

Teaching and Learning Paulo Freire: South Africa's Communities of Struggle

Luke Sinwell

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2126-6647>

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

lsinwell@uj.ac.za

Abstract

This article highlights both the internal educative practices of social movements and how these practices can effectively link to building Freirean pedagogies within higher education institutions. At the heart of this possibility lies the democratic transformation of relations between students and teachers on the one hand and researchers and activists on the other. I draw from two case studies of my own research on community-based organisations and workers' movements in post-apartheid South Africa, which point to the possibilities and challenges of developing Freirean approaches within the neoliberal higher education context. The article suggests that if the goal of education is to challenge systems of oppression, then social justice and the democratisation of the knowledge project must be the guiding principles we employ to navigate our everyday teaching and learning practices both inside and outside the academy.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; problem-posing educator; scholar activism

UNISA



the doj & cd
Department
Justice and Constitutional Development
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Education as Change

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>

Volume 26 | 2022 | #9368 | 19 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/9368>

ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2022



Published by the University of Johannesburg and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Introduction

What Did You Learn in School Today Little Boy of Mine?

What did you learn in school today dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today dear little boy of mine?

I learned that Washington never told a lie
I learned that soldiers seldom die
I learned that everybody's free
And that's what the teacher said to me

That's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school

I learned that policemen are my friends
I learned that justice never ends
I learned that murderers die for their crimes
Even if we make a mistake sometimes

I learned our country must be strong
It's always right and never wrong
Our leaders are the finest men [sic]
And we elect them again and again

I learned that war is not so bad
I learned about the great ones we have had
We fought in Germany and in France
And someday I might get my chance

And that's what I learned in school today
That's what I learned in school.
(Paxton 1964)

As the social and economic effects of police and state violence continue to disproportionately plague the marginalised and oppressed around the world in the wake of George Floyd's now infamous murder, Paulo Freire's (1970) ultimate message rings as loud as ever: education can never be a neutral process. Instead, it is either a means by which to reinforce the existing structures of society or a tool with which to transform the status quo and to create a more democratic and inclusive place in which we can all live. For critical pedagogies such as those adopted by Freire, the problem of African American people being killed by the police is not an isolated phenomenon but one which must be understood in relation to a broader structural and historical context.

The perceived need for profit and economic growth at any cost has created the conditions for the dehumanisation of African Americans (Taylor 2016). Floyd's death was no mistake or accident in an otherwise non-discriminatory Minnesota police

department. Rather, this was merely one piece of a much larger, ruthless process of the systemic oppression of racism and capitalism, which function to serve mainly white people. When the boy in the song above recites to his parent that he learned “policemen are my friends”, he is reflecting the dominant ideology or what students and indeed citizens have been conditioned and taught, both inside and outside formal schooling, to believe. The role of ideology in the construction and dissemination of knowledge cannot be overstated. It is for this reason that one of the main thrusts of critical pedagogy is to “help students recognize the social function of particular forms of knowledge” (McLaren 2009, 63). The police, the boy believes, are there to protect his community, whereas for social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), the police may protect the boy’s (read: white middle-class) neighbourhood, but their own communities are literally under attack. Like the thrust of Freire’s pedagogy, BLM provides an alternative framework from which to understand society through the lens of the dispossessed.

South Africa has a long tradition of radical or Freirean practices of adult education centred around community engagement and social justice or, in other words, a long-term process geared towards “democratising power relations” (Vally 2020, 5). Rooted in the notion of People’s Education and “mass democratic struggles against apartheid”, this approach has “increasingly been eroded or disappeared” (Von Kotze, Ismail, and Cooper 2016, 281). The transition to non-racial higher education in the post-apartheid period occurred in parallel to market-oriented or neoliberal forms of education centred on notions of “performance” and outcomes in other parts of the world (2016, 281). Within this context, Freirean approaches to teaching and learning exist on the margins of higher education in contemporary South Africa. Peering inside social movements may provide alternative frameworks through which to explore possibilities for democratic approaches to higher education. In this way, it is possible to explore “what social movements are and what adult education and learning means in relation to them” (Walters 2005, 53), but also how actors within this sphere shape and are shaped by specific experiments with radical adult education within and beyond the institutional practices in the academy (Walters 2006).

This article builds upon Vally’s (2020, 2) “vision of education for liberation” and his related conceptualisation of social movements as “laboratories of democracy” (2020, 6). A significant body of literature in post-apartheid South Africa has argued that inadequate attention has been paid to the internal educative practices of social movements. A special issue of *Education as Change* responds to this gap by foregrounding “activist knowledge, learning and history” (Choudry and Vally 2018a, 2–3). The articles in the issue centre around explicating the political histories of movements and the lessons learned “about systems of power and exploitation developed as people find themselves in confrontation with states and capital” (Choudry and Vally 2018a, 3).

Benson, Gamedze, and Koranteng (2018) offer a detailed case study of the Know Your Own Continent (KYC) education course, which developed a radical historical approach to education at the University of Cape Town aimed at conscientising students and activists. This is done “in order to disrupt the languages and practices of power in the classroom” (2018, 105). It is important to note that although KYC took place on campus, it was (like others discussed by Choudry and Vally [2018]) not part of the “official” academic programme. This article argues that social movements’ experiments with local democracy are not only important in their own right, but may also provide a basis for promoting social justice within concrete practices of higher education institutions.

