



Research Paper

Education as Liberation: Theories of Paulo Freire and Their Relevance in the 21st Century

Bhusan Padhan¹ & Dr. Bisweswari Sahu²

¹Research Scholar, DR. PMIASE, Sambalpur, Odisha, ORCID Id: 0009-0006-8253-0399

²Assistant Professor, DR. PMIASE, Sambalpur, Odisha, ORCID Id: 0009-0007-1683-9256

Abstract

This article investigates the concept of education as a tool of liberation through the work of Paulo Freire and considers its relevance in the twenty first century. It examines Freire's criticism of the old "banking model" of education, in which pupils are considered as passive recipients of knowledge, and emphasises the importance of more active and purposeful learning. This article explores into fundamental concepts such as problem-posing education, dialogue, conscientization, and praxis, demonstrating how these principles promote critical thinking, participation, and social awareness among students. This article also relates Freire's views to contemporary education, particularly in India, where exam-oriented learning and rote memorisation remain popular. It focuses on current developments, such as the National Education Policy (2020), which emphasise student-centred learning, critical thinking, and real-world application of knowledge. In an era of fast technological advancement and rising societal concerns, it proposes that education must go beyond textbooks to enable students' question, think, and take responsible action. Overall, the study shows that Paulo Freire's ideas are still very important today. His ideas can help us create an education system that's fair, responsible and good for everyone. Education should help students and teachers understand the importance of education. Paulo Freire's concept of education is still very relevant. It can help us make a better education system.

Key words: Paulo Freire, Banking Model of Education, Student-Centred Pedagogy, Conscientization and Critical Awareness, Dialogue and Democratic Learning, Praxis and Transformative Learning

Received 12 May., 2026; Revised 25 May., 2026; Accepted 28 May., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Education has historically been one of the most significant forces for shaping people and communities. Education develops people and helps them comprehend the world around them so they may participate in society. Many theorists over centuries have developed ideas about the purposes of education and the means by which they are achieved. Historically, education has often been a means of transmitting knowledge from teacher to student. Teachers in historically-based systems have been considered the teachers' primary source of knowledge, whereas students were expected only to listen, memorize, and repeat. While this method has been successfully used, many have criticized it for creating an environment that does not allow for independent thought, questioning, or the ability to understand issues in real life.

Additionally, many educators have challenged this traditional method of teaching and suggested alternative strategies. One of the most influential of these alternative thinkers was Paulo Freire. The ideas of Freire changed the way people conceive of education at a basic level. Freire's ideas are not only theoretical; they are based on his own life experience. Freire was born in Recife, Brazil, and experienced poverty as a child. Because of this, Freire had a personal understanding of the issues faced by poor and marginalized persons. These experiences allowed Freire to recognize the relationship among education, power, inequality, and social justice.

Freire had many opportunities to work with adults who could not read or write. As he worked with them, he noticed that they were not just missing letters; they were also experiencing social issues like poverty and limited opportunities. He observed that traditional methods of teaching did not assist these individuals to live better lives and created a sense of dependence and lower self-esteem. This led him to question the reason for an educational institution. He wanted education to do more than provide knowledge; he wanted it to provide an understanding of one's situation and a way to improve that situation.

Freire contended that learners are not to be treated as if they were empty vessels. Rather, they should be involved in the learning process through conversation, inquiry, and idea exchange. He wanted the learners to think about their own lives and their environments. This philosophy is most clearly outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he develops several ideas related to education such as the banking concept of education, the problem-posing concept, dialogue, awareness (conscientization), and praxis.

