Ira Shor, “Making Freire’s First ‘Talking Book’: A Pedagogy for Liberation, 1983-1986

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PAULO: This is a great discovery, education is politics! After that, when a teacher discovers that he or she is a politician, too, the teacher has to ask, What kind of politics am I doing in the classroom? (p. 46, ***A Pedagogy for Liberation***)

PAULO: But, look, Ira, for me the question is not for the teacher to have less and less authority. The issue is that the democratic teacher never, never transforms authority into authoritarianism. He or she can never stop being an authority or having authority. Without authority, it is very difficult for the liberties of the students to be shaped. Freedom needs authority to be free. (Laughs) It is a paradox but it is true (p. 91)… In some situations, the democratic goal of liberating education can lead to irresponsibility if the students perceive it as expecting less from them (p. 89)

PAULO: Many, many times I have thought about the following aspect: Our experience in the university tends to form us *at a distance* from reality. The concepts that we study…can work to amputate us from the concrete reality they are supposedly referring to (p. 106)…This is the question, How to diminish the distance between the academic context and the reality from which the students come, the reality which I must know better and better to the extent that I am engaged in some way with a process of changing it (p. 148)

PAULO: Precisely because education is *not* the lever for the transformation of society, we are in danger of despair and of cynicism if we limit our struggle to the classroom (p. 129)…For me, it would not be enough to work only inside the schools…What is very important for me, Ira, is how *not* to work alone (p. 131)

As a young teacher, I devoured Paulo Freire’s words in the decade before I met the man himself. In early 1983, a year before we met, Paulo wrote to me after reading my book *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*(1980) , the first book-length treatment of Freire-based pedagogy in the U.S.A. I opened my mailbox in Manhattan and

noticed an aerogramme. It was from Brazil, surprising enough. Even more surprising, the return address showed the name of “Paulo Freire.” I was amazed to get a hand-written letter from this renowned man.

I immediately opened the aerogramme and read it. Paulo thanked me for “the beautiful words” of my book. He mentioned that a teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan, gave him a copy of my book and told him that educators in the North are very interested in his work. I replied to the address on the aerogramme, thrilled to get such a letter.

Six months later, there came another surprise. In the summer of 1983, Paulo Freire called me from Stanford University where he was a visiting scholar. I picked up the telephone in my apartment, and heard an accented voice ask, “Ira?” to which I answered, “Yes.” The voice then said, “Paulo Freire.” I was astonished again. He said he was in California, and asked me to join him there in his seminar. I caught my breath, thought it over quickly, and realized I couldn’t get out there in time. Paulo then said he would be in residence in Amherst at the University of Massachusetts after January 1, and could I join him there? I immediately said yes. He told me who to contact in Amherst to find him. I put the date on my calendar and spent the next six months writing a new book on recent culture wars in education.

Come February 1984, I called Paulo in Amherst and made plans to travel there. He asked me to join him at a roadside pizza parlor the day I would arrive, where he would be eating with students. Once there, I parked my car at the restaurant, and through steamy winter windows saw his face at a table of young people. When I entered and approached, he stood up instantly and came over to embrace me. I was overwhelmed by his affection as he wrapped his arms around me. Paulo guided me to the table and had me sit down next to him. He talked, I talked, the others talked, and by the end of dinner Paulo asked me to join him that very evening for one of his public dialogues. I followed him to an over-flowing lecture hall and at a certain moment in the event, he called me by name, pointed to me, and insisted I join him onstage. To my astonishment, Paulo introduced me to the packed room as “his son”(an honor and a gift that still stays with me). As questions and statements rose from the assembly, he addressed them and asked me to speak as well.

For the next few days, I accompanied Paulo to sessions with professors, graduate students, undergraduates, and administrators. In those years, large crowds showed up wherever Paulo spoke. The political atmosphere at his appearances was charged with excitement and yearning. Some thanked Paulo for being a beacon of hope and

a guide for their work in education. Others testified to their struggles with teaching for justice in an unjust status quo. Still others questioned if academic discourse was counter-productive in critical teaching and in Paulo's own writings. Some wanted more explicit discussion of gender and race issues in the practice of critical pedagogy. A persistent appeal at such meetings, I would discover that night and afterwards, was a request for Paulo to confirm that there is hope for winning justice in an age of a triumphant status quo. Was Margaret Thatcher right that "There is no alternative."? Paulo assured the assembly that there is indeed hope for democratic change. He offered this assurance without exhortation but rather straightforwardly.