When I first went to Marikana to conduct research on 18 August 2012, two days after 34 black mineworkers were massacred by the police, workers were still on strike. Here, I refer to the category black as “as signifier of Biko’s idea of the reclamation of dignity in black lives” (Vally and Motala 2018, 28). The dominant view in the mainstream media at the time contributed to a picture of mineworkers as violent people intent on meting out extreme forms of violence against strike-breakers or even the police. Freire’s (1970) insistence that education and indeed the production of knowledge can never be neutral processes came into sharp relief as it became clear that my research team and I would need to choose sides. We soon learned through building relationships of trust with mineworkers who had experienced the massacre first-hand that, like the police officers who killed George Floyd, “murderers” do not in fact “die for their crimes” as the boy was told at school in the poem cited at the beginning of this article. For Freire, research—and indeed the teaching and learning process—must be underpinned by a drive for social justice. Social relations do not exist in a vacuum, but within a structural context of capitalist exploitation and oppression of the vast majority of people in the world. Hence, there is a need to understand or “read” the world and to place texts, books and articles, and indeed oral testimonies such as those my research team and I obtained in Marikana, within their social and historical context (Freire 1970).

This article links my own scholarship and research on activism in community-based movements and trade unions to Freire’s (1970) notion of the “problem-posing educator”. The following section explains how I first came across and was drawn to a Freirean approach in the context of emerging social movements in post-apartheid South Africa. I then relate this to my scholarly work in Marikana and my ongoing research in informal settlements, and I suggest that these have deeply informed my own teaching and learning practices. The next two sections highlight core principles associated with Freire’s method including the “problem-posing educator” who meets on relatively equal grounds with his or her students in order to co-produce knowledge. Here, my ideas as a white man and a Marxist were challenged by postgraduate students who wished to focus on issues of “race” and gender. Thereafter, I focus on rooting teaching and learning within the pre-existing knowledge systems of students as well as the experiential learning process where oppressed groups struggling for their own liberation are brought into the classroom and where my students undertake fieldtrips to witness the living

conditions and organisational capacity of the people of Thembelihle, an informal settlement in Lenasia where I have been conducting extensive research.

Freire's vision of social justice in education enables students to think critically and to change the world, rather than only learning *about* the world. Freire arguably goes a step further as his framework seeks to democratise the teaching and learning process altogether. When one reflects on how critical education theory and practice intertwine in the context of a relatively managerial university with strict quantitative delivery targets and a diverse student body at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the reality becomes far more complex.

Meeting Paulo Freire in Social Movement Research

I first came to know Paulo Freire's work as an undergraduate during several hour-long train rides home from college. As a budding social scientist, I was attracted to a social justice perspective that could illuminate the ways in which the underlying structures of society perpetuate inequality and poverty, thereby serving to undermine the possibilities for human beings to reach their full potential. As I read the first several pages of *Education for Critical Consciousness* (Freire 1965), my imagination was captured by his visionary perspective on freedom and liberation. I was inspired by the fact that Freire's own direct experiences with poverty shaped the way he saw the world. Indeed, this had a direct bearing upon the fact that he would develop a holistic, political approach to education geared towards providing the oppressed with tools to overcome systemic injustices.

According to Shaull's preface to the landmark classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Paulo Freire's thought represents the response of a creative mind and sensitive conscience to the extraordinary misery and suffering of the oppressed around him. Born in 1921 in Recife [in Brazil], the centre of one of the most extreme situations of poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World, he was soon forced to experience that reality directly. As the economic crisis in 1929 in the United States began to affect Brazil the precarious stability of Freire's middle-class family gave way and he found himself sharing the plight of the "wretched of the earth". ... [H]e came to know the gnawing pains of hunger and fell behind in school because of the listlessness it produced. (Shaull 1970, 10)

From the end of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Freire's work began to have a profound influence on the Black Consciousness (BC) movement in South Africa. Steve Biko, arguably the godfather of the BC movement in the country, met Anne Hope, a scholar who worked with Freire at Harvard (Thusi and Harley 2020, 78). Activists were then trained by Freirean facilitators who "were clear that their role was not to tell people what to think" (Thusi and Harley 2020, 78). By the time Freire's work was banned by the apartheid regime the tradition had already spread to the trade unions, community-based organisations and the student movement. When I arrived in South Africa in the