These ideas later became part of what is known as critical pedagogy, which focuses on the link between education and social change (Giroux, 1988 McLaren, 2007). Education is not an inherently impartial process, it can reinforce and continue existing social disparities, while it also works towards reducing them. Therefore, educators should help students understand societal issues and how to think of solutions to these problems. Freire's work is perhaps more relevant than ever today, given the current pace of changes occurring in the twenty-first century. While technological advances have provided students with expanded access to knowledge, they have also been responsible for the proliferation of misinformation, social inequalities, cultural differences and social conflict. Thus, education must be centred around critical thought and responsible action, in addition to simply developing students' knowledge bases. Today's learners need to develop critical thinking skills, ask questions of themselves and their fellow learners, and work collaboratively with other students to develop solutions to current challenges. Furthermore, today's learners must be able to recognize and appreciate multiple perspectives, and actively participate in society in a meaningful manner. These goals align with Freire's philosophy, which promotes experiential education through active engagement with the educational process and promotes awareness of current issues facing society via active dialogue.

This article illustrates Paulo Freire's primary concepts as well as their relevance to contemporary educational practices. Specifically, how Freire's beliefs continue to influence our discussions regarding improving methods of teaching and learning. Freire's methodology allows us to consider that education is not merely limited to textbooks or testing. It also comprises an understanding of the human experience and of contributing to a better world.

The Banking Model of Education and Its Contemporary Critique

The main critique that Paulo Freire expresses about education is the banking concept. This is when an instructor deposits knowledge into the student's head without any regard to how any of the knowledge will be applied. Teaching-learning becomes a one-way process. Students are treated like empty containers, and the teacher fills them with information (Freire, 1970).

In this model, learning is limited to memorizing fact and repeating them back on tests, as opposed to actually understanding what the subject matter is. According to Freire, such a method creates a dichotomy between teachers and students. The teacher becomes the only source of knowledge, and students are expected to passively listen and accept whatever is presented to them. There is little or no space for the student to question, discuss, or share ideas. Because of this type of education, students may develop a dependency on teachers and, as a result, may not have confidence in their own ability to think independently. Over time, this will result in decreased curiosity and thus, inhibit learners from developing their creativity and independent thought process.

Additionally, the banking method of education does not provide the means for students to have a better understanding of society. If a student is simply trained to memorize, they may never learn to question social issues such as inequality, poverty or injustice. Consequently, the banking method can support the status quo, without creating any challenges to the status quo. Thus, instead of facilitating change in society, education may create an environment for maintaining the status quo.

Many aspects of the education system today, especially in India, are based on the traditional banking model. One way this is demonstrated is through the measuring of student success (marks/rank) from exams taken and passed. The emphasis on exams is so great that it creates an environment where the teaching focus is on completing the syllabus instead of learning for understanding. Coaching culture, the encouragement to compete against others for high marks, and the pressure to perform at a high level to do well on large exams (e.g., competitive examinations) have led to an emphasis on memorising and repetition of learned material (rote learning). Therefore, while many students may be great at memorising and taking tests, they may lack the skills to apply what they know or to think outside of the box.

Standardised testing and rigid practices in learning (classroom) are further examples of the banking model. There are often many times when the teacher has limited access to providing the students an environment in which they can learn through discussion or activity-based learning. "In large classrooms, it becomes easier to lecture than to involve every student. These conditions make the banking model continue, even when educators are aware of its limitations" (Apple, 2013).

Advances in digital technology have highlighted the limitations of the traditional model of learning. Information is widely accessible through the internet today, meaning that students have access to facts, definitions, and explanations at any time. As a result of this access to information, simply providing information to students in the classroom is now not enough; students need to develop skills to understand, critically analyse, and apply

information in a meaningful way. To do this, students need to learn how to find trustworthy sources of information, think critically, and develop their own conclusions (Selwyn, 2016).

In India, changes to the education system, including the recent National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, have also acknowledged the importance of these skills. Critical thinking, hands-on learning and student engagement are now receiving increased emphasis in schools. However, the transition from traditional teaching and learning to more active approaches is ongoing, and many school classrooms are still in the process of transitioning.

Today, Freire's critique of the 'banking' model is just as important as ever. It encourages us to shift from an education of repetition and memorization to an education that promotes critical thinking, inquiry, and awareness of one's surroundings. To move beyond the banking model, we must create classrooms that encourage students to participate actively in the learning process, where ideas are exchanged and discussed freely, and where the education received is relevant to all aspects of life. By doing so, we will create and provide more valuable and applicable experiences for both the individual and society through our educational systems.

