

# The roots and process of social action

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*Abstract: This paper discusses the theoretical roots of social action in the work of Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire, who proposes an alternative to conventional educational methods, based on the concept of problem posing education, which entails mutual learning and dialogue between students and teachers. For Freire, the notion of dialogue is based upon the principles of equality and critical thinking, which enables oppressed people to challenge their existing circumstances. The eclectic sources of Freirean philosophy and the challenges of other writers to aspects of his thought are examined. The paper describes how members of the Centre for Social Action have translated the theories of Freire and other writers into a set of principles and the social action process, which have been used as the basis of work in the community with a wide range of disempowered groups.*

*Key words: Paulo Friere, social action, participation, empowerment*

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## **Paulo Freire**

To unravel some of the concepts surrounding social action as both a model and a process, it is first necessary to examine some of the theories and philosophies that have influenced it. The most fundamental of these lies within the work of Paulo Freire.

Freire was an adult educator in South America. In 1964 he was exiled from his native Brazil during a military coup as a result of his work with the rural poor. He continued his work in Chile and went on to teach at Harvard University before returning to Brazil to become the Minister of Education in Sao Paulo. (Institute of Paulo Freire) The core of his philosophy was a critique of traditional educational methods that denied the experiences of students and which at its heart is a consensual form of control. Ellul (1964) suggests that traditional methods of education have a number of different features, which aim to adapt learners to consensual controls. These are: career choices (specialization); authority (dependency); and the good life (consumerism). He goes on to argue that school also encourages competition (the rule of the fittest), whilst at the same time maintaining order (social conformism).

Freire (1972) was critical of this form of what he termed 'banking education' which he believed negates the experiences of students and as such holds no relevance for them. He goes on to describe the role of the teacher in the traditional educational setting:

His task is to 'fill' the student with the contents of his narration – contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them their significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated and alienating verbosity. (p.52)

What Freire is arguing is that the curriculum presented to students within a traditional educational setting, is out of context for them and meaningless in terms of their own lives. Freirian philosophy also maintains that many of the experiences of students are rooted in oppressive structures. As Heaney (1995) says:

Curriculum which ignores racism, sexism, the exploitation of workers and other forms of oppression at the same time supports the status quo. It inhibits the expansion of consciousness and blocks creative and liberating social action for change. (p.1)

Freire's pedagogy, seeks to change the social order and to bring this about through unity and common experience. The 'curriculum' is transformed into an open forum which places teacher and student on the same level and which on the one hand aims to produce a critical consciousness in people, whilst at the same time they learn the skills that they need to transform their own lives.

Taylor (1993) suggests that Freire was influenced by many different schools of thought, ranging from Aristotle to traditional Catholic theology and international Marxism, as well as many diverse philosophies and theories of education. He further maintains that Freire often 'poaches' ideas and blends them into his own ideas, using them to support his own arguments and observes that,

the text that Freire offers is actually a complex tissue of his own work and the threads of other pedagogies and philosophies which he has woven all together across the loom of his experience and his genius. (p.34)

## **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

The main tenet of Freire's pedagogy can be seen within a letter he wrote to literacy teachers in Chile in 1971, where he stated that,

To be a good liberating educator, you need above all to have faith in human beings. You need to love. You must be convinced that the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people, never their domestication. (in Maclaren and Leonard, 1995, p.25)

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) he expands upon this theory of banking education and goes on to suggest that it mirrors many elements of an oppressive society. It regards humans as manageable beings who are easily manipulated and who are expected to adapt. The more they adapt, the easier they are to oppress. Finding it hard to keep themselves and their families, they are far less likely to come

together to fight against the system that oppresses them.

Freire (1972, p.61) proposes an alternative which he terms problem-posing education, which is based on dialogue. He continues: 'Through dialogue, the teacher of the students and the students of the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teacher.' This relationship is based upon mutual learning where the teacher recognizes that he learns from the students just as much as they learn from him, both growing as part of this process.