mid-2000s I was mostly unaware of this history, but I nevertheless carried with me a Freirean approach to teaching and learning. I was inspired by the observation that when Freire was 11 he pledged “to dedicate his life to the struggle against hunger” (Shaull 1970, 10). As a white middle-class man (I will return to this identity in the next section), I have never experienced the “gnawing pains of hunger”, though I was nevertheless deeply concerned about this injustice. I enthusiastically went to soup kitchens to serve those in need as a young adult. But it was in the mid-2000s that I became interested in South Africa’s new social movements and the potential they have to challenge structures of oppression such as neoliberalism. When Nelson Mandela, the first black president of the country, was elected into power in 1994, the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) much-touted Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) brought hope that the new government would undertake a state-driven, nationwide redistributive welfare approach to swiftly address the legacy of apartheid. While major gains were made in terms of sanitation and electricity provision as well as the delivery of free RDP houses, the latter were often poorly constructed and arguably apartheid’s socio-spatial geography became even more deeply entrenched (leaving black people in poorly serviced ghettos with under-funded schools, weak healthcare facilities and low-paying jobs in the cities). ANC policy effectively shifted from the RDP’s state-driven approach to a neoliberal, market-oriented policy called Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), which reinforced poverty and inequality (Saul and Bond 2014). Radical political economists termed this process South Africa’s “limits to change” (Marais 1998), an “elite transition: from apartheid to neoliberalism” (Bond 2001), or, more recently, the country’s “corporatised liberation” (McKinley 2017).

Indeed, the post-1994 honeymoon period did not last long: soon working-class black communities in the townships felt the effects of neoliberal policies at their doorsteps and in their homes as evictions and water and electricity cut-offs became widespread. While community-based movements, or civics, were arguably intended to play a key role in the conceptualisation and implementation of ANC development plans in the transition to democracy, in the post-apartheid period it soon became clear that these movements from below would take a back seat to centralised state decision-making processes (Ballard, Habib, and Valonia 2006). The weakening of mass democratic organisations undermined the perceived need for radical education in the post-1994 period.

Like other scholars who witnessed the shortcomings of the ruling party and the emergence of new forms of organisation from the late 1990s to the early 2000s (see Ballard, Habib, and Valonia 2006), I increasingly viewed social movements as among the only viable vehicles through which structural change was possible. Freire argued that “[i]f true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process” (Freire 1970, 120). The radical educator was indeed a tireless proponent of the idea that it is not only teachers, academics or elite policymakers, or for that matter registered students, who

produce important forms of knowledge. For Freire and other Marxists, social movements themselves are among the best suited to unpack and explore systems of exploitation and oppression as they unfold in the process of challenging the authority of the state and capital.

As Choudry and Vally (2018, 3) have observed, “The educative role of social movements and social and political activism is often overlooked within adult education and social movement scholarship.” They further suggest that “movements are not only significant sites of social and political action, but also ... important terrains of learning and knowledge production” (2018, 3). My teaching and learning approach is intertwined with my research methodology, which is based on the assumption that social movement histories are important sites of learning in themselves to the extent that they produce counter-hegemonic theories and practices. The *social function* of the forms of knowledge propagated by radical social movements is not to accept the existing status quo or systemic forms of oppression, but to challenge them head-on, as in the case, for example, with Black Lives Matter.

Activists or Marxists who join academia are likely to experience a tension between the requirement to produce academic publications that are written for a small and relatively elite audience and activist forms of writing that tend to be more accessible to the public. One can rarely, in fact, get credit for such outputs at an academic institution. Nevertheless, I strove to find a balance by attempting to undertake research that is useful to movements. I agree with Croteau that “[t]heorists without significant connections to social movements can end up constructing elegant abstractions with little real insight or utility” (Croteau, Hoynes, and Ryan 2005, xiii). It is often difficult to find this balance since academics must publish, supervise, teach, and, especially women, need to look after their families. As Du Plessis has pointed out, “research traditions followed in higher education institutions become entrenched in safe zones of accreditation and incentivisation, where outputs are published, [and] passed in performance audits for promotions” (2019, 3). It is perhaps little surprise that in this context movements rarely serve as subjects of knowledge production capable of contributing directly to the dialectic of teaching and learning at higher education institutions.

Early on in my career, as a white middle-class man and Marxist, it was relatively easy for me to emphasise class at the expense of other important relationships of power, such as those embedded in gender and “race”. Indeed, the study of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa is replete with examples of how white middle-class academics benefit personally by exercising authority without reflecting upon their own privilege both inside and outside the field (Hlatshwayo 2015; Mdlalose 2014). It is important to point out here that Freire has been criticised for anointing himself as possessing the antidote for oppression and thereby being the sole or genuine liberator of the oppressed. Esteva, Prakash, and Stuchul (n.d., 4) offer a penetrating critique of Freire’s praxis. Within Freire’s paradigm, they argue, the oppressed are incapable of achieving liberation on their own: “They [the oppressed] need an outside critical intervention”

(n.d., 4). The outsider, educator or change agent embodies “the secret formula of a power to which they [the oppressed or student] must be initiated” (Rahnema 1992, 123).

Within this conceptualisation of empowerment, A has something B does not have: it must be given to them. Rasmussen (2008) has argued that Freire’s thinking undermines the oppressed, rural peasants in particular, since it assumes that they themselves cannot fully comprehend the historical and structural processes that led to their very condition. “The hub of the problem”, according to Blackburn (2000, 12), is that “any pre-determined vision of liberation introduced from the outside is ultimately paternalistic, since it presupposes that the oppressed are incapable of determining their own endogenously produced vision of liberation”. Blackburn warns that “the particularist notion of power in Freirean thought can all too easily lead to manipulation by educators [or agents] with other agendas” (Blackburn 2000, 3). Early appraisals of Freirean approaches were already touching the surface in the late 1970s and early 1980s as authors pointed to the need to “demystify Freire” (Kidd and Byram 1982). As we shall see below, I initially came with my own class-based analysis that I imposed on students, but through the dialogical supervision process I came to realise the ways in which my own ideological views were being imposed upon my students.