Problem-Posing Education and Student-Centred Pedagogy

To overcome the limits of traditional teaching, Paulo Freire introduced the idea of problem-posing education. Unlike the banking model, this approach does not treat students as passive listeners. Instead, it encourages them to take an active role in learning by asking questions, sharing ideas, and thinking about real-life situations (Freire, 1970).

Classroom interaction occurs in problem-posing education; both teachers and students can be equally engaged in learning. In this type of education, the teacher functions primarily as a facilitator of conversation, rather than the sole source of knowledge; therefore, when discussing topics with students, the teacher will ask questions, encourage student feedback/participation and assist students in creating meaning from the information presented. The result of this approach creates a more equitable and respectful relationship between teacher and student.

Another significant aspect of problem-posing education is that students' learning is connected to real-world issues rather than being confined to the pages of a textbook or a test. Students are encouraged to explore their environment by examining the problems they encounter daily, such as their community, environment, work, and social life. When learners experience the relationship between education and their lives, they become more engaged; further, they develop an understanding that knowledge is an extension of their everyday life and can be leveraged to improve the quality of that life.

In today's education system, especially in countries like India, there is a growing effort to move towards such student-centered methods. Approaches like project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and group activities are becoming more common. These methods give students the chance to explore topics, ask questions, and work together to find answers (Bell, 2010; Hmelo-Silver, 2004). By allowing students to study pollution and create solutions, instead of just reading about environmental problems, the topic becomes much more real to them and easier to relate to "reality" instead of reading about it. This method of teaching also allows students to apply many of the skills/knowledge necessary for success in the current world in a way that is practical and relevant. When students are challenged with solving real-life problems, they learn to think critically, solve problems, and work with one another. These skills are critical today as there is a growing requirement for individuals to manage multiple complex issues while also paying attention to others' needs when making decisions.

In addition, this type of problem-based learning is valuable in addressing large-scale global issues like climate change or technology/social inequities because students learn how these issues impact society by asking questions and exploring these ideas in depth. By doing this student develop an identity as individuals who are capable of making positive contributions to improving our environment through either direct action or supporting policy changes with their vote or at work.

Problem-posing approaches will create an environment for students where they would be able to learn more dynamically, be more connected to their daily lives, and ultimately develop a sense of community with one another. Shifting the emphasis from providing answers to promoting the inquiry process among students will provide a greater degree of understanding on the part of all students, as well as prepare them to accept their own and society's responsibilities and create a better future.

Conscientization and Critical Awareness in Modern Society

Another important idea in the philosophy of Paulo Freire is conscientization, which means developing critical awareness. It refers to the process through which people begin to understand the social, political, and economic factors that influence their lives (Freire, 1970). Being aware of what's happening around us means being able to determine why things are the way that they are. Freire believed that many people are affected by challenges such as poverty, inequity, and discrimination, but have not really thought about what those issues mean to them. Many of us have just accepted that these circumstances are part of life. Freire argued that education should help

individuals see that these issues are deeper than just “the way things are.” It should also help them to think critically about their own place in the world and therefore take action to make positive changes in their lives.

The need for increased awareness is even greater today than it has been in the past. Technology has allowed for the flow of information (via mobile phone, social media, and the internet) to be nearly instantaneous. As a result, we can access massive amounts of information whenever we want; however, not all of that information is accurate or reliable. In fact, the sheer volume of information we are presented with from various sources each day (i.e., misinformation, fake news, and biased media) gives others the opportunity to shape our perspective through these untrustworthy sources of information.