The objective of this problem posing education is that it enables people to become critically aware and allows them to unveil reality. Once they have an understanding of the world and of themselves as subjects within the world, they develop the power to transform it. In other words, they come to a critical understanding of the means through which they are oppressed and as a group they take action to change it. Most importantly people begin to ask the question 'why?' Freire maintains that this is the question the oppressors do not want the oppressed to ask, for if they do, it will mean a challenge to their power.

For Freire, the entire notion of dialogue is based upon equality, for one is not able to enter into a dialogue if one sees oneself as superior, or the group that has the monopoly on knowledge and truth, or if one is afraid of being displaced. As stated at the beginning of this section, Freire maintains that to enter into dialogue one has to have faith in humankind and one must also be a critical thinker, ready to unwrap the structures that hold the oppressed down, and with them challenge and transform that which keeps them in their place. If one is a naive thinker, one sees oneself as an object in the world that has to adapt; a truly critical thinker believes that the important thing is to change that reality. Critical thinking perceives the universe as, 'a domain that takes shape as I act upon it.' (Furter, 1966, p.26 in Freire, 1972, p.73).

Without critical thinking, Freire maintained that the oppressed remain within a culture of silence. The dominant members of society control the oppressed and alienated and, 'prescribe the words to be spoken by the oppressed through the control of the schools and other institutions, thereby effectively silencing the people.' (Heaney, 1995, p.9). Freire explores this culture of silence in global terms and argues that in so-called under-developed colonized countries it can be seen in its stark reality.

For Freire, the means through which people can break out of this culture of silence is the process of see-judge-act. It is through action and reflection and the dialogue that is part of that, that people can make sense of their situation and be enabled to take steps to transform it. However there are flaws in the approach which are both practical and ideological. Blackburn (2000) suggests that fundamentally Freire makes several assumptions concerning the 'oppressed'. Firstly he argues that Freirean pedagogy assumes that the oppressed are powerless, when in fact it is difficult to measure the extent to which people do not have power. The most oppressed groups in society could be said to have certain power in that they have the ability to sabotage and they have the option of non-cooperation. Blackburn (2000) uses the oppression of the Guatemalan Indians to explore this point. He maintains that whilst they were suffering extreme and often violent forms of discrimination, they developed a 'culture of resistance' based upon their own experiences. As Blackburn (2000) argues and as has been argued above, Freire used the theories of many writers and philosophers to develop his pedagogy and these were based largely upon leftist European schools of thought and traditions. Blackburn, (2000, p.11) concludes by arguing that within this perspective, 'Freirean and other participatory activists have tended to dis-value traditional and vernacular forms of power.'

There are also certain issues surrounding the extent to which Freire neatly categorizes people as either oppressed or oppressors and it would seem that in a complex world it is not as easy to split people into such distinct groupings (Blackburn, 2000). For example, in some contexts a man may be able to oppress a woman, but within a different setting, such as within the work context, the woman may possess more power than the man because of her status. Similarly a black man and a white man may both have oppressor characteristics, but a white man will be less oppressed because he lives within a society that is fundamentally racist. In this way it is feasible to suggest that people can be oppressors and oppressed at the same time but in different situations.

On a more practical level there are further problems within Freire's pedagogy and these issues concern the role of the facilitator or 'teacher-student'. Wuyts et al (1992) suggest that Freire is never actually clear who the facilitators will be. He speaks of a revolutionary

leadership but does not specify of whom it will comprise and the extent to which they will develop their own critical consciousness. Freire also speaks of the facilitators as having very special qualities, in that they need to be able to allow the group to act based upon their own needs and interests and should not impose their own agenda upon the group. Blackburn (2000) argues that this presents a problem on different levels. In the first instance he maintains that the leader will have his own perceptions of power and oppression so that when he goes to facilitate a group he goes in with an agenda based upon his or her understanding. Secondly, the group that he goes to work with may perceive their situation very differently, they may not label themselves as powerless or oppressed and may not want to use the empowerment model of the facilitator.

