need to learn to adapt, while action is an expression of an individual’s potential within the environment as given.

TEACHERS AND DEMOCRACY

Roemer suggests a similarity in Freire’s and Whitehead’s views of the teacher as well. Freire writes that the student-teacher contradiction must be overcome so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. In an authentic and liberating educational encounter, both are conscious of being unfinished actors in a struggle for shared freedom. Whitehead describes a professor as an “ignorant man thinking; utilizing his small share of knowledge.” Ignorance is an epistemological claim; a claim of humility. Teachers do not know it all, no one does, and thus are always learning, but there is no corresponding claim from Whitehead about students being teachers from whom they not only might, but also ought, to learn. Freire’s language of being “unfinished” is an ontological claim, a claim about the need to surpass the present to pursue our vocation. Thus, it is a claim from necessity. This is Freire’s central idea: in oppressor cultures there are only two things to be — oppressor or oppressed. Both are trapped, no exchange of positions will help, thus a new category of existence must be created. Freire writes of a re-birth for both oppressors and oppressed to pursue their ontological vocation to become human.

Roemer compares Freire and Whitehead on democracy and teaching. Freire writes that every phase of the teaching encounter, the content, the process, and the setting, must be democratized through negotiation between student and teacher. Though Whitehead does not use the concept of democracy as a model for teaching, Roemer believes he joins Freire on this issue as well. The textual passage used here

to make this case is telling. Whitehead writes to teachers: “Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever power you are strengthening in the pupil must be exercised here and now, whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now.” I read this quote as such: Tell your students why the subject matter you have chosen is interesting. Strengthen their powers by the work you give them to do. Impart and exhibit the possibilities your teaching has for them. The contrast here could not be clearer. Whitehead writes of a unilateral transmission from expert to novice, master to mastered. Yes, there is recognition of relevance and usefulness, but they are judged, imparted, and controlled by the teacher. In contrast, Freire is dialectical, with the content, form, and aim of the educational encounter negotiated and reconstructed in dialogue between fellow teacher-learners.

PEDAGOGY FOR WHAT?

In the section “Pedagogy for What?” Roemer makes it clear that Freire’s educational theory is aimed at the transformation of society. What does this mean? Freire is ambiguous here. In my view, he is read best, not as a social class theorist or some late twentieth century variant of Marxism, but as a post-colonialist asking probing questions less about the causes of colonialism than about its consequences and the possibilities for human liberation without violence. Here, colonialism is not merely geo-political, but interpersonal, existential, and % most importantly % pedagogical. Freire is not against difference in social status. The question is where the status comes from, how it is negotiated, and how it is interchanged. For Freire, oppression is difference instantiated in ontology. Our human vocation is to emerge from ontological difference through dialogue and love. Whitehead bemoans the toiling millions and their discontent, as well as the unhappiness of their bosses, but offers a mystical ideal of a world where everyone can experience moments of intellectual joy. Roemer captures this difference neatly: Freire offers a pedagogy of the oppressed; Whitehead offers a pedagogy of the bored.

CONCLUSION

There are other issues to discuss. Roemer thinks Freire’s use of “comradery” to describe the relationship between teacher and student and Whitehead’s sense of “complementarity” express the same concern though differing in “inflection.” Perhaps I do not know what “inflection” means here, but I am quite certain these two terms describe kinds and qualities of relationships that have some similarities, but significant, definitive differences. Roemer does not argue that Freire and Whitehead have no differences. However, he does argue for a number of similarities through interpretations I believe are forced and unconvincing. And the larger claim, that even with their differences, Freire and Whitehead share a “common framework in their thoughts about education” is, in my view, not substantiated in this essay.

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).