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# On Becoming Pedagogical: Encounters, Challenges and Freirean Criticalities in the Key of F

## ABSTRACT

*What does it mean to be a pedagogue? To become part and contributor to pedagogical processes? In this article I look back at the work Frank Abrahams developed around the legacy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and its efforts fomenting conditions for critical pedagogies to flourish. Following Freire's interest in connecting reality and theory, I construct a narrative from the word (Freire's, Abrahams' and mine) onto the world, highlighting in particular, the impact conceptual framing can have on programmatic development. As I see it, and experienced first-hand, the focus and nature of Abrahams' work has always been pedagogical; highly conscious of the practical possibilities of one's utterances and engaged with the politics of policy and making their enactment possible. The article thus foregrounds the on-the-ground consequences of critical pedagogy and the challenge of pushing limit-situations in music education and music teacher education.*

## Keywords

critical pedagogy; policy; Frank Abrahams; music education; program development; music teacher education

I

The future is something that is constantly taking place, and this constant “taking place” means that the future only exists to the extent that we change the present. It is by changing the present that we build a future, therefore, history is possibility, not determinism. (Freire, 1993, p. 45)

**W**hen I first met Frank Abrahams (or, FA, as he signs his emails), I was looking for change. I was a Latino from Brazil and an adapting immigrant in a drastically different reality, and Frank was instrumental in my transition into higher education and my first full time employment in a teaching-intensive institution, the Westminster Choir College. My early tenure in that program was marked by close

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collaborations with Abrahams. Frank and I were colleagues for over a decade, working together closely for several of those years. We shared readings, we made plans, we discussed programmatic change, we talked about Freire. In fact, Freire's work and the potential impact of his pedagogy within music education was the impetus for the inordinate amount of time and capital we spent (in the mid aughts) changing the undergraduate curriculum and establishing a series of three required courses focused on critical pedagogy. Seeing history as possibility, a lot of energy went into realigning the music education curriculum, expanding the masters program, and creating a 'lab school' in a middle school next door to campus. We spent time talking about the field, about teaching...and about Freire.

Twenty years later, looking back, I must acknowledge we shared a collegiality I have come to know as unfortunately uncommon. Collegiality is fragile, fraying in ways at the same time simple and bewildering. The attention and care we give to each other is part willingness, part risk, part gift, part alignment, part solidarity. Significantly, however, collegial encounters shape our becoming, they shape the learning that must take place, as Freire says, before teaching can emerge. So, while we often disagreed (as colleagues do) and our paths diverged as time went by, I learned how to be in higher education and to think about programs and programmatic change first with Frank Abrahams.

## II

In itself, inverse in its refusal of theoretical reflection, practice, in spite of its importance, is not sufficient to offer me a knowledge that explains the *raison d'être* of relations among objects. Practice does not by itself represent the theory of itself. But without Practice, theory runs the risk of wasting time, of diminishing its own validity, as well as the possibility of remaking itself. In the final analysis, theory and practice, in their relationship, become necessary, as they complement each other. (Freire, 1985, p. 101)

Complementarity seems to me to centrally inform the work that Abrahams has developed over his career, and in particular, over the last 20 years. Here I am considering the much talked about and perennially challenging notion that theory and practice must intersect, that *praxis* is essential in thoughtful education. I believe Abrahams' interest in Freire emerged out of the pedagogical necessity to think and act in consonance. While Freire's concerns with the material, the tangible, and the immediate reality of individuals are prominently available in his work, it is easy to forget such materiality is unrelentingly connected to a historic consciousness (the Marxian in Freire) that is always already aware of the conditions of thought, of doxa, of the discursive structures that conceptually condition and concretely (de)limit one's practice. Said differently, Freire's 'word to world' is no easy slogan, but the unrelenting work of situating educational action, of foregrounding inquiry, of lifting up the relational at every pedagogical step we take.

