As a new Ph.D., struggling to run a writing program, I discovered the field of composition studies in 1977 when I read Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. These two books continue to have a profound effect on me, clearly visible in my work for the ten years after I read them and still strongly present today. To make a distinction that Freire would not approve of, and that I will say more about below, I could claim that Shaughnessy influenced my pedagogical practice, whereas Freire influenced me more in educational theory. I own eight of his books—more than I possess by any other writer on education—and my own essays are collected in a volume that draws its title from his work: *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*.

Freire, I believe, is one of the most important thinkers on education of our time. A lengthy essay could analyze his multiple influences on American composition studies as well as his leadership in liberatory education worldwide. Here, however, I must give only my own impressions of his importance, which are, I fear, likely to be as inadequate as most of the obituaries I have read in the U.S. newspapers. I truly believe that Freire has been of profound importance for a whole generation of American writing teachers.

Freire's most important idea for composition instruction in the United States is the concept of "critical consciousness." Fundamental to this concept is the assumption that the unjust world social order unequally distributes power, and the benefits that accrue with power. But people who have not achieved critical consciousness either do not perceive this injustice, or else regard it as something natural and inevitable, not man-made and alterable. They do not see themselves as actively changing their surroundings, but rather as passively fulfilling predetermined social positions. In contrast, when they acquire critical consciousness, they do see injustice and they do see themselves as agents for progressive change.

How does this transformation come about? In Freire's thinking, it can be fostered by the right kind of literacy education. The right kind is literacy education that draws its materials from the students' own lives and gives them considerable authority in exploring these materials. The students teach as well as learn, the teacher learns as well as teaches, in the Freirean classroom. And as students acquire better literate abilities, they are encouraged to use them for the projects of progressive social change that their education is making them increasingly desire.

This concept has been so influential in my generation of composition specialists, first, because we encountered it at a time (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in English translation in 1970) when we were already convinced of its fundamental assumption about social injustice from our own
experiences with the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war protests, and the women’s movement. Second, Freire’s book spoke to a predicament in which we found ourselves as writing teachers, wanting to be progressive political activists but engaged in seemingly apolitical work. How exciting to find a theorist who believed that the very work we were doing was in fact crucial to progressive social action! Freire’s influence can be seen, for example, in my early essay “Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness: An Application of Paulo Freire,” in which I claim that “basic writers are very much like Freire’s peasants,” in need of an intellectual method that will help them penetrate and analyze their surroundings (133). I argue that mastery of academic discourse provides this method, analogous to the literacy education Freire provided to his students (see 150).

Continuing to explore Freire’s work and its American influences, in my own later work I have pointed to some problems. One of these is a tendency in American uses of Freire to imagine that academic literacy could provide a consciousness that is “critical” in the sense of analytic and self-reflective without also necessarily confronting the political implications of such an intellectual awakening. As I have suggested in “Marxist Ideas in Composition Studies,” this approach leaves the Marxism—that is, the radical political critique—out of Freire, treating him only as a philosopher of the act of interpretation. I myself may have focussed on the concept of discourse community, which I developed following lines of thought that Freire suggested, precisely because it protected, rather than challenged, my social class interests (see 59-60).

Another problem focuses on the apparent assumption in Freire’s thought that acquisition of the analytic method, which literacy is supposed to provide, automatically also awakens a desire for progressive political change. Freire seems to assume that the desire for such change is there, at least within people who are oppressed by the unjust social order (although in theory, any member of the social order, including the elite, may be equally deluded about the social order’s true unjust nature), and all that’s needed to bring out this desire is to show it a way to work on the world.

To believe in the linkage between literacy education and political activism is very convenient for teachers with a radical political agenda. They can believe that they are pushing their students in the political direction in which they want them to go without ever having to mention anything political in the classroom, simply by encouraging them to become analytical about texts that are relevant to their lives. I have increasingly questioned whether the transformation could, or should, occur so neatly, which led in my later work to exploring issues of classroom authority, the teacher’s and the students’. In effect, what I was doing was questioning the function of the “and” in my title “Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness.” My questions here were influenced by a postmodern critique of the very idea of analysis, that is, the idea that people can detach themselves from their surroundings and operate on their surroundings objectively; this idea would seem to be insufficiently aware of the constitutive power of historical, cultural, and social contexts.
But these qualifications are just what we would expect to emerge from
detailed exploration of a complex thinker's work over an extended period of
time. They should not obscure the key points of Freire's influence, which I
believe are still very important.