After my first trip to Amherst in February 1984, I made two more visits that month. On my second visit, I went with Paulo to a dormitory devoted to Black studies and culture. The students there invited him for lunch. The food was good and plentiful, the company congenial. Because meals on the road for me in those traveling years were unpredictable, I ate a lot when I could, taking that day two full lunch plates. When I sat down next to Paulo, he noticed the two plates, and asked whom the extra food was for. I said I was hungry and loved food. Paulo's attention to this surprised me. He promptly announced to the table, "I do not trust people who do not like to eat. Food is biophilic, to love food is to love life." (I wish I had taken three plates and not only two!) I did not yet know the hunger Paulo experienced as a child in an impoverished home near Recife in northeastern Brazil. His hunger depressed his grades in school until an older brother found a job and used his income to buy more food for the family. Paulo then did better in school. After that, Paulo never took food for granted; as a child, he swore he would do whatever he could to stop kids from being hungry.

Meals, then, were political experiences no less than sensual ones, convivial pleasures filled with stories and humor. While Paulo had a special taste for two kinds of wine—beaujolais and dao–his food preferences were "fejoada"(the everyday black bean stew of Brazil), along with arrugala salad, and a familiar meat I ate growing up, liver, the cheapest meat sold by the butcher, which embarrassed mothers once requested in America 'to feed their pet dogs.' If a restaurant did not serve beans, Paulo would declare, "But this is an absurdity! A restaurant without beans." In their campus apartment in Massachusetts, there were always black beans soaking in the refrigerator.

During my second visit to Amherst that February 1984, I said to Paulo, "We should write a book together." He instantly replied, "Let's start tomorrow!"

His enthusiasm was wonderful, but I had no book proposal yet to offer. So, I returned to my hotel room that night to compose one. In my room, I wrote notes for a book based on questions asked by North American educators. For five years, I had been traveling my country giving talks and workshops for teachers. From sessions in different locations, an agenda of questions and issues emerged. After writing down some of these items in my Amherst hotel room, the next day I showed them to Paulo. When he offered public sessions, he liked agendas to emerge from the bottom up, and preferred his audiences to set the questions, though if his hosts asked him to lecture, he would accommodate them. Paulo sometimes described his appearances as political "pretexts" through which local forces might consolidate support for their own articulated agendas. Perusing my agenda of questions teachers asked most about critical pedagogy, Paulo said, "Yes, a dialogue on dialogue. Let's call it ***a talking book***." He named the genre at that moment, and the name has stayed for over thirty years now.

I then returned to New York to refine and annotate the agenda of questions. A week or so later, once again in Amherst for my third and last visit, I showed Paulo a revised draft of key questions. Paulo agreed to this agenda, and then asked me to come to Michigan where he would be working soon in March; after that, he would be in New York City in May where we could meet again after his appearance at Columbia University with the legendary founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, Myles Horton. During these two short trips for Paulo, we further refined the questions, which would serve as prompts for our talking book. We then needed long working sessions for taping our dialogues around each issue. Paulo said he would be in Vancouver in July and asked me to join him there to do the first recordings. So, in July, 1984, I traveled to the Canadian Pacific with an agenda of questions for our dialogue, along with equipment for recording our exchanges, joined by a colleague from the City University of New York, Prof. Herb Perr, a critical art educator, who volunteered to handle the technology as we spoke.

The agenda I brought to Vancouver eventually became a "Table of Contents" for the talking book. It was based in this sequence of questions:

1. What is "liberating

education”? How do we understand or define it?
2. How can teachers transform themselves into liberating educators?
3. What are the fears and risks of transformation?
4. Is there structure in liberating education?
5. What is the dialogical method?

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6. Do all First-World students need liberating?
7. How can liberating educators overcome language differences with the students?
8. How do teachers begin a liberating class on the first day?