Always a planner and strategic actor, Abrahams' encounter with Freire seemed to have enabled a pathway and language to the kind of space for change in his immediate environment that was the target of constant preoccupation. In his writing one sees this kind of complementarity materialized in statements such as this:

Many beginning conductors do not handle the power that the position of conductor warrants well and the choral experience becomes about rules and procedures rather than a journey that the conductor and singers take together toward the acquisition of choral agency. (Abrahams, 2017, p. 1)

While I am uncertain of the implications of *acquiring* agency—in the sense of steps conquered, and held, toward a certain end—Abrahams' work outlines possible pathways toward a criticality that acknowledges existing realities; linking reality to possibility while aiming to amplify the limitations existing structuring structures impose. The question that Abrahams seems entangled with is: Even if the destination is the same, does a distinctive journey leads us to an arrival, differently? I think this is what he has in mind when he argues that “critical pedagogy is concerned not only with the students and the change that occurs in them as a result of the learning, but also with the change that occurs in the teacher” (Abrahams, 2005, p. 5). That is, the *pedagogical* in critical pedagogy is not simply strategy or “best practice,” but conscientization; an intentionality that goes beyond didactic outcome. I choose then to think of Frank's aims as prioritizing the idea that the outward look of a practice is less significant than, or at least dependent upon, the consciousness of the practitioner.

While we certainly fell short and failed on multiple occasions, our work at WCC was guided by ‘conscientização’. This practice of consciousness was structured in varied ways, in milestones such as a year-two ‘portfolio review’ all undergraduates engaged in, through connected course work, in our engagements with school partners, and just as significantly, in the discourse that was shared, if often disputed, among faculty and students. Frank's obstinance was, undoubtedly, a critical factor in the success stories that emerged, embodied in the lives of students, many now teacher educator colleagues.

### III

This capacity to always begin anew, to make, to reconstruct, and not to spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and to live [life] as a process—live to become—is something that always accompanied me throughout life. This is an indispensable quality of a good teacher (Freire, 1993, p. 98).

Macedo (1994) has called *the pedagogical* a striving for “becoming critically conscious of the socio-historical world in which one intervenes or pretends to intervene politically” (xi- xii).

Regardless of all the generative activisms, hopeful and humane, that emerge from the work of Freire, I find that *refusal* remains an underexplored and a critical pedagogical space to be traveled and acknowledged. This has been on my mind for a number of

years and while I would write about it differently today, the sentiment is captured in the following passage:

Music educators interested in student empowerment and providing a transformative education need to refuse the unwavering will to be who we are. Non-alienating teaching requires conscientization, but also the negation of who the dominant discourse tells us we are. Personal meaning, interpretation, self-social-cultural understanding and expression, as well as a wider knowledge of the world should come first in the conceptualization of music education. (Schmidt, 2002, p. 9)

This seems to resonate with the politico-pedagogical challenges one continues to face today. The music education profession has changed in these two decades, refusing in much greater numbers to call its artistic and educational labor apolitical. However, educational environs, particularly in the United States, growingly contend with revanchist, racist, and colonializing discourse and action aimed toward erasure and toward illegibility. In such environs, refusal as a concept and practice becomes the acknowledgment of a form of radicality that Freire embraced. He did so in imprisonment and exile, as well as in a lifelong understanding that reconstruction is a constant in education, it starts in and requires refusal, and is the basis of pedagogical criticality. I see a similar radicality present in the luminous work of Tina Campt (2019), who productively frames refusal as a pedagogical process that co-locates “a rejection of the status quo as livable” and “the creation of possibility in the face of negation, i.e., a refusal to recognize a system that renders you fundamentally illegible and unintelligible” (p. 29).

“As a referent for change,” writes Freire (1985), “education represents a form of action that emerges from a joining of the languages of critique and possibility” (p. 56). Frank’s work as a practitioner is, I believe, also aligned with such concerns and is directed toward locating the possibility of school and professional culture change at the intersection “between teacher *political empowerment*—how we better and more fully embed ourselves in the micropolitics of schools—and teacher *pedagogical empowerment*—how we cope with the discomfort of regularly adapting practice” (Schmidt, 2020a, p. 56). His work toward a critical pedagogy in music education and in choral education were centered on creating a more visible continuum between political and pedagogical empowerment, refusing to see them as zero sum, one distracting from the other.