This is why the concept of critical consciousness is essential. In order for learners to acquire this type of awareness, they need to develop the capacity to challenge what they see and hear instead of taking everything as fact. In addition, those who have studied how education impacts society also emphasize the importance of media literacy as well as critical thinking skills to help combat these problems (Kellner & Share, 2007). Freire’s definition of conscientization is a valuable tool in building these skills by providing an opportunity for learners to develop their own understanding through deep thinking about and careful analysis of different points of view. The concept of critical consciousness is also very applicable to the diverse population that exists within the boundaries of India where there are many differences in language, culture, class, and access to resources. The existence of many socially related issues including poverty, gender inequality, underemployment, and lack of educational opportunities is a daily reality for millions in India. If critical thinking skills are not fostered, students will simply accept the existence of social issues without questioning them. Education must therefore play an essential role in both educating students about the existence of socially related issues that exist in society today as well as stimulating critical thinking in relation to potential solutions.

Students need to be encouraged to consider issues such as social justice, environmental issues and digital misinformation when they are learning in a classroom setting. They should also be prompted to ask more than just factual questions, such as, “Why do these issues exist?” “Who is impacted?” “What can be done to improve this situation?” Conversations around these types of issues will help to develop a sense of responsibility and awareness in learners.

The recent changes in the Indian education system, particularly in relation to critical thinking in the NEP 2020, demonstrate the increased importance placed on these topics. Schools and colleges are starting to adopt teaching strategies that encourage students to inquire, engage in dialogue and critically analyse what they learn.

Through developing a critical awareness of education, learners will become informed and responsible members of society. They will not only come to understand society, but will also be able to take action on improving their society through this process. The idea of conscientization as proposed by Freire remains relevant in our world today, specifically in a developing and diverse country such as India.

Dialogue and Democratic Learning

Dialogue is a key idea in the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire. He believed that real learning happens when there is open communication between teachers and students, not just one-way teaching (Freire, 1970). The dialogical classroom allows both teachers and learners to share their thinking, ask each other questions and learn from each other. In this way, learning becomes a shared experience rather than something that the teacher controls only.

Respect is vital to this method. In a dialogical environment, students are not simply viewed as passive recipients of information but as individuals that have their own knowledge, life-experiences, and thoughts to share with the wider learning community. As teachers and students engage in discussions, both teachers and students learn and grow together, resulting in an atmosphere of equality and support. Rather than just providing their students with answers to questions, teachers assist them in thinking, reflecting, and articulating their own points of view.

Using dialogue as a tool creates more understanding of a topic or issue for each person in the learning community. When learners engage in conversations, exchange opinions, and listen to the contributions from others, they are able to build a fuller and more complex understanding of any topic, transforming their learning experience from one that consists of rote memorization into one that consists of deep, meaningful learning, thereby strengthening their self-esteem and communication skills.

In today’s education system, dialogical learning is becoming more important. Many schools and colleges now use methods like group discussions, classroom debates, seminars, and peer learning activities. These practices allow students to interact more actively and learn together (Biesta, 2010). Teachers and learners are able to think critically together and learn from each other’s questions and experiences with a dialogic approach to teaching and learning. This creates an environment for shared learning as opposed to solely teacher-directed instruction.

To effectively use a dialogic classroom, both teachers and learners must demonstrate mutual respect for one another. In a dialogic environment, learners are no longer considered to be merely passive recipients of

information; instead, they are considered to have their unique bodies of knowledge, life experiences, and perspectives that can be used to contribute to the larger community of learners. Through engaging in discussion, teachers and learners are able to share knowledge and grow together in a respectful and supportive environment characterized by equality. Teachers would not only respond to their students' questions by providing them with answers, instead they would help their students to think critically, reflect critically, and articulate their own perspectives.

The use of dialogue as an instructional method allows for increased understanding for all learners who participate in the learning community relative to a topic or issue. The act of engaging in a conversation with other learners and listening to how each learner contributes to that conversation will allow learners to have a more complete and comprehensive understanding of any topic, and will help them to transform their learning from one of rote memorization to one of substantive meaning, which will result in the development of their self-esteem and exercise their ability to communicate effectively.

In many traditional classrooms today, students are still reluctant to speak up for a variety of reasons such as shyness, fear of mistakes, etc. Many teachers also put more emphasis on getting through the curriculum instead of encouraging discussion among their students. Creating a classroom culture that values open dialogue is essential.