The foundation of Freirean thinking and practice is the idea that knowledge is important not only because the oppressed as well as students learn “about” the world, but also because of the extent to which it can potentially enable learners to act “in” the world in order to transform or reshape structural and social processes that serve to exclude the poor and the working class. These collective contributions are not only scholarly but directed towards building communities of struggle or what may be called social movements. I am a student of social movements and in turn this socially and politically engaged grassroots research has rubbed off on my students, and in many cases directly informed their areas of study. This suggests that social movements themselves are taught and learn indirectly from their own experiences in struggle, and it is through their lessons that researchers may then have the privilege to offer their students an alternative or radical lens through which to understand contested meanings of transformation in society. But, as several of my postgraduate students have demonstrated through detailed investigations, there are other relationships of power besides those determined by class.

Supervision and the “Problem-Posing Educator”

The students whom I have supervised have often built upon my research by taking theirs into new directions. From this perspective, the teaching and learning framework is guided by the notion that there exists a dialectical relationship between student knowledge (and their interests) and the knowledge one possesses as a supervisor. Information is not merely transmitted from the lecturer, from the top down, into what Freire refers to as “an empty vessel” or the student’s knowledge bank (1970, 52). This process, however, does not happen magically or with the flip of a switch. Students’ own ideas for research emanate from their own diverse, lived experiences and may challenge those forms of knowledge or understandings of the world that the lecturer holds dearly

to himself or herself. While initially I personally impressed upon students a Marxist analysis focusing on the working class, I later learned from them the need to identify other relationships of power that, as several of my students have demonstrated through their research, are contextually specific and play a significant role in reinforcing systems of oppression. Within Freire's paradigm, teachers, in this case lecturers, are not the foremost authority when it comes to disseminating knowledge. Instead, both the teacher and the learner bring their own valuable experiences to the classroom. Freire calls the teacher who enacts this philosophy the "problem-posing educator" or one who

constantly re-forms his [sic] reflections in the reflections of the students. The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the students the material for their consideration, and re-considers his [sic] earlier considerations as the students express their own. (1970, 68)

For more than a decade, I have done research that develops oral histories of social movements and also supervised and taught students who research social movements at a postgraduate level. There is in South Africa arguably a triple-pronged movement of students, workers and communities (however disconnected they may be from each other in practice). These are the community-based movements in townships often associated with service-delivery protests over water, electricity and housing as well as the #FeesMustFall movement, which began in October 2015 at Wits University and then spread across the country that year and into 2016 after the then President Jacob Zuma announced a zero per cent increase in fees. I am also a student and teacher of the workers' movement that witnessed the police killing of 34 mineworkers in Marikana on 16 August 2012 and culminated in the longest strike in South African mining history in 2014 (under the banner of the independent Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union [AMCU]).

Ngwane has conceptualised these three dynamic forms of resistance as expressions of "insurgent democracy" (2019). In his view, the liberal democratic order is "under siege" (Ngwane 2019, 229) and scholars and activists should therefore look to "post-apartheid's freedom fighters" who arguably provide alternative forms of democratic politics rooted in traditions of grassroots militancy. I have engaged with these movements, following Vally (2020), as "laboratories for democracy", looking mainly at how self-organisation of the working class can mobilise collectively to challenge existing class relations (Sinwell and Mbatha 2016). My students have extended beyond this limited vision by investigating the internal dynamics of movements and the significance of identity politics, "race" and gender. In other words, students transformed a seemingly top-down imposition by the teacher into a dialectical and relatively democratic process characterised by a fusion of both teacher and student knowledge.

In the lead up to the national student movement associated with the period between 2015–2016, I coordinated student activities within and beyond the research centre where I was based, including during the tumultuous period of #FeesMustFall. Our postgraduates and post-doctoral fellows began at this time to study the emerging

movement, including problematising the meaning of decolonisation and undertaking ethnographic research on how students collectively exercised power from below. In the mid-2010s I began to consolidate my role as a proactive, engaged supervisor, but it took time before I began to adopt feminist and intersectional approaches to the study of social movements, something which my research tended to ignore. In addition to engagements with my own students, informal conversations with women activists opposing gender-based violence and racism including those involved in #FeesMustFall also shifted my thinking and led me to extend beyond an isolated conceptualisation of class oppression.

