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Book Review: Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire

Freire, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Herder and Herder.

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KEYWORDS

Critical Pedagogy; Educational Inequality; Problem-Posing Education; Critical Consciousness; Paulo Freire

ABSTRACT

This book review examines Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, focusing on its critique of traditional education and its emphasis on dialogue, critical consciousness, and social transformation. It evaluates the book's theoretical contributions, practical limitations, and continuing relevance to contemporary education.

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Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) is one of the most influential works in critical educational theory. The book challenges traditional approaches to education and examines the relationship between education, power, and social inequality. Freire argues that education is never entirely neutral; instead, it can either reproduce existing structures of oppression or contribute to social transformation. Through his concepts of the "banking model of education" and "problem-posing education," Freire proposes an alternative educational philosophy based on dialogue, critical consciousness, and human liberation. This review examines the book's central arguments, evaluates its theoretical contributions, and discusses its limitations and contemporary relevance.

Summary of the Main Arguments

Freire's central argument is that conventional education often functions as a mechanism for maintaining social inequality. He introduces the concept of the "banking model of education," in which teachers are regarded as the primary sources of knowledge and students are treated as passive recipients. In this model, education becomes a process of transferring information rather than encouraging independent thinking.

According to Freire, this approach reinforces unequal power relationships between

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teachers and students. Students are expected to memorize and reproduce information without critically examining the social conditions surrounding them. Consequently, the banking model discourages creativity, dialogue, and critical reflection.

As an alternative, Freire advocates "problem-posing education," which emphasizes active participation and mutual learning. Rather than positioning teachers as unquestionable authorities, this approach encourages teachers and students to engage in dialogue and collaboratively construct knowledge. Education thus becomes a process of inquiry through which individuals develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their societies.

Another important concept is "critical consciousness," or conscientização. Freire argues that education should help learners recognize the social, political, and economic structures that shape their lives. Through reflection and collective action, individuals can challenge oppressive conditions and participate in social transformation.

For Freire, education is therefore not simply a means of acquiring knowledge or professional skills. It is fundamentally connected to human dignity, democratic participation, and the pursuit of social justice.

Critical Evaluation

One of the book's major strengths is its critical examination of power relationships within educational institutions. Freire challenges the assumption that teaching is a politically neutral activity and encourages educators to reflect on how their practices may reproduce existing inequalities. His arguments are particularly valuable for understanding educational disadvantages associated with socioeconomic status and unequal access to learning opportunities.

Another significant contribution is his emphasis on dialogue and student participation. By rejecting the idea that students should remain passive recipients of knowledge, Freire provides a theoretical foundation for learner-centered education. His approach has influenced participatory teaching methods, collaborative learning, and critical classroom discussions. In contemporary educational environments, where creativity and independent thinking are increasingly emphasized, these ideas remain relevant.

Nevertheless, the book also has several limitations.

First, Freire's distinction between banking education and problem-posing education may be overly simplistic. Traditional teaching methods do not necessarily prevent students

from developing critical thinking skills. Direct instruction, memorization, and structured learning can be effective, particularly when students are acquiring foundational knowledge. Therefore, rather than completely rejecting teacher-centered instruction, educators may benefit from combining explicit teaching with dialogue and independent inquiry.

Second, Freire's educational philosophy presents practical challenges. Problem-posing education requires substantial interaction between teachers and students, which may be difficult to implement in large classrooms or examination-oriented educational systems. Teachers also face institutional constraints, including curriculum requirements, standardized assessments, and limited instructional time. The book offers limited practical guidance on how educators should address these challenges.

Third, Freire's emphasis on oppression and liberation may not fully explain the diversity of educational experiences. Although social inequality is an important issue, students' learning outcomes are also influenced by individual motivation, family environments, cognitive development, and cultural expectations. An educational framework primarily focused on political and social structures may overlook these additional dimensions.

The book is also relevant to contemporary discussions about educational technology. Digital learning platforms and artificial intelligence have transformed how students access and engage with knowledge. From Freire's perspective, these technologies could either reinforce passive learning or promote active participation and critical inquiry. However, the educational value of technology depends on its pedagogical application rather than its mere availability.

Conclusion

Overall, Pedagogy of the Oppressed offers a powerful critique of traditional education and highlights the importance of dialogue, critical reflection, and social responsibility. Its greatest contribution lies in demonstrating that education is closely connected to broader social and political relationships.

Although Freire's theoretical framework sometimes presents an overly polarized view of teaching practices and provides limited practical guidance, his ideas remain valuable for contemporary educational research. In particular, his emphasis on learner participation and critical consciousness continues to inform debates about educational equity, democratic education, and the role of technology in learning.

Ultimately, Freire's work reminds educators that education should involve more than the transmission of information. It should also encourage learners to question assumptions,

develop independent perspectives, and participate actively in society. For these reasons, Pedagogy of the Oppressed remains an essential contribution to educational theory and practice.