Abstract

Creating democratically engaged citizens always has been one of the underlying functions of social studies teachers, albeit not listed in most state standards. Voter apathy and the lack of civic engagement, even voting, truly stresses this point. Almost every student in the USA has to attend several history classes and one government/civics class. Even at that level the impact of these classes seems to be minimal on civic participation. This essay investigates the idea of Dimension 4 of the College, Career and Civic Life (C3) framework, “Action” and how that process of teaching through the lens of Paulo Freire could impact this lack of civic engagement. This article begins with a brief analysis of the difficulty of teaching for Action. It then investigates notions of a commodified pedagogy, and how such a rationale creates problems for an Action-type pedagogy. The College, Career and Civic life framework then is briefly discussed. From there, Paulo Freire is introduced and then an exploration of how his nuances of societal change can happen within the classroom. The article briefly discusses how Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework fits within Freire's pedagogical style. This paper points classroom teachers toward his work and the promise of high energy critical thought which is a rationale for civic action.

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Freire, 2000, p. 34).

The claim that public schooling moves students toward being motivated and critically engaged democratic actors is debatable. The authors of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards were concerned enough to include informed action as one of their four dimensions of good social studies teaching (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Critical thinking is a precursor to Dimension 4 Action. One of the most common negative mutterings from faculty members at universities is that students entering higher education cannot think critically. According to these professors, these students either blindly follow what is said in the classroom or are extremely apathetic. In my own classes I have noticed a similar phenomenon—that students seem to be either amazed or confused when confronted with the complexity of critical analysis. From a critical perspective, this is the deficit of a pedagogical system and society that privileges facts over contextual understandings, and this thinking should not be reductively framed as the deficits of students. More often than not, I encounter students who want to explore knowledge in more profound and meaningful ways. They are inspired and intrigued by the possibilities critical thinking allows. After reflecting on these statements and my own thoughts, I realized that I, a purportedly critical educator, was seemingly “asleep” in ways similar to the students. I felt a description of the Freirean process, the most profound teaching method/pedagogical thought process I had experienced in the classroom, was in order. This process is akin to Maxine Greene's (1988) “wide-awakedness” that links the students' knowledge to what is needed to be known, a style not just of pedagogy but understanding. This wide-awakedness enhanced my classroom instruction...
exponentially. Similarly, such a practice would be useful for a social studies teacher to become the catalyst for informed discourse and the facilitator of democratic action with their students. This paper discusses the Freirean pedagogical stance that could help the classroom teacher provide insight into the struggle for civic motivation and critical thought. From this discussion, the paper offers suggestions as to the possibility of the integration of Freirean critical pedagogy as a complement to the C3, thus to create a more complete critical tool for the classroom.

**Discussion**

Action requires participants in a democracy to form critical judgments to determine notions of right or wrong. The National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) C3 College, Career and Civic Framework demands Action in the 4th Dimension of the Framework (NCSS, 2013). The title of Dimension 4 is ‘Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.’ The C3 Framework takes this concept seriously, concluding that most social studies classes should culminate in an idea of social Action. Notice that the word Civics in the title is used mildly but one still indicates the concept of Action. Where can students get the motivation for Action in the K-12 environment? As a former social studies teacher and current teacher educator, I have encountered social studies classes that frame historical study as memorizing facts. These classes conceptualize time as a linear progression of events, with singular historical agents catalyzing events disconnected from complex social contexts. The stories are random, not connected to causal underpinnings and investigations, but seem to exist in isolation. Of course, not all social studies classes are like this, but as Wayne Au (2009) notes, the instrumentality of standardized testing promotes this behavior by teachers. The instruction is far from relevant to students’ lives. The phrase, ‘History is so boring!’ resounds. Often, there are very few places within schools where students and teachers can challenge the status quo or actively investigate social constructions from non-dominant perspectives of memorizing facts.

Social studies classrooms can offer a rich site for such challenging practices because of comparatively minimal amount of ‘curricular enclosure’ by high-stakes accountability measures. DeLissovoy & Cedillo, (2016) explain how curricular enclosure is a process that marketizes schools and instrumentalizes curriculum to match an economic rationality, this replaces democratic concerns and capacities for market logics. In order for students to begin to judge experience and to decide how they feel about an issue, students first must develop the critical tools with which to judge an issue (Slater & Griggs, 2015). The current influence of market demands, both in and outside of schools, makes criticality a difficulty for all citizens. Students just share this malaise. These critical tools must include discourses that allow students access to vocabulary and methods that challenge notions of power and privilege (Segall, 2013). Why is it imperative that the curricula have these discourses included? As Segall (2013) notes, “Critical discourses do not see knowledge and the practices legitimated by them as disinterested, natural, objective, or neutral. Instead, knowledge and ways of knowing are already positioned and positioning, embedded with ideologies, assumptions, values, and worldviews” (p. 478). If one is going to teach the social studies then one should have to advance some form of critique. Byrd (2012) explains how this critique is enacted in the classroom:

> Rather than viewing social studies education as a passive acceptance and memorization of unchanging causal relationships and events, students involved in a deliberation of concepts and meanings are better equipped to evaluate these systemic relationships and determine how ideas around the nature of society evolve, change, and constitute various forms of thinking (p. 1077).