I was convinced that alternative forms of research were not only necessary, but could also provide valuable contributions to the available scholarship. Students wished to explore dynamics of intersectionality, “race”, and especially gender within social movements. Initially I resisted, but during informal discussions over a long period of time, including over wine after seminars, students impressed views upon me, and I became open to the ideas. It was both necessary for me to trust and genuinely seek to understand the perspective of the students, but also for them to feel empowered enough to put forth their unique voice. In line with Freire’s alternative, democratic approach we were able to partner in a meaningful quest to co-produce knowledge rooted within the students’ own interests, experiences and knowledge systems. Whereas my work tended to obscure the significance of gender and power within social movements, for example with a focus almost exclusively on men mineworkers, one of my students named Bridget Ndibongo (2015) undertook ethnographic research on women in the platinum belt. This scholarly work adopts a feminist lens to understand the events that culminated in the longest strike in South Africa’s mining history, which took place in 2014. She employs ethnographic research methods and in-depth interviews, including autobiographical life histories, in order to point to the central role that women in Marikana, including wives, sisters, and aunts, played in the strikes. Ndibongo argues that they were not mere extensions of men, but instead enacted, from their own distinct ideological vantage points, changing forms of individual agency and collective mobilisation.

During the five-month-long strike, women and men who had depended upon the breadwinner salaries of the mineworkers were beginning to go hungry. It is perhaps no coincidence that Ndibongo, who was conducting fieldwork during this period, heard complaints from the women of Marikana about the people’s empty stomachs and responded by initiating a food drive. Her research activities soon became directly engaged with the labour and women’s movements in Marikana.

I was also a supervisor of a research Master of Arts (MA) dissertation by Thembelihle Maseko (2017), which looked at intersectionality within a woman’s movement in a township to the south of Johannesburg called Freedom Park. The study of social movements tends to be written through the lens of men, and where women are discussed, the focus tends to be on their public lives. Both avenues had not been explored in my own research in an in-depth way and my student took the initiative to spend a great deal of time with women in their homes and at public meetings. As Freire’s paradigm

suggests, the teaching and learning process, and therefore supervision, goes both ways. It is not primarily about the lecturer or the student on his or her own, but centrally about how they can work together and develop a mutual relationship based on trust.

I was the supervisor of another young student named Kgothatso Mokgele (2018). His MA dissertation looks at the shifting nature of student identities within a student movement at one of the universities in Gauteng. The dissertation sheds light on the changing nature of individual students' identities that resulted from their involvement in the events related to the #FeesMustFall movement. The dissertation's theoretical approach is well-developed as he draws upon Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality, the lived experiences of "race", class and gender, to provide a nuanced understanding of the changing nature of individual activist identities in relation to the movement that they helped construct. I have sought to demonstrate how my students became "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire 1970, 68). The learner is not an empty vessel to be filled by the teacher, but rather someone who comes with important knowledge since it is based on their own experiences. This approach has assisted me in extending beyond my own man-centred or patriarchal bias as well as to challenge the centrality of class relations. Empirical studies of social movements became the foundation for teaching and learning in a pedagogy geared towards challenging existing forms of oppression in a critical pedagogic framework. This may contribute to building the foundation for a cohort of postgraduate students to co-produce relatively unique and neglected forms of knowledge in the areas of feminism, intersectionality, and social movements.

Experiential Learning and Social Justice

Freire consistently reminds us that the education process is never a neutral one: it either functions to maintain the status quo or to challenge it (Freire 1970). The political or ideological vantage points of compulsory readings as well as the selection of guest speakers and the nature of field trips must be carefully considered when designing a module. It is no accident that students who register in my modules learn to see through the lens of the oppressed and, building upon my own research on social movements, the curriculum is designed to look towards the possibilities for popular agency to transform aspects of social relations. Through guest speakers and a field trip to Thembelihle, an informal settlement in Lenasia consisting of about 25,000 residents, students in my postgraduate modules learn to engage directly with housing activists at the margins of society.

The case of Thembelihle is arguably one of the quintessential "laboratories of democracy" in the post-apartheid period. The civic organisation in the area, the Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC), is often cited as a radical and autonomous attempt by ordinary people to control local democratic processes in the post-apartheid period. According to Tselapedi and Dugard (2013) of the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI), the TCC "reclaims power" from a top-down state bent on excluding the poor from decision-making processes. The settlement, through the TCC's

leadership, “offers hope that with sustained active citizenship, the state can be made to respond to collective demands and democracy can be consolidated” (Tselapedi and Dugard 2013, 63).

A more recent MA dissertation from Wits University also engages directly with the question of popular participation in Thembelihle. It argues that the state must begin “to recognize the agency of all citizens and is [or should be] open to alternate ways of creating spaces of participation” (Lourenco 2018, 54). It is incumbent upon us “to look to organisations like the TCC to discover the ways in which this is possible” (Lourenco 2018, 55). The TCC is best understood as a homegrown, organic attempt to participate in decision-making and local governance processes. Participation in Thembelihle requires not only institutional means through which to enact change, but also non-institutional means or contentious politics. The “People’s Parliament” is a term used by residents themselves to describe a process of genuine citizen control, but it also occurs in the form of a mass meeting that takes democratic decisions; it requires taking control of one’s destiny and the destiny of one’s own community.

A democratic social arena that is a genuine representation of a relatively large group of the dispossessed may be called the People’s Parliament. It is mostly well-attended and takes on a militant character during times of crisis. Its “social space”, discursive rules and boundaries are directly constituted and defined by ordinary people at the margins of society with aspirations and dreams of improving their own lives. At times it is literally a matter of life or death. For the residents of Thembelihle, participation is often about extending beyond the bare minimum needed for survival in a corrugated iron shack, but it also means engaging in broader struggles, campaigns for workers’ rights and confronting xenophobic and gender-based violence.