Also, in terms of the educators, there are further difficulties relating to the recognition of their own position of power. It is possible that facilitators may fail or be unable to, 'strangle the oppressor within them, and may consequently misuse their position to manipulate those over which they (potentially) have so much power.' (Rahnema, 1992, p.124) Freire places many expectations upon the educator, who is at the end of the day human and, as such, entirely capable of manipulating or abusing power whether they are conscious of it or not.

Groups and organisations, particularly within the development context have used Paulo Friere's methods to work with oppressed people. Based upon their own professional and personal backgrounds, they will work with people in different ways and will develop the system to suit their own contexts. The Centre for Social Action is an example of this. Whilst they have been heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, the CSA has its own style of working.

As well as Frierean thought, the Centre has been influenced by the disability movement, (Oliver, 1990; 1992), black activism (Cress Welsing, 1991; Hooks, 1992) and feminist movements (Dominelli and McLeod, 1989; Hudson, 1989). Based on all of these influences the CSA:

Opposes models based on individual pathology that have dominated social welfare. Rather social action concentrates on the circumstances in which people find themselves. Individual pathologies are no substitute

for serious consideration of the social condition of service users. (Fleming and Ward 2004 forthcoming)

Over the years the CSA has developed its own individual principles which guide its work. It is therefore necessary at this point to define social action as it is used by the CSA and to place it within its historical context. Finally the process of social action itself will be presented and explored.

## **Social action**

Within its British context self-directed groupwork, or social action, is based first and foremost upon anti-oppressive principles and the notion that people can gain collective strength through working in groups. Mullender and Ward (1993) maintained that as a result of consecutive Conservative governments, an approach was needed within a social and community work setting, that took account of the problems that people experienced as a result of oppressive social policies. They saw this approach as being openly collective with a value base that embraced all the principles of anti-oppressive working. Mullender and Ward (1991) also recognize the work that has been undertaken with feminist and anti-racist approaches and that rather than seeing these as separate struggles,

Male as well as female workers must find a practice which supports the women's movement and white practitioners, as much as black, have a responsibility to work in a way which supports the activists' struggles. (p.10)

In this way practitioners are asked to 'combine their efforts with those of oppressed groups without colonising them.' (p.11)

Social action as it is used by the CSA, began its development during the 1970s. Youth work during this decade was based upon models of social education. Arches (2001, p.1) argues that problems facing young people tend to be attributed to, 'individual pathology or the breakdown of social norms.' During the latter half of the decade there were moves to encourage young people to design and implement their own services and the term social action came about as practitioners

saw themselves moving away from the social education origins of youth work into action centred community work. (Mullender and Ward, 1993).

Ward and Boeck (2000, p.45) assert that there are three main characteristics of social action. Firstly, 'it was designed to distance itself from the 'deficit' and 'blaming the victim' approach.' Secondly social action advocates that only through careful questioning and understanding of the reason 'why', can the question of 'how' be tackled. In other words to return to Freire, social action aims to engender in people a critical consciousness in order that they are able to identify the underlying causes that keep them in the situation that they are in. Ward and Boeck (2000) continue that through asking the question why:

people have the opportunity to widen their horizons of what is possible, to break out of the self-perpetuating narrowness of vision, introspection and 'victim blaming' induced through poverty, lack of opportunity and exclusion. (p.46)

Finally social action is process rather than outcome oriented. People are guided through a process which does not work towards a final result, activity or action but which is a 'way forward of discovery, of liberation, of dialogue, of conscientization.' (Ward and Boeck, 2000, p.46). Once groups are clear about the situation and the underlying causes, they are then able to take action based upon the conclusions they have reached during the 'why' stage of the process. Once the action has been taken, the group reflects upon what they have achieved and the process begins again.