In order to create the action in the history classroom, the teacher must advance a critique that provides the justification for Action. Students in a democracy are not going to take Action, or “defend their democratic rights,” unless they perceive a wrong to themselves or others (Gradwell, Rodeheaver & Dahlren, 2015). It is imperative that they perceive such justice to defend human rights, here and abroad. Students may not realize the full extent of their own feelings or judgments on an issue without critical discourse. But how does the social studies teacher provide such discourse? What pedagogy invokes a platform for such discourse?

Through its framework, the C3 enables the students to begin the process of critical work. By defining the world as a set of questions and hypothesis that are testable, C3 frames the study of history as critical work. The dimensions in C3 focus on the stages of research that form scientific premise and inference, and with the addition of logic, that becomes the foundation of critical thought. Known as the Inquiry Arc the C3 (National Council of the Social Studies, 2013), it has four dimensions:
• Dimension One, developing questions and planning inquiries,
• Dimension Two, applying disciplinary concepts and tools,
• Dimension Three, evaluating sources and using evidence, and
• Dimension Four, communicating conclusions and taking informed action.

These four dimensions complete the Inquiry Arc to facilitate historical understanding and inferences of the future. The deductive and inductive nature of a classroom following curriculum designed with this framework compels students to be immersed in the actual work of doing history. Basically, it is the historical method codified for classroom use. The weekly practice of curriculum planning with C3 allows history teachers to engage students in inquisitive studies of the past, helping to circumvent the overwhelming urge to learn history as isolated non-relevant facts. It stops the memorization train. The main skill that it builds is motivation to figure out the answers to historical questions and how these questions relate to today (Grant, 2013). This framework coupled with a Freirean facilitated critical discourse create a complete critical operation.

Context

When I was a high school social studies teacher, I had many experiences of critical thinking with students in the classroom. The problem with these brief moments of critical insight is that, without a constant dialectic of practice and reflection, critical classroom moments can become isolated instances, not a regular practiced discourse. Thus, no critical actor is established with the students. Critical thought is not just a pedagogy but a lived experience (Foucault, 1995). Later, as a graduate student, I reflected on my pedagogical practice teaching high school. I realized that during those moments of criticality, the students had discovered the fact that sovereign power could be negating, prohibiting, censoring, and homogenizing. The students accomplished this stemming from a Freirean question, “Who rules me?” I had stumbled onto Critical Pedagogy. It was not just about the question, because many questions do not create a critical environment. It was about how the students situated themselves within the question. The students always were concerned with the justifications of all the rules in high school. This question attempted a personal connection with the democratic lesson. I was motivating them to embark on a critical engagement.

As a graduate student, I began to grasp the significance of this personal student connection for my pedagogy with the introduction to the work of Paulo Freire (2000) and Critical Pedagogy. Through Freire, I began to understand how beneficial it is for democracy to incorporate critical thinking into the curriculum. It was a foundation to understanding one’s life and the world; the pedagogy juxtaposes the student with the concept that needs to be known (Freire, 2000). I began to understand the critical process and more meaningful ways to practice it in my own life. Self-reflection was the primary practice where I critically journeyed every day. I began to know theoretically why thinking critically is so important for a democracy. Without an individual thinking subject, democracy cannot exist. Books like Pedagogy of the Freedom (Freire, 2009) and Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire, 2000) as with other Freire texts, can lead the social studies teacher to motivate their students to see the world anew, to see themselves as actors in their own dramas. Freire termed this ‘conscientization’ - critical consciousness raising. It was a powerful understanding for me. Once I started using visual codifications, Freire’s main dialectical catalyst (i.e. photographs or paintings), I observed an important manifestation. As the students decoded these images, they made a greater commitment to the lesson. The depth and pertinent dialogue about and within the lesson happened with greater regularity. If the codification was chosen correctly the students became adept at grasping the concept almost every time. One of the most important factors for an instructor is ‘knowing’ your students well enough to plan the codifications precisely to link the student to the concept. The student’s own background knowledge meets a codified catalyst (an imbedded marker within the instruction), from that point new knowledge is created (Freire, 1998). It is an empowering experience. Students come to understand complex concepts on their own by decoding objects such as photos, art objects, songs, and letters. The student must be allowed time to wrestle with the object. The compound thoughts that begin to occur within the students can then be enhanced with the addition of vocabulary and context cues from the lesson to form new knowledge through the discourse. The students can come alive during this process, because they are caught in the dynamic of knowledge construction. They realize, as Horton and Freire (1990) state, “We make the road by walking” (p. 3). Education becomes the act of knowledge building and thus the ultimate human experience.
As a secondary social studies teacher and a teacher educator at the university level, I have been inspired by Paulo Freire's educational thought to reconsider history teaching as an active and collective struggle to engage with students in constructing knowledge. Such engagement inspires history teachers and students to jump into a discourse that unleashes creativity, empathy, and logic. It can build a more ‘just’ world through action, ‘parresia’ as Freire termed (Freire, 2000). My history classes were more meaningful and interrogated historical and political phenomenon at a greater depth at a level at which the student will not forget, because they lived it. Not surprisingly, Freire’s literacy results in Brazil were astounding as well. There are many resources online and in print for Freire’s methods, rationale, and the stories of his teaching. Relevant methods include encoded imagery, open cueing, open questioning, active dialogue, deconstruction of a complex concept, and implicit call to action.