One leading activist named Siphwe Mbatha has limited formal education but is incredibly knowledgeable about grassroots democracy in South Africa. We met in 2011 in the Democratic Left Front (DLF) as we collectively sought to unite worker and community-based organisations. By being involved in solidarity actions and attending community meetings in Thembelihle, and even visiting activists in jail at times when they were unjustly arrested, a relationship of trust developed between us. Moreover, I recruited Mbatha to be the core researcher on my team in Marikana (see below), which led us to co-author work together (see Figure 1). Mbatha and I have developed a long-standing friendship and he not only takes students from my Urban Sociology class on tours of his community, but also continues to do research with me and to organise in the same activist circles, including most recently Kopanang Africa Against Xenophobia (KAAX), which was formed in February 2022 and seeks to challenge the right-wing politics associated with Operation Dudula.

Thembelihle has been the site of some of the most militant and sustained protests since the early 2000s when the government attempted to forcibly evict residents. For my postgraduate class on urban politics, students spend a day in the settlement taking notes

and listening to community leaders after reading scholarly literature about the settlement. The relationships and collective purpose that exist between myself and the people of Thembelihle facilitated a situation in which when I brought my students to Thembelihle they were welcomed with open arms. An exercise in experiential learning, their assignment is to link theories of participatory governance and in situ upgrading to what they have observed in the settlement. In contrast to the conventional “banking” approach to education, the exercises in this module are geared not towards finding the answers to abstract questions with no application to reality, but to understanding the urban world as something that is socially constructed and therefore in flux. It is dependent upon existing power relations and, as is demonstrated through the case of Thembelihle, reality can be transformed by collective action. According to Freire, “reality is really a *process*, undergoing constant transformation” (1970, 61).

According to Du Plessis (2019, 5), “interlocutors” such as research assistants “belong to, and never transcend, subordinate positionalities in the knowledge-production process. They are hardly acknowledged as co-creators of knowledge with autonomous epistemic agency.” As academics are squeezed tight for administrative, teaching, and research outputs and increasingly required to raise their own funds, it may not always be feasible to carefully link teaching and learning in the classroom to one’s ongoing research. But we must continue the quest even if only on a small scale. Between 2018 and 2019, I held a National Research Foundation (NRF) Incentive Funding grant whereby I undertook research that details a 20-year history of popular resistance in Thembelihle.

As in Marikana, the people of the area experience state repression when they engage in contentious politics, including the occupation of roads and marches to local authorities. Sipiwe Mbatha, who moved to the settlement at the age of 13 so that he and his mother would have a place to call “home”, has also been a victim of police brutality. In 2011, during a peaceful demonstration, he was shot with a rubber bullet in the kneecap. His neighbour, who stays in a shack across the road, had his front teeth shot out by a rubber bullet during a protest against the government’s attempt at evicting the residents in 2002. Repression paradoxically sprang these and other activists to life. Since the community came in their thousands to resist forced removals, they have sustained an anti-capitalist and radically democratic TCC, which is the subject of a draft of a book manuscript that I am completing. As Freire would certainly have it, the voices of the oppressed and their collective actions to liberate themselves from systems of oppression are both the protagonists and researchers of the book, and they also teach my students how to change the world.



Figure 1: Sipiwe Mbatha, furthest right, is facing and addressing the students in one of my postgraduate modules that deals with the politics of urban space on the outskirts of Thembelihle informal settlement in Lenasia

My teaching and learning approach is embedded within aspects of the community of Thembelihle as I have given presentations at meetings of the TCC about my research and other subjects, and written press statements in consultation with activists in the area. Activists have become teachers of my students. Scholars must move towards a situation whereby we not only extract information from grassroots organisations, but also train activists to write, research, and undertake public presentations.

I have taught an urban politics (Honours) module each year since 2017 (one year prior to joining the Department of Sociology). Among others, for the purposes of space it is useful to point to three hallmarks of this module: 1) it entails a field trip and essay; 2) students present and lead lectures through group work; and 3) it involves an independent research project, which serves as the final examination. The module itself also involves a great deal of student participation as students are expected to (and marked) based not only on their involvement in the class overall but in presentations that they give in groups for a specific lecture that is assigned to them. The qualitative independent research project, which tends to focus on issues such as access to health, crime,

evictions, electricity cut-offs and different forms of public housing, serves as the final examination. Over the years, students have tended to choose to conduct their research in urban areas or spaces with which they are familiar, or perhaps townships where they live or grew up. In line with a Freirean framework, with their pre-existing knowledge, students begin with a topic they are interested in and then they share this with me and I assist with co-constructing a research topic and specific central research questions.

According to Freire, the learning process is “impossible without a relation of mutual understanding and trust” between the learner and educator (Freire 1970, 102). In this way, teachers may prompt students to research something they already have an experience with or a degree of knowledge about, thereby building upon their own experiences and potentially offering insight and new forms of knowledge about specific aspects of their living, working, or studying environment. Instead of imposing one’s assumptions and frameworks about the teaching and learning process that should ideally take place, a Freirean approach suggests a careful engagement with existing experiences and practices. In this way, students are not merely required to regurgitate knowledge on a student sheet, but to think critically about the world in which we live by applying theoretical concepts to practice, and also reflecting on the ways in which social movement practices develop or enable us to reinterpret theory. This is an element of Freire’s “education for critical consciousness”.

