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## Paulo Freire as Learning Theorist

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**Abstract:** I defend the thesis that Paulo Freire had a theory of learning. Contrary to what learning theorists sustain, I will present a theory of learning in Freire's work.

**Key words:** adult learning, dialectics, lifelong education, Paulo Freire, praxis

*It was while in exile that I realized I was truly interested in learning (Freire, 1985, p. 181).*

*Teaching and learning are a part of the same process of knowing (Freire, 1993a, p. 112).*

A theory of learning is central to the field of Adult Education. Moreover, a theory of learning is actually increasingly important if we consider the fact that we are now referring to our field as lifelong learning rather than adult education. If our Handbooks of the field accurately reflect our major areas of interest, there was a time when we could basically get away without a theory of learning. Before the moniker of lifelong learning, in the era of Adult Education, learning makes only cameo appearances in the Handbooks until the 1989 Handbook when it becomes an obligatory chapter, and framing concept for multiple chapters in all subsequent Handbooks. Gert Biesta (2018) uses the term "learnification" to refer to the ever-increasing focus on learning at the expense of a focus on education in our field and in broader educational policy circles. Moreover, Biesta, like others (Boshier, 1998; Centano, 2011; Crowther & Martin, 2005; Field, 2001; Martin, 2003; Milana, 2012), argues that this increasing focus on, or perhaps take over by, learning in our field to the detriment of education and teaching, is part and parcel of the growing influence of the emphasis on the individual in the still globally hegemonic (Harvey, 2007) ideas of neoliberalism.

In today's Handbooks and other major learning texts in the field of Lifelong Learning and Adult Education, Freire is a frequent reference when discussing social justice or transformation. Yet, when it comes to the ever more frequent discussions of learning and learning theories, Freire is either absent, downplayed, or posed as a figure who is given credit for merely being an advocate for social justice or as somehow having a theory of education or pedagogy, but not a theory of learning (see for example, Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991; Mezirow, 2000). In some way, we have come to a point in the field where we find it acceptable to think about and theorize learning as if it were separate from education and teaching. Our thinking has become so individualized that we find it acceptable to discuss learning as an individual act or as a process that takes place without education. The pinnacle of this transformation is most notable in the area of self-directed learning. It is interesting, however, to consider that much of the early work in this area, before the era of learnification, was actually an effort to, with a nod to Biesta, "educatify" individualized learning. Knowles' (1975) book on self-directed learning, for example, is basically a manual on how a person can become his or her own teacher, with advice on how to set schedules and how to evaluate one's own learning. This educatification of learning seems so embarrassingly antiquated today,

because we increasingly want to consider learning as a process outside of any relationship with what are the inescapably social processes of education and teaching.

This paper runs against the current of the learnification of our field, through presenting a theory of learning based in the work of Paulo Freire that is dialectically related to his understanding of education. In an exception to the treatment of Freire in most contemporary learning texts in the field, Boucouvalas & Lawrence's 2010 Handbook chapter concords with the standpoint I take in this paper. To present what they call a "holistic understanding of learning" (p. 36), Boucouvalas and Lawrence cite Freire. "Teaching and learning are only moments in a greater process which is knowing (Freire, as cited in Boucouvalas and Lawrence, 2010, p. 36).

Boucouvalas and Lawrence (2010), however, are the exception. For basically the entire field of adult education, Freire has an education-focused approach from which we can derive democratic teaching practices. For decades now, we have been reading Freire for insights on teaching and the educational process. Nevertheless, few of us have realized over these years, myself included, that as we are reading Freire for insights into how not to be banking educators, we are at the same time reading his theory of learning; it has been hiding in plain sight. And, if we take the importance of dialectical thinking seriously, we have actually been reading one of the most sophisticated and profound theories of learning without realizing it.

Freire, by never separating learning and teaching, has actually done us a great service; he has actually made our work easier. Today, with our growing list of learning theories (Cherewka, 2019), those of us who are interested in education and teaching are tasked with studying learning theories and then developing or finding educational practices that are in harmony with these learning theories. This is probably most evident with neuroscience approaches to learning and has led to a whole cottage industry of brain-based teaching practices. Here, one of Freire's cardinal tenets is violated, the dichotomizing or separating of the learning and teaching dialectic. As mere educators, we simply do not have the knowledge or skills to understand brain science, so we look for or create the simplified summaries and then try to come up with teaching practices which fit what we know about how the brain works, how humans 'actually' learn.

Freire, however, by refusing to dichotomize the learning/teaching dialectic—because he understood it would violate a basic principle of research that we study reality as it actually is and not how we want it or think it to be—presents both a theory of learning and a theory and practice of teaching in dialectical unity and in correspondence with the dialectical nature of reality (social and natural) itself.