By design, the above questions center on the role of the teacher in critical pedagogy. Teachers I had spoken with in the U.S. wanted to know how critical teaching practice connected to the theory of critical pedagogy, how this practice differed from traditional teaching which we all had learned from our many years in formal classrooms, and how adult educators undertook their own transition to critical ways of teaching.

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For the month of July 1984, in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia, Paulo led a large adult education seminar of 60 students every morning from 8am until noon. The days there started early for him and for me as I sat in on each class session. Once again, he asked me to comment in class at various times on questions raised by the teachers. At noon, we went to lunch, and then to afternoon appointments where Paulo spoke on television and radio, and gave interviews to the local press. Then, between four and five p.m., we returned to the faculty apartment the University provided him. There, we set up recording equipment and reviewed the agenda of questions prompting our dialogue. At the start of each new session, we reviewed our work so far, and sometimes re-played the final minutes of the previous day's tapes. Then, we recorded for three hours with breaks. About 8pm each evening, we ended that day's session. A tech assistant from UBC then took each day's tapes and copied them, returning the original and copies to us the next day. Each night, hungry, we went to various Brazilian restaurants for a big meal filled with stories from Paulo's life. At midnight, we returned to our rooms to be ready early the next morning for Paulo's formal seminar. This busy schedule lasted for ten days, at the end of which we had over 20 hours of raw tape.

In daily recording, we sometimes stopped taping to review a section of our exchange, occasionally re-taping a segment to draw out an issue not well developed. At times, Paulo could not find the English expression he wanted to convey his thoughts. We would stop taping at that point, and he would then speak his thoughts in Portuguese. Because I understand Spanish and French only, we asked a bilingual native Portuguese Professor to join us, Ya-Ya Andrade. After Paulo spoke in Portuguese, she would offer a literal English translation of his Portuguese utterance. I wrote down her literal English translation and then converted it into several versions of idiomatic American English. I then read aloud my written varieties; after Paulo heard me say the English versions, he would read them over to himself, and choose the one he thought was closest to his Portuguese meaning and intention. As people know, Paulo was passionate and eloquent in English, even though at times his English failed him. All in all, our composing process with Paulo's Brazilian Portuguese rendered into several translated possibilities from my native American English, was an interesting rhetorical exercise in what could now be called "translanguaging."

Vancouver was a wonderful two weeks, busy with productive taping of our talking book, lots of good food and conversation, a very interesting seminar daily, and sites to visit. When we finished our work there, I took the tapes home and spent the next

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6 months in New York typing a manuscript from the recordings. I typed on the first PC I ever bought, a slow Epson which was then “top-of-the-line” and now of course is a primitive museum piece. I also rented a tape player with a floor pedal and earphones. Inserting one tape at a time into the tape deck, I then touched the “Forward” button on a floor pedal and listened as the recording played in my earphones. I memorized chunks of tape as they played and then typed each chunk onto a computer file. This tape machine also had a reverse pedal which I could tap to play back sections whose words escaped my short-term memory. Finally, chunk-by-chunk, by January 1985, I had a complete transcript on a computer file divided into chapters based on the opening question for each session we recorded.

In February 1985, Paulo returned to Amherst, Massachusetts, about four hours north of my apartment in Manhattan. I went there with two printed copies of the transcript and a compact tape recorder with fresh tape as well as copies of the tapes we had recorded. Paulo and I then spent hours reading together the printed transcript sentence by sentence. Whenever one of us wanted to add, cut or revise a sentence, we offered alternative wordings to each other, which we each penciled into our separate copies. Sometimes, one or both of us thought there was a “hole” in the transcript where new material was needed. To remedy these holes, we did more taping on the spot in Amherst, noting on the tape itself and on the printed manuscript where we wanted to put this new segment. I took home the edited manuscript as well as the newly-recorded material, and spent the next few months in New York preparing the next draft of the manuscript. On July 4, 1985, I prepared the final copy of this new draft by typing at my computer for 14 hours. That Fourth of July, the national holiday in the U.S.A, I typed as thousands of people passed under my Manhattan windows en route to spectacular fireworks. With this next draft complete and printed out, I brought hard copies to Boston College where Paulo was in residence for a few weeks in the summer of 1985. Once again, we jointly edited and revised this draft page by page over several days. I then took this edited manuscript back home and prepared still another draft of the emerging talking book.