Conclusion

Vally urges us to consider the possibilities for building a radical orientation among students in higher education institutions. “Individuals in many universities are able,” he suggests, “to connect with community organisations and social movements, and they can accomplish valuable counter-hegemonic work” (2020, 15). In this way, higher education is conceived as “a public good and a space for critical democratic citizenry” (2020, 15). In practice this means creating democratic spaces for social justice that challenge the fundamental values and culture that drive individual incentivisation.

As I delved into my permanent post in my department, I have tended to move further away from grassroots movements in an attempt to consolidate my own mainly single-author manuscripts and monographs. The danger is that, in mainstream academic research, building grassroots movements becomes an afterthought, rather than one of its core characteristics. For example, while I am in touch with the workers of Marikana (whom I have published extensively on), my work continues to be cited, while their own living and working conditions have not improved substantially and the vast majority cannot access my publications. It is in this context that one must be weary of Freire’s, or Freire-like, approaches that appear on the surface to be participatory and inclusive yet run the risk of being co-opted and manipulated by authorities (and even lecturers themselves) at various levels within and outside academic institutions.

As higher education funding continues to be cut as the economic crisis is exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, we must consistently strive towards constructing democratic

or egalitarian engagements with communities and between students and academics. These engagements are not static, but various and in flux. At one time relations may reflect authoritarian tendencies, but these can be democratically transformed. It also requires in practice a delicate balance between supporting democratic approaches to teaching and learning on the one hand, while on the other ensuring that the university's strategic visions are being realised. This will undoubtedly involve a thoughtful and dedicated training of researchers and other learners to not only inculcate our own biases, interests, and interpretations but to engage with the diversity of the students' interests and provide the possibility to extend beyond one narrow and static approach.

One of the key lessons is that “activism and adult education work within the academy ... [are] not mutually exclusive as both targe[t] change” (Von Kotze, Ismail, and Cooper 2016, 290). Scholars must continue to create spaces for the study of resistance and liberation as well as the prospects of forging alternative ideologies and radical discursive frameworks such as those that emerged in Marikana and in other working-class communities such as Thembelihle. We must also take the lead from a new generation of critically engaged scholar-activists including Benya and Jeni (2022, 73), who partnered with women in Marikana and with farmworkers in Umgungundlovu in KwaZulu-Natal in order to “co-develop local feminist [and other ideological] registers and grammars and conceptual vocabularies” in a way that is “locally grounded, but outward looking”.

Extending beyond the limits of my own work, students have not only investigated and shed light on the mainly black working class in South Africa and other places around the world (as Freire would have it), but also the prospects for women to create individual and collective avenues through which to challenge oppressive systems of power and authority. But, we must also recognise that students bring to the table their own prevailing assumptions and lived experiences, which often reflect the dominant world view. In practice there exists no linear path whereby teachers simply learn positive lessons from students. This is particularly the case in a context where teachers must navigate students' needs for individual mobility alongside or against a social justice approach that may result in fewer career opportunities.

Walters' (2006) suggestion that scholar-activists must embed transformative practices within the academy beyond individual courses or research agendas remains instructive. She argues that a “life-long learning” approach is necessary so that these become part of the core values of higher education institutions. This suggests that no single or isolated practice or technique in the classroom or field can reflect a Freirean approach on its own. If the goal of education is to challenge systems of oppression, then social justice and the democratisation of the knowledge project must constitute the guiding principles or compass we employ to navigate our everyday teaching and learning practices both inside and outside the academy.