## **The principles of social action**

The Centre for Social Action (2001) is committed to working in an anti-oppressive way and as such, has created six principles which guide its work. These principles,

encapsulate a set of beliefs about the unrecognized skills and capacities of people who may be marginalised by the wider community and assert



their rights to determine their own future, the inherent power of collective working and the ethical principles that should inform professionals working with groups such as these. (p.2)

They are as follows:

1. *Social Action workers are committed to social justice. We strive to challenge inequality and oppression in relation to race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, class, culture, disability or any other form of social differentiation.*

Within this principle the Centre for Social Action recognises that all forms of oppression are inter-linked and one cannot simply be committed to one cause at the expense of all the others. There is also a sense that social action workers should carefully consider the groups with whom they are working and ensure that they are clear about how oppressive comments or actions are addressed. (Mullender and Ward, 1993). Also the responsibility for challenging oppressive remarks should not lie with members of the oppressed group.

2. *We believe all people have skills, experience and understanding that they can draw on to tackle the problems they face. Social action workers understand that people are experts in their own lives and we can use this as a starting point for our work.*

This principle challenges the problem focussed nature of mainstream social and community work practice. It challenges the notion that people's problems can be solved by professionals who know better; it recognises the fact that people are fully aware of their needs and an understanding of the roots of those needs will come to the surface through the process.

3. *All people have rights including the right to be heard, the right to define the issues facing them, and the right to take action on their own behalf. People also have the right to define themselves and not have negative labels imposed upon them.*

Once again this principle highlights the fact that within social and community services, the user rarely has choice in terms of the assistance that they are given. Mullender and Ward (1993, p.34) maintain that, 'It is no longer tenable for workers to deprive

clients of key information on the assumption that they know best.' Mullender and Ward (1993, p.34) go on to suggest that service-users should not be given assistance based upon the assumptions of the professional, rather they should be, 'empowered to opt in or out of groups and campaigns, to define their own issues and to set their own agenda for change.'

4. *Injustice and oppression are complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment and the economy. Social Action workers understand people experience problems as individuals but these difficulties can be translated into common concerns.*

This principle emphasizes the most important aspect of the social action process: asking the question 'why?' To encourage people to describe their situations and ask them what can be done to change them merely scratches the surface and does not allow people to explore *why* their circumstances are such. Without this question, 'there can be no awakening awareness either of wider scale oppression or of the possibility of moving beyond fatalism and self-pity into raised consciousness and the pursuit of rights.' (Mullender and Ward, 1993, p.36)

5. *We understand that people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people in a similar position.*

The process of social action is ostensibly about groupwork. Groups that have used social action vary, but mainly they consist of people who come together to address an issue which affects them collectively. Arches (2001) examines the work undertaken by a group of young people living on an estate in Nottingham. They had been involved in burglaries and the courts requested a social enquiry of the circumstances of some of the young men in the area. The report found that the young people on the estate were bored and frustrated, with limited leisure facilities for them to use. The probation officer began using social action with the young people and over a five year period the young people raised funds, went on trips, held meetings with police and councillors, and enlisted support from adults on the estate. Although the

youth club that they eventually created was destroyed by fire shortly after it was opened, Arches' (2001) research over 20 years later reflects the impact that social action had upon the young people involved in the project, particularly communication and interpersonal skills.

6. *Social action workers are not the leaders, but facilitators. Our job is to enable people to make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues. Everybody's contribution to this process is equally valid and it is vital that our job is not accorded privilege.* Facilitation of a social action group is non-directional, workers are committed to ensuring that the group keeps control of both the agenda and the content and that the group itself decides upon direction and action, based upon the work that they have undertaken together. However, Arches (2001) maintains that this can be difficult and there are problems with the fact that once the involvement of the CSA is over, the group must not be left floundering. Many of her respondents spoke very favourably of social action facilitators and the fact that they did not try to lead or direct the projects. However from her research it is also clear that continuing consultation and training from the facilitator would have been of benefit, as would activities and discussion concerning potential threats and difficulties that the group may encounter after the departure of the facilitator.

