

SHORT VERSION

Counting telephone poles – or learning to think?

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In the heydays of the great adult educators Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and Paulo Freire, lay and learned all over the world became fascinated with their new thoughts and ways of implementing education, especially for youth and adults. Today, a generation on, we seem to have forgotten much of it. We are making education into a technological process, learners into subjects and teaching methods into techniques for how to fill the learners' heads with pre-planned content and skills. But real education is much more. It is learning to think, do and be – in new ways in an ever-changing world. Learning to count telephone poles won't take us far. Besides, soon the telephone poles will be gone anyway.

Julius Nyerere was Tanzania's first President. He was given the honorary title of *teacher* or, in Swahili, *mwelimu*, which is a word originating from Arabic, of course.

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher, who also advised on education in the West Africa's countries of Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. The methods were quite simple, but they required commitment and involvement from the teachers, or facilitators, as well as the participants because the learning content was to be *functional*, not just bookish knowledge that would be more easily forgotten.

Paulo Freire's most famous book '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*' was published in Portuguese in 1968 and in English in 1970. This was a time when many saw socialism as a framework for change in the West and the developing countries, many just taking their uncertain steps as independent states, some still under the yoke of colonialism. In Christianity, especially in Latin-America, the 'liberation theology' was about daily life as much as about faith. It challenged the oppressors' lack of moral justification for their rule – in the fields of race, class, economy, colonialism, gender, war and peace.

"No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunate, and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in their struggle for redemption", Freire wrote in his 1970 book.

In order to analyze and understand reality, and find ways to greater freedom for the oppressed (and the oppressors), one must study conditions through the use of the concepts of language. People must themselves define their conditions, not the oppressors, and to do that they need concepts and relevant terms. Teachers and facilitators of the revolutionary processes must constantly question and re-examine their own interests in serving the oppressed – so that they can take charge of their own destiny – "be their own example in their struggle for redemption".

In the modern world, literacy and schooling are seen as fundamental for participation in society and enabling people to have a say in their life at individual and collective levels. In Freire's Brazil, it was a requirement to be literate to be allowed to vote (and in Pakistan, an MNA must have a university degree). But literacy and other education must be functional, purposeful and practical. The words and topics to be studied must be relevant to people's everyday life, and in formulating paths out of misery.

It isn't quite revolutionary thinking; it is rather stating the obvious, that every human being has the same value and needs. Freire built on philosophers, educators and revolutionaries throughout history, from Platon to Hegel, from Christ to Marx and Simone Weil, and many others. In education, Jean-Jacque Rousseau and John Dewey were important.

In Tanzania, the literacy campaigns in the 1970s, and the further education efforts, were less revolutionary since the land under Mwalimu Nyerere was already a proclaimed socialist state. His own teachings through speeches and writings focused on people-power against local and international capitalists and exploiters. Educated people were told to serve the poor with the book as the peasants till the land by the hoe. The framework was “Education for self-reliance”. ‘Boss-mentality’ could land you in court.

When the masses in Tanzania demanded primary education for all in the late 1970s, the leaders were not quite prepared for it in one of the world’s poorest countries. Yet, it was introduced.

If it could be done in Tanzania one and half generation ago, it can certainly be done in Pakistan today! I am glad that the current government plans to double the education budgets over the next five years. Money is important, but the leaders’ will is more important, and the philosophy on which education rests.

Sadly, in today’s world, we seem little interested in intellectual and political thinkers like. We have become as technocrats. Nyerere, Freiere and many other educators and politicians warned against that when I was a young student fascinated with their new ideas. We thought we were on the way to the ‘promised land’, where poverty and ignorance would be gone. Much good has been done, for example in fields like gender equality and environmental protection. Apartheid in South Africa is gone, at least in its crudest form, as we celebrated last week at Nelson Mandela’s passing. But there are many other fields of ‘apartheid’ and oppression, which are less visible and therefore less easy to fight and eradicate, including the denial of literacy and basic education.

The ‘wise’ men have misled us; our education systems don’t serve ordinary people. In the West, they serve the two-thirds at the top, but not the one-third at the bottom – the poor people, immigrants, minorities, mentally challenged, drug abusers, and others who fall outside mainstream society. And with deeper analysis, we realize that even the interests of the majority are also not served in the right way.

At school, we learn to count telephone poles, but we don’t learn to think, analyze and be, at least not well enough. Our functional skills are not as good as they should be – in spite of the long time children and youth spend at school.

A few weeks ago, the results from the OECD student assessment survey, PISA, was released. It became evident, again, that educators and politicians seem mainly interested in knowing how high their country ranks on the list, how well the fifteen-year olds tested do in math, science and language, the three fields measured in some sixty-five countries. American youth don’t do very well, but they are self-confident; I would rank that high.

It is an ill wind that blows no good; even PISA may bring some good. But the whole exercise borders on the ridiculous. Why should anybody desire to be best on a score-card? It is impossible to measure the most important things: how well young people understand their surroundings, how good they are at analyzing issues, how kind and creative they are so they can solve tomorrow’s problems. I would be worried if children all over the world scored high on the PISA test. Then technocracy would have won the battle and Nyerere’s and Freire’s efforts would be futile. But they aren’t. Let us study what they did – and talk less about PISA.

I hope that the debates that follow the PISA survey may help us to push the ‘refresh button’ in our minds so that we can bring education back to what it is meant to be: learning to think, analyze and be; trying to understand life and death; find new and fairer ways of organizing our lives and communities, and much more. Learning to work in offices, administer factories, build roads, sell new cars, and so on, is also needed. But all those things are just means, not end-results. Life is much more than that. Real education must help us learn the important things, not just counting telephone poles.

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