## **Method of Inquiry**

*The act of analyzing cultural action...must be done dialectically. Otherwise, it is impossible to understand (Freire, 1970a, p. 1).*

*Dialectical thinking constitutes one of the major challenges to those who follow the option we are talking about here. It is not always easy (Freire, 1985, p. 130).*

My outline of Freire's theory of learning is based on a philological investigation of Freire's major works. In conducting the philological investigation, I drew on Gramsci's (1971)

methodological guidelines for philological investigations he outlined in his *Prison Notebooks* in Notebook 16, Note 2 titled “Questions of Method” (pp. 382-386). Important to this study, then, was to read both Freire’s texts on education and his autobiographical texts in which he reflects on the historical contexts of both his writing and practice. Moreover, given the unchronological nature of the publishing of English translations of his work--reflected in this paper’s reference list--, it was important to read Freire’s work in the order in which they were written in the original, rather than in the order of their English-language publication.

For the dialectical analysis and presentation of Freire’s theory of learning, I drew on, as Freire (1970b, 1973, 1978) himself did, the work of Mao Tse-Tung (1975). In particular, I draw on Mao’s 1938 article *On Contradiction* in which he discusses principal and secondary contradictions. Since Freire understood reality dialectically, he presents his ideas in terms of contradictions. In reading Freire, one encounters numerous contradictions: theory/practice, subject/object, humans/world, etc. Using elements of Mao’s analysis, I identify Freire’s principal contradictions and secondary contradictions in order to present his theory of learning.

### **Foundational Philosophical Premises**

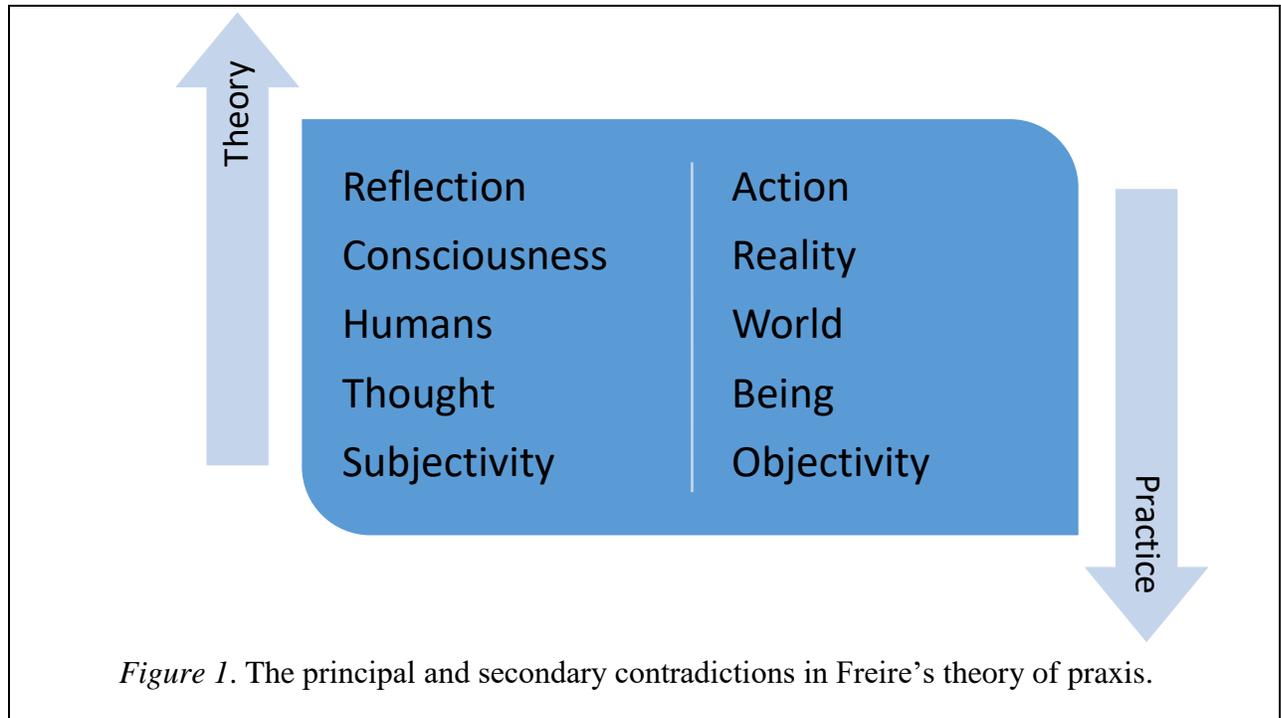
As a part of presenting Freire’s theory of learning, it is important to begin with some of Freire’s foundational philosophical principles regarding social reality that are central building blocks in his theory of learning. Leaving aside the question of whether Freire was a Marxist, Freire shares philosophical principles with Marx. As dialecticians and materialists, both Marx and Freire do not have a lot of static foundational philosophical principles because they begin with the idea that as human beings we are always in a state of becoming; we are never finished becoming human. This also means that Freire identifies very few elements of human nature as starting points for a theory of learning, because as Freire (1970a) says, our “ontological vocation” is to be more human. We are, then, for Freire (2005), beings of praxis. This has profound implications for learning. For as I will detail below, praxis is the most elemental description of Freire’s theory of learning. As beings of praxis, we “constantly create and re-create [our] knowledge...in a permanent act of discovery” (p. 107). This constant act of discovery or learning, which characterizes us as human and makes us more human, is also our self-creation as humans and is our learning. As beings of praxis, then, we are our learning. In Freire’s (1993b) early work he says we are beings of inquiry; in later work, Freire (1997, 1998a, 1998b 1998c) draws on François Jacob’s idea that we are “programmed for learning” in order to emphasize the fact that learning is at the very essence of who we are as (human) beings in a constant process of becoming more human. So, learning is what makes us human, and we make ourselves human by learning. Since learning is a human endeavor, it is also a social endeavor. There is no self-learning or as Freire (1993b) says, “no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world” (p. 61). Dialogue is the means through which we learn and the means through which we engage in continuous inquiry into ourselves, the world, and ourselves in the world; it is the vehicle of praxis. Dialogue is also the process through which we can understand learning as praxis and the inseparability of learning and teaching. “Dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action [praxis] of the dialoguers are addressed to the world” (Freire, 1993b, p. 69).