**Freirean Method Adapted for the High School Classroom**

The Freirean Method is a critical discourse between an object, the teacher and the student (Freire, 2000 & Freire, 2009). It begins by creating or choosing a physical object that has a social theme, and that relates to the state standard. All objects have linguistic codes or themes embedded within them. The teacher chooses the object with an appropriate code, or assigns the object a code from its connection to the instructional standard. In Freire’s terms, the codes are called the generative themes. To assign a code the teacher creates prompts that helps the student see the code.

For example, one of the simplest objects to work with is a photograph. The state standards point towards the content that is to be taught, from that standard the object is chosen. If the standard for the week is the Great Depression, one may choose a photograph that shows a family packed up in a car on the side of a dusty road. Such a photograph already has the linguistic codes of poverty, despair, and hunger built into it. It sets the context to help the students understand the period under study. If the teacher cannot find such a picture, one is chosen for its similarity to the content understudy, such as choosing a picture of a dusty road. The teacher assigns the codes that need to be in the object to prompt the students as the Freirean method is employed to decode it. The first photograph of the family works better because the codes are so explicit but either can be used successfully. Picking the object is very important to the success of the exercise. Examples of other objects for the Great Depression standard are a worn out pair of shoes, a box of sand, torn clothes, a map of the migration of homelessness, a tin from the time period, and any other object that ‘can’ represent the standard concretely. Freire’s objects were chosen by intensive conversations with the participants in his classes, called Culture Circles. From the transcripts of these group meetings he would choose the objects. Freire was known to use paintings as his objects, assigning codes to them that related to his participants’ themes (Freire, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987). In today’s classroom, the object selection is dictated by standards, rather than generating a theme from classroom participants.

Once the object is chosen then the dialogic method is used to expose the codes for student consideration. In most cases, the students do the decoding directly, with some prompting from the teacher, through a conversation between the students about the object (Shor & Freire, 1987). These methods mentioned previously in this piece include open cueing, open questions, active dialogue, deconstruction and an implicit call to action. Open cueing refers to the use of selected words to make the object come alive thematically. I indicate such words with a hashtag because students are familiar with this classification or grouping device. The first cue is always “what is going on in this object?” The cue is #represent. In the example of the Great Depression photo, I might use additional cues such as #dust, #hopelessness, #hunger, #fault, #destiny, but the final code is always #power. Power is included at the end because it relates to how the students see themselves in the world through power relations. These suggestions of cues are specific to the example photograph. The teacher chooses cues that directly relate to the standard. The minimum amount of cues are key to the student ownership of the knowledge-- the less, the better.

These cues can be accompanied by open questions that may or may not include the cue. Once the students are using the cues in multiple encounters with objects, the less questions have to be used. These questions are always open ended allowing the students to hypothesize questions and answers as they engage the object. The questions are generated by selection of the object and conversations with the students in the classroom. A student’s background context is essential for this step as the questions are relevant to the student’s lived experience. The process is similar to the Socratic method, proposing some problem or conundrum in the
object, as it relates to the student’s lives and reveals the standard under study (Freire, 2000; Freire, 2009).

An example of an open question with the example is “Why would these people leave their farms to find a new life?” A very simple question, but the foundation of understanding the ramifications and relevance of the Great Depression. A final open question is “Why would I choose this particular object for us to study?” This helps students understand my motivation, giving the object relevance to the lesson.

The active dialogue prompts the students to have a conversation with the object. It begins with one of the open questions but in a direct conversational format. The teacher would prompt the active dialogue with the question, “Why did you do this to me?” The object begins the dialogue. This enables the class to answer the question, then make-up other questions the object might ask, then later answer, at first this seems like a convoluted process but it is amazing how students take to this activity.