First, Freire helped us to see that education is a political act. Education can
never be the neutral conveyance of information or skills. On the one hand, it
always reflects the distribution of power present in the larger society in which
it functions; and on the other, it always engages the whole person, her or his
imaginative and ethical as well as cognitive powers, her or his political as well
as personal identity. Education, then, must always be a site of struggle.

Second, Freire helped us to believe that education can serve progressive
ends. I believe that my generation does not come easily to this hope, perhaps
precisely because of the high ideals we attempted to serve when we were
younger. I think that we are generally quite reluctant to allow ourselves to hope
that what we are doing professionally may be politically efficacious. But Freire
offers just that hope. Patiently, persistently, respectfully, he went about the work
of teaching people who were thought to be far more ineducable, far more
inevitably trapped in oppression than any students we encounter, and he made
a positive difference in their lives. Without the faith that this is at least sometimes
possible, it would be very hard, at least for me, to muster the energy for the
classroom every day.

Third—and in a way, summing up the impact of my first two points—Freire
showed us the need to inform pedagogy with theory, in the face of early
tendencies in the field of composition studies to dismiss theory and focus
resolutely on the “practical.” To illustrate the importance of theory for
pedagogy, Freire tells a story in Pedagogy of the City about a São Paulo inner-city
literacy group that ran into difficulties. Their meetings were getting nowhere.
He says:

What was taking place was, up to a certain point, that the group leadership did not
have sufficient theoretical knowledge to, in the process of thinking about the practice
of the people involved, unveil with them the obstacles and their raison d'être. All of
a sudden, the leadership began to feel lost. In reality, the leadership lacked the
theoretical tools to help it illuminate the practice about which the militants were
attempting to think, but were unable to do so. (104-105)

The point here is that one should be equipped to think theoretically, so that when
difficulties arise, one can be more inventive in thinking of ways around them.
In this passage, Freire also names some thinkers whose theories he believes will
be helpful to literacy workers (Piaget, Vygotsky, and others). He shows that it
is important to benefit from the work of others, but to use it flexibly, not
dogmatically. He shows that theory and pedagogy should not be separated (as
I did in my opening distinction between Shaughnessy and Freire), or, worse,
opposed to one another, but rather creatively intertwined. I believe that not only
has this view of the relationship between theory and practice been crucial to the
development of composition studies, but it also represents an important contribution that composition studies brings to English studies (a contribution that English studies has yet to appreciate fully).

It is fashionable these days to debunk the goals of liberatory education, to make fun of the supposed radical pretensions of progressive teachers, or to adopt rancorous "more-populist-than-thou" positions. As I suggested above, I can see a number of valid criticisms of the radical pedagogy Freire inspired. But I think it is important for us to remember that his key points are still vital to the health of democratic education in this country. I deeply regret that I never met Paulo Freire. Not that I had anything so very important to say to him—but his work has been so crucial to my own development that I simply wanted to stand in his presence. His ideas will always be present in my thinking. Whatever our limitations in understanding, employing, or extending his work, I think we should never lose sight of the fact that Paulo Freire has pointed us in the right direction.

Works Cited


Paulo Freire in Context

GARY A. OLSON

On a sweltering day in October of 1990, São Paulo was teeming with bustling pedestrians and noisy street traffic. The third largest city in the world, São Paulo can easily overwhelm a visitor swallowed up in the crush of its twenty-one and a half million residents; after all, this immense, modern metropolis could comfortably contain a city the size of New York and still have room for Chicago. São Paulo is a city of genuine cultural diversity: besides its Indian population, Brazil boasts a huge Asian population as well as inhabitants descended from