

Learning to Dance

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In his early manuscripts, Karl Marx condemns the way capitalism forces human beings into fulfilling only their most primitive functions. He writes that “an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young . . . it produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need,” leaving him able to create objects of vision and beauty (76). Yet in the capitalist system, the worker produces goods for others and receives a paycheck for his troubles. Thus, the worker begins to produce not for the sake of personal fulfillment, but to earn wages; in Marx’s own words, production becomes “not the satisfaction of a need . . . [but] a *means* to satisfy needs external to it,” such as food and shelter (74). The worker reverts to the animalistic state, in which the ability to create becomes a mere means of survival.

Brazilian educational critic Paulo Freire takes this logic a step further with his own definition of what it means to be human. In Freire’s view, the ability to question and to apply the fruits of our questioning to our everyday lives is an essential component of our humanity; he writes that “apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human” (369). It is not enough simply to mold our resources into physical objects, or to exert ourselves to make something new. Rather, Freire adds thought into the equation—thought, and the ability to think critically about the world we live in. But Freire does not advocate sitting around, mulling over ideas. He has no interest in the life of the solitary intellectual who pursues studies in the abstract. In fact, what Freire means by “inquiry” can be taken as an extension of Marx’s notion of “creation” in that it is concerned not merely with knowledge but with application; “inquiry” is intimately wound up with our actions in the world.

Equipping all members of society with the capacity for such “inquiry” is thus critical to preserving our humanity. Freire advocates education as an enabler of the impoverished and the disenfranchised, a means by which they

may become active agents of their own destinies and create a world after their own vision. We are human because we can transform the world around us, because we strive for more than necessity; and teaching us how to tangibly apply these unique traits should be the goal of education.

Tragically, today's education system bears more resemblance to the fruitless production line Marx so decries than to the inquiry-enabling institution Freire advocates. Indeed, Freire criticizes what he calls our "banking concept of education," the system "in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits," the information provided by the instructor (368). In this system, to learn is to memorize and to absorb as much of the truth as is currently accepted by the teacher (and, most likely, society). Because students cannot learn without a teacher, the personal experiences and observations of the student are rendered obsolete; the student cannot possibly conceive an original idea of any merit because of the lack of supporting evidence, and so the student does not attempt to think about worldly matters for her or himself. If valuable ideas are in fact "owned" by someone else—someone better educated—then they cannot form an important part of the average person. Just as the workers in Marx's view are isolated from their own ability to produce, the students are isolated from their ability to engage in the creative process.

But students, like Marx's proletariat, do not always accept such a stultifying system and may rebel. I became aware of this belligerence through a surprising encounter I had as a student in a test prep class. It was a month ago in New York City, but it could have been a classroom anywhere—a white board up front and a shelf of dictionaries in the back; students chattering in the transitional time between lessons; a boy with his head on the desk, desperate to catch an extra few minutes' sleep. It was a scene that belonged to schools all over the country—that is, until one girl suddenly stood up and started swinging her hips from side to side. Above her head her hands were crossed at the wrist, and her tongue was still for the first time since she had walked through the door. Laughter greeted her movements, a half-exasperated "Girl, you crazy!" from a student across the aisle. Her performance was as out of place to them as it was to me, and none of us could look away. The intense focus on her face was as noticeable as her disregard of the work she was supposed to be doing in the classroom. The sample GED essay that lay carelessly on the desk—that was secondary. *This* was her passion. This was where she found herself.

The five-paragraph essay the girl was supposed to be writing, with its rigid structure and preconception of acceptable answers, embodies the bank-

ing concept. One's point is sufficiently proven not by the quality of one's arguments, but by the quantity of "supporting details"—three per main idea, at least. Subjects worthy of discussion are preselected and distributed to the students. The test taking place—a timed exercise—examines not quality of insight, but the speed with which students can articulate even the most mediocre, mundane statements. Such statements are not original ideas, but phrases regurgitated from prior lectures. This type of production is no different from the production of an assembly line. The creation is divorced from the humanity of the creator; the creation is made to reach an end—a passing grade—rather than to serve as a means to self-expression. Within these essays, socially acceptable ideas are churned out for circulation, with those that best fit the formula held up as an indication of progress. The student's most prized work becomes divorced from the student's ability to conceive an original idea. Just like the factory worker, the student's work is not her own but belongs to someone of higher status. The student does not affirm herself through the creative process, but satisfies the requirements of the social order. Is it any wonder that the girl in my classroom was less than enthusiastic?

Because test prompts are unlikely to be either intellectually stimulating or creatively satisfying—questions such as “What was the happiest day of your life, and why?” and “What is the most important article of household furniture?” spring to mind—students complete them for only one reason: to acquire a degree. Just as the factory worker creates only for the sake of a paycheck, education becomes merely a means to an end, the means of obtaining the certification that allows us to obtain more prestigious jobs and higher pay. Students in the classroom I observed were practicing for the upcoming GED exam; students in my high school classrooms wrote to receive grades that would impress colleges and future employers. Where we ought to have felt the tremendous power of our species—for humankind alone educates its members—we saw only the comforts of a steady salary and a white picket fence. Our education became an obligation we must fulfill to achieve status, instead of a laboratory in which to generate new ideas and innovations.