Deconstruction is the process of deducing the pieces of a concept associated with an object under study. The teacher begins with a complex concept, such as poverty, and the students use the codes in the object to help split the concept into its associate verbal identifications. This enables curiosity and inquisitive positing of the concept. The positing becomes an investigation of how the concept relates to or justifies the object. A complex concept like poverty could be posed with the example of the photograph of the dusty road. The students would decode the concept as it relates to the object. The codes pull the students towards an active investigation of the complex concept.

The final characteristic that surfaces from this theoretical framework is the implicit call to Action. This is termed “epistemological curiosity” (Freire, 2001, p.37). Normally, if all these methods are initiated by the teacher, this call to action happens naturally. If not it can be proposed by the teacher with a couple of open questions: “Why is understanding this important to our Republic?” “What does this concept have to do with today’s problems in the world?” A final call could be, “How can I keep this from ever happening again?” or “How do I fix or mitigate this problem today?” The students personify these question as they relate to the object. Most often, the students will make this leap as they exhaust the codes in the object.

The C3 Framework Relationship

This process relates to the C3 Framework in several aspects. The first is C3 Dimension 1, Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries. Each object actively engages the student directly enabling them to ask the object questions and make hypothesis as to the relation of it to the subject. These questions become the lived experience of the student because the student generated the questions they have of the object. Many of these questions are generated without a prompt, with the dialogic interaction with the object. The answers that students glean from the process enables them to create a hypothesis to study. Some students will continue the investigation on their own if the dialogical interaction is compelling.

The most interesting event using a Freirean Method is the ability of the instruction to create relevance to students within lived experience. It gives students a stake in what they are discussing. They make informed inferences and conclusions on the topic which is investigated. Because students begin the lesson decoding an artifact, the investigation belongs to them. Students have ownership in the inquiry. Such ownership creates a bond between students, the topic and the social world (lived experience). Students see themselves as actors on the world. The act of dialogical communication culminates in the impetus for informed Action by students. Dialogical communication is the action of the application of knowledge on the social world. As students view the photo of the Great Depression, they begin to decode and decipher from previous schema. This is an active process and much of it is interpreted through the lens of the lived experience of the student. From there, the motivation to want to communicate and discuss conclusions is present. The implicit call to action requires motivation. It is not just an exercise in the social studies classroom. The C3 Dimension 4 indicates this process and action should transfer to the students lived experience. It should change them into active participants in the vibrant republic (NCSS, 2013).

The topic that the student investigates begins to live. Freire discusses the fetish of today’s teaching methods that posit knowledge as dead lifeless bits of info that exists independent of any experience from which it came, known as banking education (Freire, 2000). Dialogical teaching is a lived process. To Freire, the knowledge...
is not dead and lifeless. It is a meaningful part of the students’ lives (Freire, 2000).

The classroom instruction built in Freire’s manner allows the learner to become an active citizen. Freire, using this form of instruction, prompted a revolution, was then imprisoned, and finally exiled and then returned as a hero. His teaching is known as reading the world, because of its ability to place a learner in an active role within a lived world.

A lesson with such a dialogical method begins with the end in mind—the hoped-for Action. “How will you as a student change your world?” “How will you make a difference?” “What small step can you start with?” These are eternal life questions that anyone at any age ponders. How does a democratic republic operate to create a better world? It is only changed through action—the informed action referenced by Dimension 4 (NCSS, 2013).

Freire does deserve some criticisms. Much of the specific critical process that Freire proposes in his original instruction is housed in the language of oppression. This type of political critique, economic and social critique comes from Marx. But interesting, the Brazilian Government on Freire’s return is democratic. Marx is not the greatest postulator of governance but his social critique is relevant in sociological and educational critical theory.

Conclusion

In summation, I will offer some solace to history teachers who feel disconnected from their students and pedagogical lives. Freirean pedagogy is not just another method. Freire’s famous text was not titled Pedagogy for the Oppressed, but rather Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This indicates that the locus of action rests in the dynamic collectivity of teachers, students, schools, and communities. Freirean pedagogy is not the passive practice of scripted curriculum; it is a dynamic process of knowledge construction between teachers, students, and the social world. The subjectivity—the knowledges, desires, and worldviews—that Freirean pedagogy locates within students and teachers is profound. It can enliven students from the deadening drudgery of standardized schooling. The critical investigations spurred by this stance on pedagogy can mirror the real historical processes used by historians, engaging both students and teacher in the act of doing history, instead of merely reading it. Once students are involved in these investigations initiated and described by the C3 framework, made relevant through a Freirean lens, the impetus for civic involvement is raised substantially. Students have the ability to move from just learning history to making it.

References