## The Principal Contradiction that Constitute Freire's Theory of Learning

*There is no teaching without learning* (Freire, 1998a, p. 17; Freire, 1998b, p. 29).

*Only authoritarians separate the act of teaching from the act of learning* (Freire in Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 41)

As I alluded to above, the overarching or principal contradiction in Freire's theory of learning is the one between theory and practice, which is singularly identified under the term praxis. This principal contradiction, however, has several dialectical elements or contradictions within it. These can be considered secondary contradictions and they fill-in more specific aspects of Freire's theory of learning. In Figure 1, I have tried to illustrate the relationship between the Principal Contradiction of praxis (theory/practice) and the secondary contradictions that make up this central contradiction and that help explain it.



For Freire, the starting point for understanding the nature of learning is to understand the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. By theory, Freire is also referring to reflection, consciousness, thought, and subjectivity which are all human endeavors. These endeavors, however, can never be understood outside of our action or being in the objective world or reality. The world or reality, however, is not something outside of ourselves but rather a result of our being in it. Freire is a materialist and not an idealist, so he does begin with the understanding that there is a material world beyond human consciousness, but as a dialectician he also understands that considerations of a world beyond human consciousness are really pointless because our consciousness is also of the world.

From these basic, yet fundamental, contradictions, Freire outlines learning as a process within the dialectical relationship of the individual and the social. In other words, any individual's learning, as in all social theories of learning, cannot be understood outside of a process that is always and inevitably social. Yet, it is Freire's dialectical understanding of this relationship that goes beyond other theories of learning that, because they are not dialectical, may address social aspects of learning but seem unable to get past the one-sided, psychological, and individualistic idea, as in the case of Jarvis (2018) that "the crucial philosophical issue about learning is that it is the person who learns" (p. 18). Indeed, individuals learn, but as Freire (in Freire & Macedo, 1987) argues "consciousness is socially bred....I cannot separate my subjectivity from its social objectivity....[A] theory of education...should neither deny the social...nor emphasize only the development of...individual consciousness" (pp. 47-48). It is only a dialectical understanding, in conformity with the dialectical world in which we live, that can maintain a focus on both the individual and the social in their intersubjectivity (Freire, 1985). Moreover, for Freire, since there is no learning that is not social, there is no learning that is not at the same time a process of education or teaching. For Freire, the most basic definition of learning is the dialectical relationship between knowing subjects (people) mediated by an object or objects about which they want to know more (Freire, 2005). Freire's refusal to separate learning and teaching appears throughout his work (Freire, 1985, 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 1998a, 1998b), but is probably most evident in *Pedagogy of Freedom* which has a whole chapter titled "There is no teaching without learning". It is important to highlight that his understanding of the learning/teaching dialectic goes beyond his oft repeated idea that teachers learn while they teach, and learners teach the teacher while they learn. The learning/teaching contradiction is more profound and is based in Freire's (1998b) "comprehension of the cognitive process" (p. 31) and the nature of our being as unfinished historical beings. Learning and teaching are two poles of a dialectical relationship at the very heart of knowing and Freire's understanding of the dialectical relationship of ontology (being) and epistemology (knowing). Anthropologically, Freire argues that learning, for our species, preceded teaching. In our learning over time, we came to realize that there were ways of teaching. Historically, teaching emerged from learning, it "is part of the very fabric of learning" (p. 31). And any teaching that "does not emerge from the experience of learning cannot be learned by anyone" (p. 31). Freire's insistence on the dialectical unity of learning and teaching cannot be understood outside of his dialectical understanding of the relationship between theory and practice (praxis), or our intentionality toward the world in an effort to theorize or understand the world.

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