#### IV

What we do in the classroom is not an isolated moment separate from the “real world.” It is entirely connected to the real world, and it is the real world which places both powers and limits on any critical course. Because the world is in the classroom, whatever transformation we provoke has a conditioning effect outside our small space. But the outside has a conditioning effect on the space also, interfering with our ability to build a critical culture separate from the dominant mass culture. (Shor and Freire, 1987, pp. 25-26)

Micropolitics and adaptability are a different way to characterize the schematics of Abrahams' tenets of critical pedagogy. As I read his work today, and as I recall it from our interactions, a concern with the real world of the classroom, which meant a concern with existing practice, is carefully chipped away, cautiously but helpfully inviting music educators to see their classroom spaces as those "where children and their teachers struggle daily to ensure that music retains a place of significance in the school curriculum" (Abrahams, 2005, p. 3). *Significance* is the operative word in this sentence and does the work of articulating a dual concern for tradition as well as relevance. When I was in my early 30s, Frank was fond of saying that it was impossible to argue against the self-assuredness of someone of that age; although he most certainly tried. My interests then were located on disruption, not in highlighting spaces of potential consensus. I often failed to see how incrementalism could address the (still) existing disjuncture between possibilities and reality, in other words, "what is portrayed to be 'real' in music education and the actualities of music classrooms" (Lamb, 1996, p. 124). How can music be *significant*, our arguments often went, if it fails to facilitate "a process that turns experience into critical reflection and political action?" (Macedo, 1994, p. 182).

But in his work as a program leader at Westminster, in his writing and particularly in the choral rehearsal, I observed Frank working diligently, many times struggling, to foment the kind of solidarity that has also framed much of my work. Looking back, I see in those efforts toward a *critical pedagogy for music education*, an ethical challenge to do differently, construct something akin to what Gaztambide-Fernandez (2012) calls solidary education, aiming to foster "action that also affects or modifies the one who acts" (p. 53). In these terms what I find crucial in Abrahams' work is the amplification of Freire's trust in the need for the didactic—teachers need to be teachers—while at the same time exerting a commitment to the ethics and radicality embedded in solidarity. I think Frank believed the cost of critical pedagogy to be rather high, and that the facilitation of a capitalized "Critical Pedagogy model" could serve as a proxy for music teachers to begin to "resist the constraints that those in power place on them." His work, then, was dedicated to help particularly those young in the field to imagine themselves doing said work; a new 'real' in the music classroom. Music educators, he argued, can do this "in their own classroom by acknowledging that children come to class with knowledge they gain from the outside world and as such, that knowledge needs to be honored and valued" (Abrahams, 2005, p. 4).

The acknowledgment of the other—a task made more and more difficult in today's divide-and-conquer politics—is at the basis of solidarity. And solidarity, I argue, is indispensable in empowerment. It is in this dual work that teachers can indeed, "critically reject their domesticating role" and their own domestication, and in doing so "teachers can demythologize the authoritarianism of teaching packages and their administration," acknowledging that "in [the] classroom, with the doors closed, it is difficult to have the world unveiled" (Freire, 1998, p. 9). To me that resonates with the



challenges of professionalism and the externality of policy that continue to plague our education environs, for “when what counts as policy is delimited only by external directives we risk naturalizing as *not policy*, all the discursive, curricular, pedagogical, governance and personal action of teachers” (Schmidt, 2020a, p. p78). This seems in full alignment with how Abrahams (2005) chooses to define critical pedagogy, using the words of Peter McLaren (1998) to construe it as a “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state” (p. 45). Sadly, 25 year later, or 50 since Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this work remains just as urgent.