With the latest draft in hand, I returned to Amherst in February 1986, to do the final editing with Paulo, who was once again in residence there. We edited the text sentence by sentence for the last time, reviewing footnotes I had added into the manuscript. (Later, I would add a selected bibliography.) When we finished, Paulo said that my name should come first on the book in its American edition. I said his name should come first. He insisted again because, he said, I put in so many hours

and months developing the manuscript. So it was, my name first on the cover of the American edition, which also has a photo of us on the campus of the University of Massachusetts—Amherst, in early 1985, when Paulo was 63 and I was 39.

I also selected four excerpts from noted American scholars as “front-matter” for the U.S. edition, each relating to central claims of Paulo’s in our talking book: that education can never be neutral, that social class is a crucial arbiter of power relations in school and society, and that students must be included in the making of their own education. While we were still revising the manuscript, I asked a literary agent in Manhattan to place the book with a publisher. She declined, not convinced that she could market such a genre, *a talking book.* I then approached a major press which similarly rejected the manuscript; “Paulo Freire” was not a name the major publisher cared to carry. Instead, a small independent press published it in 1986, Bergin-Garvey. In the following decades, this book went through at least 10 printings in its American edition and is still in print more than thirty years later. It also has done well in its Brazilian edition, published in 1987 in Portuguese as *Medo E Ousadia: O cotidiano do professor(Fear and Courage: The daily life of the teacher,* Paz E Terra). The book has been translated into Hebrew for an Israeli edition, into Chinese for a Hong Kong edition, and into Greek for an edition in Athens. There may be other editions in print also, “pirated” printings, because Paulo remarked to me several times how when he traveled he would be presented with editions of his work in a foreign language which he never authorized or contracted.

When the fateful aerogramme from Paulo suddenly appeared in my mailbox in 1983, Paulo was already an international icon in great demand. His name filled lecture halls wherever he went. I benefitted from my association with him, for which I am grateful. From my point of view, I was like many young scholars in need of mentoring, thrilled to co-author a book with a renowned senior figure. Moreover, co-writing the book with Paulo buoyed my political morale at a troubled time for activists in America. The political situation for many North American radicals at that time was grim; we faced resurgent corporate and conservative forces who were gaining ground every year. Economic and political elites had counter-attacked against the mass movements of the 1960s, throwing their accumulated assets, institutions, and wealth against the democratic/egalitarian advances of the previous protest period. In the book I wrote on culture wars, I named this aggressive resurgence “the conservative restoration,” a difficult time to oppose the unequal status quo. A reactionary Administration under President Ronald Reagan imposed neoliberal austerity on the nation. Labor union leadership failed to organize their

members to stop the looting of the 99%. At the City University of New York where I taught, progressives lost the battle to defend Open Admissions for non-elite students as well as the war to maintain a tuition-free public institution. Many progressive junior faculties were fired at my university, in 1976-1977. Programs we had built were dismantled and de-funded. The student population declined by about 100,000. Outside the university, we marched against the Contra War in Nicaragua, against the death squad regimes favored by Washington in places like El Salvador, against the invasion of Grenada, for an 'Equal Rights Amendment" guaranteeing women equal pay for equal work, for nuclear disarmament, for government funding of AIDS research and relief. Under siege on campus and off, I joined protests and began writing books and traveling the country to speak on critical pedagogy and teaching for social justice wherever an audience would invite me.

In those difficult days, Paulo Freire's luminous aerogramme suddenly arrived in 1983.