However, such alienation is inevitable in education. Science, math, basic historical facts, languages—each of these subject areas could be said to have definitive yes/no answers, specific principles that must be understood, numerical formulas that must be memorized and absorbed. Freire advocates abolishing clear-cut boundaries between pupil and instructor, characterizing the ideal roles of each as “student-teacher” and “teacher-student,” with both groups simultaneously learning and instructing (373). Yet we cannot learn

about Newton's theories, Plato's philosophy, or the Pythagorean theorem by discussing them with people who have not already studied them. In these instances, the teacher must necessarily lead the discussion; she is already at an advantage in her greater knowledge of the subject matter. But how might we correct the system while staying true to the spirit of imparting hallowed knowledge?

I think the answer has to do with the desire to dance. For the girl in my classroom, dancing was a form of self-expression, something she was not able to achieve through her studies. To Freire, this is a problem in itself. Inquiry, and our ability to use it to transform the external world, is what Freire holds to be the highest expression of our humanity. Yet the student did not sit down to express her ideas with pen and paper, but stood up and shook her hips, suggesting that dancing was to her more expressive of her true self than writing.

This return to the physical, to the sensual, as an escape from education, is not unique. As I looked around the classroom that day, I noticed a series of acrostic poems plastered on the walls. It was the sort of exercise intended both to fortify the students' sense of self and to send them racing to the thesaurus. Each poem bore a student's name and that student's "personal" qualities. The "L" in Luisa stood for "luscious and lovely"; the "S" in Sam for "sexy"; the "T" in Tatiana for "tantalizing." Every poem contained at least one adjective having to do with the sexual or the physical. Bored by the task at hand, these students, like my classmate, danced around the requirements of the assignment, spicing up their otherwise production-line education.

But there is a difference between those poems and the girl's dancing: while she rejected the system in favor of something more expressive, the poems were an attempt to make the system less dreary. It is this expressive spirit we need to harness if we are to turn our classrooms into true places of inquiry. In his speech "The American Scholar," Emerson re-imagines the role of classical literature in contemporary education. To him, the classics should not be used as "deposits" to be stored inside students, as vehicles of absolute truth, but should be read for what still rings true today. Emerson emphasizes that

as the seer's hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume. The discerning will read, in his Plato or Shakespeare, only that least part,—only the authentic utterances of the oracle;—all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato's and Shakespeare's. (59)

The most acclaimed authors of the past may be acclaimed for their timeless insight, but that does not mean all of their insights *are* timeless. He advises us that “one must be an inventor to read well,” and warns us that it is “better [to] never see a book, than to be warped by its attraction clean out of [our] own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system” (57). Although Emerson advocates the study of famous literature, he believes that this study is only beneficial to the extent that the student may build upon such ideas and expand them.

Emerson’s premise is that absolute truths, truths common to all human experience throughout the ages, do exist; a supposition Freire, who criticizes those who believe in “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” axioms, would most likely disagree with (368). To Freire, reality is not a constant, but a “process,” fluctuating and advancing with the efforts of individuals (370). But whether or not we accept this premise, it seems as though we ought to be able to make that decision for ourselves. Are there timeless truths in classical literature? We can only ascertain this by reading the works themselves, and judging whether or not what we find there corresponds to our own experience.

If such truths do exist, studying classical literature can serve an additional progressive purpose. To Emerson, schools only become significant “when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame” (59). The value of studying the accumulated knowledge of the past is the value of inspiring future generations towards further creation. Education cannot be limited to understanding previously formulated theories, but must be extended to critical analyses of their strengths and weaknesses, their accuracies and their limits; still, the strengths and accuracies that we find may give us courage for our own endeavors, and inspire us to further inquiry. This is where the “communication” that Freire believes so essential to the process of learning can come from, from the conversation between the modern student with both her classical predecessors and her contemporaries, her nearest classmates (371). Emerson would emphasize to Marx and Freire that there may be value in the past, that everything need not be cast aside for our world to advance. Transcending the restraints of the past while drawing on its strengths—this is the meaning of educational progress.

The individual cannot possibly advance in our society without understanding her potential to interpret the surrounding world, to take charge, to manipulate and alter her surroundings in her own image; and only with extraordinary fortitude of mind may the individual acquire faith in his own

ability to accomplish such things. As Marx would claim, such abilities define our humanity and distinguish us from other species; anything else is purely animal. Yet when we do not trust our own ability to formulate ideas, to create “proper” words, it becomes virtually impossible to attain a sense of self-satisfaction. The student, convinced of her ignorance in the intellectual realm, turns to what most readily surrounds her—the immediate and pressing needs of physical subsistence. The student becomes the graduate who does not question—the graduate who complacently accepts his or her standing in life, for better or for worse, generation by generation.

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