

THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

by PAULO FREIRE

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Why educate? What for? This question is very rich in nuances. In my language, to ask "why", "what are things for?", or just "what for?", implies "how?" too, and it also implies "with whom?" My first, tentative reply is that there are different answers to this question, and that if it were somebody else who were speaking, a Brazilian educator with a different dream, a different vision of utopia, a different political and ideological position, and a different understanding of our presence in the world, the answer would be different.

Hence, I shall give the answer of a Brazilian who was born in the most dramatic region of Brazil, the most unsettled region in Brazil, the most troubled and the most unsure of itself. This is the north-eastern part of Brazil, and particularly the city of Recife. I shall give a possible answer, coming from a man who believes and is absolutely convinced that any period in history is a time of possibilities, and not a time of determinism, nor a time of reproduction of what has already happened.

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAKING HISTORY

A man who views history as a time of possibilities must necessarily understand the aspect of subjectivity confronting objectivity in the historic endeavour. This means that he has to recognize the special role of subjectivity or consciousness, for even while not being aware of his subjectivity, the owner of objective reality is not a mere reflection of this objective reality. For the same reason history, being a time of possibilities, demands the growth of responsibility in all men and women. For me, to make history means to re-invent the world within history, and the historical challenge of re-inventing the world subjectively is the very process of re-invention. It means to plan, to project, to dream; it means to love, to become involved in the process of transformation.

We also have to see that sometimes it is not possible to re-invent, precisely because, being a possibility, history is also an impossibility. History demands from me an understanding of the limits of my own possibilities.

On the other hand, living and exposing myself to history as a possibility, I have to develop myself. This development has much to do with my own individuality, which is constructed socially, but carries my individual stamp. Modernity seems to forget this relationship once in a while, and we are sometimes so much concerned about the social dimension that we end by collapsing the individual dimension of men and women into the social dimension, as if the social dimension alone could explain you or me. It cannot explain what is myself, what makes me myself rather than Pedro, and what makes Pedro himself rather than me. The social dimension is not a sufficient explanation of myself.

THE CURIOSITY OF MAN

I expose myself as much as possible to time, to history. For we are beings who display curiosity. There is no re-invention without a knowledge of what is re-invented and there is no knowledge without curiosity. This is something of the answer to the question "Why educate and what for?". It is curiosity with regard to our history, this possibility I have of being myself and not being myself tomorrow, this possibility I have of maturation, growth, change. Curiosity is one of the bases of educational practice. But it is interesting to observe how educators (men and women), both at the level of domestic experience and at the level of school experience, sometimes deny curiosity to children. What is worse, they do so in the name of scientific modernity and objectivity.

We can thus deny ourselves the pleasure of asking and asking, which is the expression of curiosity, and is precisely what makes us the beings that we are. Probably one of the fundamental differences between me and the couple of German shepherd dogs I have in São Paulo (whom I love, and who have a pedigree of German names which I don't understand) is that Gene (the dog) and Andra (the bitch) have never asked me anything, nor have they ever organized a seminar with all the dogs in the street to ask about keeping the houses secure. I do ask questions, I enquire every day, I grew up asking and I shall die if I do not ask. It is terrible how sometimes educators, fathers, mothers, teachers of children, adults or post-graduate students stamp on the need and the pleasure of asking.

In any culture children ask everything before they go to school; after they start going they stop asking questions. It is necessary to convince people that schools must be centres for questions, happiness centres, and I think that there is no happiness without curiosity. Some of us teach in a way I call ironically the Pedagogy of Answers. In general, at the beginning of the semester in the very first class, teachers give answers to questions the students never asked. The students remain silent for three hours and do not even know who framed the fundamental questions to which they are giving answers.

Teachers have to maintain curiosity. I think that one of the more fundamental tasks of teachers is to set examples. Sometimes we think that communication is only verbal. But it is also achieved with the body, the whole body, the eyes, the look, the face; a certain air we may adopt, suggesting curiosity. One has to be curious while teaching. One has to give an example to the pupils of the pleasure and the need of questions. One must not be afraid of asking, but it is not necessary to give talks about asking. It is better to ask and ask. This is what I think should be done.

EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION

Why educate? What for? One of the reasons is precisely to develop the ability to ask good questions, and to refute false answers. There is no real humanistic education, no education for liberation - which means more than education for freedom - if the right to raise questions is denied and if false answers are not refused.

So-called Modernity has lied too much, and it seems that one of our concerns for a hypothetical Post-modernity should be to raise again some of the questions to which Modernity has suggested false answers. To refute many of these answers would be enough to justify this kind of meeting and the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Existing implies taking risks. With respect to asking, the greater risk is not to ask, to remain silent and to forbid questions. I do not think that we could “be” without asking. Our presence in the world implies asking. There are no paths made without questions being asked, since, to build a path means to ask where it leads.

When the Institute was created, I was already 30 years old, but we are still all young, do not doubt it. Suchodolski, Hausmann and I are still exercising what curiosity has induced us to do, which is, curiously, never to let curiosity die in ourselves, in spite of our being 70 and 80 years old.

EDUCATION FOR ALL AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

When we think of education for all, we probably think immediately of an education which is committed to the concerns of men and women in the world. This means attaining a better quality of life for those making history in the world. But this never means attempting to impose a particular concept of education for all. For me, what should be ethically and politically imposed should be that education for all is really provided throughout the world, since it is a right. What kind of education it should be, is a matter for the community.

When I was Secretary of Education for the city of São Paulo (until two weeks ago), we first had to solve the problem of restoring most of the 670 school buildings, while working to change the face of the schools, making them less authoritarian, more democratic and open. Only then was it possible to think of spreading the provision of computers. It is important that workers' children learn to manipulate computers like others, but what matters more for some is to have food to eat, and clothes to wear.

We had to confront authoritarian traditions, and I saw how little respect was shown to public property. I understood that it is impossible to confront poor physical conditions in schools without addressing the underlying education policies. Despite political misunderstanding, and a lack of money, it was possible to do many things: changing the world is very difficult, but it can be done.

But I would not accept that anybody from anywhere in the world comes to São Paulo to tell us what we should do, even if we do not really know what should be done. The main principle is that education for all is a right, and a duty of those responsible for education.

How to achieve education for all is a matter for the people also, and not only a responsibility of the government. One of the problems is that the leadership of the Third World belongs to the First. I see no future without an equilibrium between riches and poverty. At a certain moment the rich will no longer remain isolated from the misery they have created. Above all, we have to include in the notion of development the question of the quality of life. It is possible to reorient development, and to overcome the falsification of our understanding of the term. In this, ecologists the world over are our hope. This change is of immense importance for education.

It is better to say no to certain offers of help and to fight alone, than to accept and to acquiesce with conditions laid down by the powerful. As a man of the Third World, I would ask my colleagues not to help the dominant, but also not to be arrogant towards the First World. Being humble does not mean accepting humiliation.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR



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Paulo Freire is the author of the pedagogical theory recognized throughout the world and explained in the famous books, "Education the Practice of Freedom" (1974) and "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970).

Secretary of Education, in São Paulo and National Co-ordinator of the Literacy Campaign in the Popular Education Movement in his country, he was also Professor at the Catholic University of Santiago (Chile) and special consultant to UNESCO's Regional Office.

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Paulo Freire has published a vast collection of books and more than twenty universities have conferred on him the title of Doctor Honoris Causa.