From my point of view, thirty-odd years ago I wanted *the talking book* to start from questions raised by actual teachers regarding critical pedagogy. Beginning from their concerns is a foundational democratic orientation, originally emphasized by John Dewey a century ago, the premier American philosopher who argued that school studies should begin with non-academic materials, subjects, and activities. Basing teaching and learning in the culture, conditions, language, and problems of students was also the starting point of Freire's literacy method, which he named *generative themes*. This *bottom-up* or *student-centered* or *experiential* starting point answers the central question of curriculum design, *Where does subject matter come from?* Freire's critical learning process finds its subjects, themes, and topics in the conditions and discourses of the people for whom it is offered. The second foundational question of a critical method asks, *If we find subject matter in the situations of the learners, then what do we do with it?* The Freirean answer: We begin a critical dialogue on the material. Dialogue education poses subject matters as problems for mutual inquiry, for successively deeper study into the contexts, consequences, and power relations embedded in any topic. This is the dialogic process I wanted to use for the talking book when I began work with Paulo many years ago.

Another goal I brought to the making of *A Pedagogy for Liberation* related to our using accessible language. I wanted the discourse of this book to be broadly legible to teachers and students who have been exposed to academic discourse in formal schooling but who do not speak or write in a high-status academic idiom used by

scholars and intellectuals. High-status discourse among scholars is an idiom rich in qualification, apposition, embedded syntax, generalization, abstractness, rhetorical figures, and references to sources credited in a field of expertise. Composing in high-status discourse, a scholar or research professor demonstrates the cultural capital required to claim membership in a disciplinary field of experts. This high-status discourse and identity are gained in extended doctoral training which few of the millions of practicing teachers undertake. Such scholarly discourse is needed for some consequential debates and institutional settings, like when a critical theorist in education or another discipline addresses her or his colleagues in the field or prepares a policy paper to influence debates in society. The talking book I wanted to produce with Paulo was addressed to different speech communities: in-service and pre-service teachers, teacher-educators, students across the curriculum, and directors and practitioners in labor, community, and political education projects. For these audiences, my goal, then, was to speak plain American English in my own voice and to orient Paulo's second-language English into the simplest English possible.

Now, twenty years after Paulo's death, are his theories and practices still relevant? The neoliberal global order has risen to vast power since his passing. He observed neoliberalism's dehumanizing consequences with the assault on wages, job security, standards of living, natural resources, social programs, democratic rights, and public goods like public parks and public education. Paulo had always urged teachers to take part in movements beyond education to defend not only schooling but also democracy and living standards. His recognition that education was not an independent center of power but rather a dependent sub-sector created by elites in power centers elsewhere, remains relevant now in this age of privatization and standardization. Public education is being looted and dismantled to transfer the vast assets of the public sector into private hands, making it urgent for teachers, students, and their families to battle beyond the schoolhouse, the campus, and the classroom.

In the many battles underway and still to be joined, Paulo called on us to avoid copying him. Rather, he advised us to reinvent our theories and practices to suit the needs of our own changing times and places. He opposed standardization as a bureaucratic suffocation of creativity and freedom. His ways of thinking and doing were not to be fetishized: "The only way to follow me is not to follow me." He believed all politics is situated, and because education is a form of politics, it too is a situated practice which must be designed for the people, place, and conditions

where it is undertaken. Yet, even though critical classrooms and programs will differ depending on the site, the students, and the political climate, what unifies all democratic agents is what Paulo referred to as our “dream” for the humane world we want to live in. Paulo Freire’s dream was for a world with less violence, less cruelty, and less injustice. To bring that dream to history, he worked in society as a whole as well as in schools and colleges, where he proposed dialogic, problem-posing education carried on in the name of social justice, for questioning the status quo, against domination, inequality, and manipulation. *Social justice* is the concept used in America now to name the dream unifying a spectrum of identities, interests, and projects, all of whom have a stake in democracy, equality, ecology, and peace.

Everywhere, now, oligarchy rules, what Paulo called “the power now in power.” The dominated majority, “the power not yet in power” to Paulo, have always resisted oppression and continue to do so. Paulo Freire emerged from an earlier time and place of great popular resistance, Brazil in the twenty years before the military coup of 1964. That coup destroyed the democratic movements and Paulo’s literacy program, forcing him into exile until 1980. An exile, a “vagabond of the obvious” as he called himself, he traveled the world encouraging democratic opposition in and out of education, leaving us a treasure of ideas and practices to build from and to reinvent.

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