## V

The transfer-of-knowledge approach is the most suitable pedagogy for sustaining elite authorities. The transfer method is thus no accident or mistake. The inequality and hierarchy in our corporate society simply produce the curriculum compatible with control. The chain of authority ends in the passive, transfer pedagogy dominating schools and colleges around the country. It also ends in teacher burnout, student resistance, and the continual eruption of reforms. The standard transfer curriculum is a mechanistic, authoritarian way of thinking about organizing a program which implies, above all, a tremendous lack of confidence in the creativity of students in the ability of teachers. (Shor & Freire, 1987, pp. 76-77)

To me, Freire and Shor’s words above are an expression of what remains essential at a time where de-professionalization and performativity endure as prominent concerns in the field of education. In music education, highly disciplinary or transfer models continue to reinforce conceptions of the music educator as a “constituency of one” cut off from or unaware of larger school challenges and community realities (Benedict & Schmidt, 2014, p. 91). And concerns about how to decolonize music education—including and perhaps especially in higher education—remain central to our dialogue, while still encountering serious resistance.

Transfer pedagogy remains anathema to practice that aims to “engage musical imagination, musical intelligence, musical creativity and musical celebration through performance” (Abrahams, 2007, p. 6) or to practices that contest, as argued above, the domestication of teacher practice, inviting teachers and students to better understand who they are and what realizations a solidarity education can foster in both (Abrahams, 2007). As dialogue takes place inside some kind of context, and “these conditioning factors create tension in achieving goals,” dialogical spaces are not free spaces where you may do (or say) what you want (no matter what conservative ‘free speech’ advocates profess). This seems an important reminder, as dialogue does not exist in a political vacuum, for “to achieve goals of transformation, dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline” (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 102).

This is consequential, I argue, because social actors can open up spaces to push back against top-down policy, doxa, or didactic practice. In fact, it seems to me

dialogical and critical pedagogies are nothing if not the ongoing labor to co-construct spaces “whereby unexpected voices and actions gain authority through grassroots efforts,” which establish and renew solidarity (Bylica & Schmidt, 2021, p. 3). The Freirean legacy—what his work activates in so many—is then the willingness to go beyond ourselves and our experiences, to enact the kind of border crossing that connects ‘word to the world’ and thus “actively challenges perceived boundaries between classroom pedagogies, school-level policy structures, and socio-political realities through everyday interactions” (Bylica & Schmidt, 2021, p. 3).

I have tried to live and further theorize Freire’s legacy by underscoring that, while existing constraints may guide and regulate teachers’ choices, educators have the right to define parameters of engagement within and beyond the classroom through active participation in decision-making and policy crafting at multiple levels (Barrett, 2020; Schmidt, 2020b; Shieh, 2020). I observed Frank’s commitment to this kind of practice, as we aspired to professional efforts funded by criticality, agency, and solidarity, and labored collaboratively to change the nature of the music education program at Westminster Choir College. The impact of such work can read as minimal—as the music field continues to struggle with its own coloniality, its tenacious homogeneity. Viewed personally, however, the outcomes are just as much in knowing such possibilities are in fact *real*, as in seeing them enacted in the lives of countless graduates who took on the good fight and saw themselves as willing and capable to exert their “full humanity” (as Freire would say) in their practice as educators.

## VI

Dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility. How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere “its” in whom I cannot recognize other “I”s?...How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite and that the presence of the people in history is a sign of deterioration, thus to be avoided? How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others? How can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness? Self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue. ... At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more [and differently] than they now know. (Freire, 1970, p. 90)

As I reflect on my early years working as a colleague to Frank Abrahams, what I choose to remember of myself, of him, and of the work we levered together, is a commitment to unsettling students into closely considering the wondrous yet terrifying act of educating another human being. As commitments to program advancement, to innovation and change, to thoughtful teaching, and to careful consideration of student



voice and need are not a given, I choose to remember the ways my colleague took those commitments seriously. I choose to remember the ways they mattered to me then, and matter still. As we celebrate Abrahams in these limited pages, and celebration is always a bit myth making, reflectively looking back is a way of placing memory as a form of limit-situation, a space that invites humility, in the hope of renewed dialogue. The hope as Freire said, to together, learn more than we now know.

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