The principles are an important feature of social action and they provide a firm basis that guides social action workers. However, it could be argued that, as in the case of some of the criticisms of Freire discussed above, social action demands much of its workers who are expected not to influence the group, merely to facilitate the process. However there must always be the risk that facilitators will subconsciously attempt to move the group in ways that it may not necessarily want to go. Workers will have prejudices of their own, they will also have professional values and beliefs and it may be difficult to keep these buried during the course of their work. The next section will examine some of the other criticisms of social action including an exploration of some of the issues concerning the facilitators.

## **Critiques of social action**

Social Action professes not to impose an agenda upon the groups and communities with whom it engages. However, Barry et al (1999, pp.68-69) would challenge this and maintain that social action itself is indeed an imposed agenda and that it is, 'a method of working devised *by* professionals *for* groups of participants. It has not evolved through the efforts of those it purports to empower.'

It could be argued that any method which aims to work with oppressed or minority communities has an agenda. Mullender and Ward (1993) clearly state that the agenda of social action is to empower people through working collectively together to improve their situations or circumstances. Most importantly it asks people to examine the root causes of the problems they are facing in terms of economics, environment and structural inequalities. This is the aspect of the process that attracts most criticism from Barry (1996) and Barry et al (1999).

They argue that in their experience young people do not want to examine the structural and political inequalities that impact upon their lives. Barry et al (1999) maintain that,

For many disadvantaged young people, the problem is managing to survive day to day, finding a job and/or having constructive activities and support networks. (p.68)

By this last quote, Barry et al (1999) seem to be arguing that as well as having to cope with the day to day stresses of their own lives, they also need other activities and support structures that give them concrete day to day solutions to the everyday problems they are experiencing. They argue that social action, which asks young people to uncover the roots of their disadvantage, is simply not giving the practical support and assistance that is needed.

In terms of their perceptions of the needs of young people, Barry et al (1999) have four main criticisms of social action with young people. The first is that in their experience young people generally do not want to address national or political issues – they want to focus upon themselves and their own realities rather than the wider structural picture. Secondly they prefer a more directive approach and rather than facilitation, they prefer emotional support from

those who work with them. Thirdly, Barry et al (1999) suggest that social action can be accused of raising expectations of young people in the long term. They go on to argue that goals should be short term and achievable rather than tackling issues that may not offer immediate results. Finally they argue that the self directed nature of social action may be too difficult and demanding for some young people, who after all, have been used predominantly to directive models of youth work practice.

One of the other criticisms that Barry (1996; 1999) makes is also the fact that self-directed groupwork can potentially overlook positive input from the facilitator. She argues that the facilitator role within social action is simply about guaranteeing anti-oppressive practice and the facilitation of self-direction. Rather Barry et al (1999) feel that,

Those working with young people should also consider the possibility of injecting their own ideas into the debate with young people ... it could be about sharing with (them) innovative and pro-active ways of improving their situation. (p.69)

Barry (1996) argues that there is also the issue of young people acting in isolation. As the self-directed groupworker attempts not to impose content, the young people act alone and this, she maintains, can be demoralizing and that it is only through partnership working that young people can really make a difference within their own lives:

Without the goodwill, cooperation, openness and collaboration of others who can give them that trust and recognition as partners, then regrettably the powerful voice of young people may well remain unheard. (p.11)

Essentially, within her criticisms of social action, Barry et al (1999) are asserting that sometimes young people simply do not want to ask the question 'why', and that to take them through a process which makes them examine the political, social and economic roots of their problems is simply a way of imposing an overtly political agenda upon those who do not really want it. Rather they want a more directive approach that will support and

encourage them to change their individual lives.

In a counter argument to Barry (1996;1999) Fleming et al (1999) maintain that the 'why' stage of the process is in fact the most important and that simply looking at the 'what' and the 'how' is a traditional model of youth work that enables people to act, but does not empower them in any way. They maintain that traditional models of youth work use the 'what' and the 'how' and that simply to ask these questions is to,

collude with the process in which explanations and responsibilities and the scope of the solutions are sought in the private world around young people and within their existing knowledge and experience.' (p.49)

