A Critique of Freire, and Dreams is an excerpt from Listening Up: Reinventing Ourselves as Teachers and Students by Rachel Martin.
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tended to the tape alone, I was able to interpret myself in a way I never had before. I was taken aback by how tentative I seemed, stumbling over my words, groping for new ways to say the very thing I’d just said. That’s not how I usually talk, and it forced me to think about the rationale I must have been operating under. I saw an until then unconscious thread that guided some of my talk in the classroom. I was preoccupied with my language because I was worried the women wouldn’t get what I was saying. Listening to their part of the discussion, it was quite clear they understood just fine. And I was too busy thinking about what I was saying to see where they were meanwhile taking the discussion.

I say all of this to acknowledge my own need to recognize assumptions that sometimes still take hold of me and interfere with my ability to see the people in my classes, to learn, and to effectively implement a theory of teaching that rests on that very seeing and learning.

I also say this to acknowledge my need to reckon, day one, with what I think is many participants’ assumption that I think I know more than they do—an assumption based on their knowledge of the attitudes often evidenced by middle-class White people. I think people will use interpretive techniques and engage with reading and writing, finally uninhibited by spelling errors or a beginning knowledge of English, only when they perceive that we as teachers are honest in our desire to join in a collaboration.

This was true for me as a student in one of my recent schooling experiences. The courses in which I stretched myself were those taught by a professor who, without disavowing her own expertise, made it clear she had as much to learn from us as we had to learn from her. During class discussions with other instructors, when I was positioned as someone who was to eventually see what the professor already knew, my mouth stayed closed. This was true even when I agreed with what one faculty member wanted me to “get,” her left and feminist perspective closer to my own than the aforementioned professor’s had been. But I had to believe there was an honest dialogue to enter before I would step in.

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I will argue in Chapter Three that, in one respect, Freirian pedagogy and the popular notion of people as dysfunctionally illiterate are flip sides of the same coin. While the political motives of each are quite opposed, both give at least the impression of assuming that without literacy, people lack the ability to think critically, to act on their own behalf, to even believe change is possible. Before moving to the next chapter,
I want to say that while Freire’s influence in radical education is widespread, critiques of either his writings themselves or their impact in the field are only rarely published. This may be due as much to self-censorship as to the lack of a critical gaze. To engage in such reflection is to open oneself to suspicion, if not attack. One infamous example is the reaction to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering?” (1989). Peter McLaren writes of Ellsworth’s piece,

[This] woeful misreading of the tradition she so cavalierly indicts [is full of] distortions, mystifications, and despair [based on her] self-professed lack of pedagogical success [and] her inability to move beyond her own self-doubt, [thereby] hold[ing] her voice hostage [and] using theory as a scapegoat for failed practice. (in Lather 1992, 126, emphasis mine)

Henry Giroux adds,

She succumbs to the familiar academic strategy of dismissing others through the use of straw man tactics and excessive simplifications which undermine not only the strengths of her own work, but also the very nature of social criticism itself. (in Lather 1992, 126, emphasis mine)

I have also experienced intellectual attack, as well as dismay from community activists I respect, one of whom was astonished that I would criticize Freire because “he is a revolutionary!” That Freire’s revolutionary commitment can be an inspiration to all of us is undeniable. What are worth questioning are both Freire’s words and the degree to which they have been relied on by radical educators here. Most importantly, to the extent that I was previously moved by some of the very passages in Freire’s work of which I am now critical, this rereading is really a challenge to my earlier, and sometimes still present, self.

I am indebted to Freire and the teachers who were inspired by him for what they have taught me about such central themes as motivation, student-generated themes, and language. But there are important ways in which I’ve changed since my early reliance on Freirian pedagogy. Freire wrote, “Even though my tomorrow and my there are clear to me, I cannot manipulate the students to bring them with me to my dream. . . . I have to convince students of my dreams, but not conquer them for my own plans.” (Shor & Freire 1987, 156–157). I’m not suggesting we abandon our dreams or hide them, adopting a neutral stance regarding the future. But if our tomorrows are so clear, why aren’t we further along in realizing them? Maybe there is something for us to more deeply deconstruct about our own consciousness—with our students—in order to reconstruct dreams, and ways of achieving them, that will come true. It’s toward this end that I turn to Chapter Three.
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