References

- Ballard, R., A. Habib, and I. Valonia, eds. 2006. *Voices of Protest: Social Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Bond, P. 2001. *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press.
- Blackburn, J. 2000. "Understanding Paulo Freire: Reflections on the Origins, Concepts, and Possible Pitfalls of His Educational Approach". *Community Development Journal* 35 (1): 3–15. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/35.1.3>.
- Benson, K., A. Gamedze, and A. Koranteng. 2018. "African History in Context: Toward a Praxis of Radical Education". In *History's Schools: Past Struggles and Present Realities*, edited by A. Choudry and S. Vally, 104–16. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315163826-7>.
- Benya, A.-J, and S. Yeni. 2022 "Co-Developing Local Feminist 'Conceptual Vocabularies' While Strengthening Activism through Critical Consciousness Raising with South Africa's Mine and Farm Women". *South African Review of Sociology* 52 (1): 72–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2021.2024087>.
- Choudry, A., and S. Vally. 2018. "History's Schools: Past Struggles and Present Realities". In *History's Schools: Past Struggles and Present Realities*, edited by A. Choudry and S. Vally, 1–17. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- Choudry, A., and S. Vally. 2018a. "Learning from, in, and with Independent Community and Activist Archives: The Past in Our Present and Future". *Education as Change* 22 (2): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/4513>.
- Crenshaw, K. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics". *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (8): 139–67. <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.
- Croteau, D., W. Hoynes, and C. Ryan. 2005. "Introduction: Integrating Social Movement Theory and Practice". In *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics and Social Movement Scholarship*, edited by D. Croteau, W. Hoynes, and C. Ryan, xi–xvii. Minnesota. MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Du Plessis, G. E. 2019. "Reflexive Encountering and Postgraduate Research Training in South Africa". *Education as Change* 23 (1): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/5037>.
- Esteva, G., M. S. Prakash, and D. L. Stuchul. n.d. "From a Pedagogy for Liberation to Liberation from Pedagogy". Accessed January 19, 2021. <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/330T/350kPEEEstevaVsFreiretable.pdf>.
- Freire, P. 1965. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Herder and Herder.
- Hlatshwayo, M. 2015. "White Power and Privilege in Academic and Intellectual Spaces of South Africa: The Need for Sober Reflection". *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies* 42 (1): 141–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2015.1035486>.
- Kidd, R., and M. Byram. 1982. "Demystifying Pseudo-Freirean Development: The Case of Laedza Batanani". *Community Development Journal* 17 (2): 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/17.2.91-a>.
- Lourenco, M. 2018. "Participation and the Politics of Mediation: The Case of the Thembelihle Crisis Committee". MUS diss., University of the Witwatersrand. <https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29698>.
- Marais, H. 1998. *South Africa: Limits to Change, The Political Economy of Transition*. London: Zed Books.
- Maseko, T. 2017. "Intersections: A Study of the Private Lives and Public Lives of Selected Women from the Social Movement Organisation, Abahlali baseFreedom Park". MA diss., University of Johannesburg. <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/246095>.
- McKinley, D. 2017. *South Africa's Corporatised Liberation: A Critical Analysis of the ANC in Power*. Johannesburg: Jacana. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971705200108>.
- McLaren, P. 2009. "Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts". In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, edited by A. Darder, M. Baltodano and R. Torres, 61–83. New York, NY: Routledge and Falmer.
- Mdlalose, B. 2014. "The Rise and Fall of Abahlali baseMjondolo, a South African Social Movement". *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Science* 41 (3): 345–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2014.990149>.
- Mokgele, K. 2018. "Changing Identities and the Contemporary Student Movement at the University of Pretoria". MA diss., University of Johannesburg. <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/278947>.
- Ndibongo, B. 2015. "Women of Marikana: Survival and Struggles". MA diss., University of Johannesburg. <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/59526>.
- Ngwane, T. 2019. "'Insurgent Democracy': Post-Apartheid South Africa's Freedom Fighters". *Journal of Southern African Studies* 45 (1): 229–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2019.1548136>.
- Paxton, T. 1964. "What Did You Learn in School Today Little Boy of Mine?" Sung by P. Seeger. Track 8 on *Broadside Ballads Volume 2*. Accessed July 30, 2020. <https://genius.com/Pete-seeger-what-did-you-learn-in-school-today-lyrics>.

- Rahnema, M. 1992. "Participation". In *The Development Dictionary*, edited by W. Sachs, 116–31. London: Zed Books.
- Rasmussen, D. 2008. "Cease to Do Evil, Then Learn to Do Good". In *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis*, edited by C. A. Bowers and F. Apffel-Marglin, 113–30. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Saul, J., and P. Bond. 2014. *South Africa: The Present as History; From Mrs. Ples to Mandela and Marikana*. London: James Currey.
- Shaull, R. 1970. Preface to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by P. Freire, 9–15. New York, NY: Herder and Herder.
- Sinwell, L., and S. Mbatha. 2016. *The Spirit of Marikana: The Rise of Insurgent Trade Unionism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr6gs>.
- Taylor, K. 2016. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Thusi, Z., and A. Harley. 2020. "'Political Literacy' in South Africa". *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults* 11 (1): 77–90. <https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela9148>.
- Tselapedi, T., and J. Dugard. 2013. "Reclaiming Power: A Case Study of the Thembelihle Crisis Committee". In *Active Citizen Matters: Perspectives from Civil Society on Local Governance in South Africa*, 57–65. Cape Town: Good Governance Learning Networks (GGLN). https://ggln.org.za/images/solg_reports/SoLG_2013.pdf.
- Vally, S. 2020. "Between the Vision of Yesterday and the Reality of Today: Forging a Pedagogy of Possibility". *Education as Change* 24: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/6984>.
- Vally, S., and E. Motala. 2018. "Troubling 'Race' as a Category of Explanation in Social Science Research and Analysis". *Southern African Review of Education* 24 (1): 25–42.
- Von Kotze, A., S. Ismail, and L. Cooper. 2016. "Social Pedagogy in South Africa: Holding the Tension between Academia and Activism". *Pedagogia Social: Revista Interuniversitaria* 27: 281–305.
- Walters, S. 2005. "Social Movements, Class and Adult Education". In "Class Concerns: Adult Education and Social Class", edited by T. Nesbit, special issue, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 106: 53–62. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.179>.
- Walters, S. 2006. "Adult Learning within Lifelong Learning: A Different Lens, a Different Light". *Journal of Education* 39: 7–25.