By not asking the question 'why', Fleming et al (1999) argue that young people are kept in their place. The question 'why' offers young people a route out of this blame, for only by seeing the structures that oppress them are they able to, 'see opportunities to develop a much wider range of options for action and change.' (Mullender and Ward, 1993, in Fleming et al, 1999, p.49)

Ward (2000) goes on to argue about some of the actual dangers of not asking the 'why' question. A preoccupation with the 'what' and the 'how' in the United States has led to what Murray (1999) terms a custodial democracy – a situation where mainstream society walls off the excluded, either by sending them to prison or maintaining the deteriorating inner cities. The privileged mainstream remain comfortable and those excluded are told that they cannot function as full citizens. Asking the question 'why' offers options that the 'what' and the 'how' do not present. These latter approaches keep people in what Freire termed a state of naïve consciousness, preventing them from exploring the inequalities that stand in their way forward, and keeping problems and issues within the realm of the personal and the local rather than, 'enabling (people) to envision a much wider range of options for action and change.' (Ward, 2000, p.5)

Within social action literature, there are many examples of how communities and groups of young people have gained through working within this method. Whilst some of these examples are been given by people who are committed to social action, Arches (2001) provides a less predisposed evaluation of three projects and

examines their impact over time. She interviewed people who had been involved with a social action project twenty years ago and asked them to talk about how the project and the social action work undertaken had changed their lives. It seems that from the interviews conducted, the project participants had experienced changes within their relationships and behaviour that was having an impact upon their own families over two decades later. One of the participants in the evaluation spoke thus:

I've got a 12 year old son now – and I know from what I went through to get this and that, I'm trying to show him values. If you work hard and try something you can achieve your aims ... I was part of something – I was part of making something work by sticking together and persevering – you can change people's lives. I'm proud of that. (Arches, 2001, p.14)

More specifically people in the evaluation group spoke about the fact that had it not been for the group they would probably have become involved in criminal activity. Whilst there are many youth work projects that could boast about similar results, the social action evaluation reveals something more about the *way* that they were worked with and the values which emanated from it. One participant in Arches' research spoke of the facilitator in terms of the respect that he had had for the group. He also spoke of values and the fact that the group had remained in control: 'We were in charge, we set the guidelines, we wanted to get on it.' (Arches, 2001, p.16) A further quote demonstrates this yet more clearly: 'What's the difference between ATAG (Ainsley Teenage Action Group) and a youth club ... well we wanted it! We wanted it, we loved it.' (Arches, 2001, p.5)

Barry et al (1999) argue that the social action approach was created within a South American development context and therefore has little relevance for young people in Western 'developed' countries. However, as has been discussed above, the central tenets of Friere's pedagogy are pulled from European philosophies and theories of education. Yet, aside from this academic debate, Arches' research has shown that people who have used social action within a British context have not only gone on to use the process again, but also say themselves that their interpersonal skills have improved and

that their family lives and relationships are better as a result of the group with which they were involved twenty years ago.

Within his broad criticisms of social action Blackburn (2000) uses a similar critique to that of Barry (1996) and Barry et al (1999) in that he maintains that people who are used to a banking type of education do not have sufficient skills to be able to cross over into self directed work. This criticism would seem once again to be rather patronising in that it does not recognise that people are automatically labelled as having limited skills, just because they do not have formal educational qualifications, or are deemed 'socially excluded'. However it could be suggested that professionals who are used to individualizing problems and pathologising, find it yet more difficult to allow service-users to determine what their problems are, why they exist and how they can be remedied. The problem it seems lies not with the jump from banking to self-directed education, but with the professionals being faced with a challenge from those who they have perceived for so long as inadequate and in need of help. When people begin to determine their own destinies through a process that exposes and challenges the mainstream, the role of the professional and the power which accompanies it, becomes uncomfortably threatened.

Process is the key to social action, and the examples given in the articles that follow demonstrate that participants in social action groupwork understood this. They began by questioning the way in which social action begins with the very basics, but soon recognized that through creating a firm knowledge basis, they were far more able to ask 'why' their problems existed, and to develop change based upon a critical awareness of their situation and its complexities.

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