Freire's idea of dialogue indicates that education should not be a one-way process but rather an interactive and inclusive one. When given the opportunity to express their thoughts and ask questions, they learn in a more engaging and meaningful way. By fostering productive discussions in our schools today, we can not only develop productive, intelligent learners; we can nurture thoughtful and responsible citizens in India.

Praxis and Transformative Learning

Another important idea in the philosophy of Paulo Freire is praxis. Praxis means the connection between thinking and doing. According to Freire, learning should not stop at understanding ideas. Students should also reflect on what they learn and use it in real-life situations (Freire, 1970). In simple terms, it is about learning, thinking about that learning, and then taking action based on it.

Praxis indicates knowledge is only relevant when it is enacted. If students merely read about theories yet never use those theories in their lives, their education is not complete. For instance, when students learn about social issues, such as poverty or the damage to the environment, they need to think through how those issues impact the area they live in and how those students can take action regarding those issues. This connection of theory and practice makes education more meaningful and applicable to students.

Many current classroom approaches reflect this principle in some way. Many teachers use experiential learning as a teaching method whereby students learn from their own personal experiences. Instead of just reading about or listening to a theory, students are actively engaged in an activity or project or fieldwork. This can assist students in developing a clear understanding of the theories. Kolb's theory of learning also places a great deal of emphasis on the need for students to participate in reflecting back on their learning experiences in conjunction with the information they have learned (Kolb, 1984).

Additionally, another example using service-learning demonstrates how students collaborate within their communities towards solving real-world problems. During this experience, students not only learn but also feel responsible for their actions. They learn more about the social issues and are encouraged to make a difference (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

In India, the concept of Praxis is becoming increasingly important. Reform activities for education such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, focus on experiential learning, skill development, and application of knowledge to real-life situations. Schools and colleges are beginning to provide fellowships, community service opportunities, field trips, and team projects to create relevance for their students between what they learn in the classroom and their everyday lives. Some examples of these types of activities are cleanliness drives; awareness programs; and community projects. By participating in these kinds of activities, students gain an understanding of social issues surrounding sanitation and health, as well as environmental protection. Furthermore, they develop skills such as teamwork, responsibility, and problem-solving.

Although in a lot of places education is mostly centered around exams and just knowing facts, the student has not had sufficient opportunities to practice what they know. Therefore, there is still a need for the continued strengthening (or further developing) of the practice of praxis within education.

Freire's concept of praxis makes clear to us that education is action; i.e., the goal of education is not just to acquire knowledge, but to also engage students in thinking about their place within society and how they can contribute positively to it. When learners can apply their knowledge from the classroom to their world through participating in ways that create positive change, then education becomes a true transforming force for that person. In a modern-day India, creating this type of opportunity will develop responsible, conscious and engaged citizens.

II. Conclusion

The educational philosophy of Paulo Freire has had a major influence on modern educational thought by offering a new perspective on teaching and learning and emphasizing the importance of dialogue, critical consciousness, and praxis. Freire challenged conventional understandings of education as a means of liberation and social transformation. Freire's ideas are still important today, as educational institutions in the twenty-first century must educate students to be prepared for and understand the complexities of the social environment in which they live, as well as critically examine information and engage in active participation in democratic societies.

Freire's philosophy provides an excellent framework to achieve these aims through developing critical consciousness, collaborative learning, and transformative practices. Therefore, Freirean pedagogy continues to be useful as a source of inspiration for educators who are working towards creating a more fair and equitable education system.

References

- [1]. Apple, M. W. (2013). *Can education change society?* Routledge.
- [2]. Bell, S. (2010). Project-based learning for the 21st century: Skills for the future. *The Clearing House*, 83(2), 39–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098650903505415>
- [3]. Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy.* Routledge.
- [4]. Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* Jossey-Bass.
- [5]. Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Continuum.
- [6]. Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning.* Bergin & Garvey.
- [7]. Hmelo-Silver, C. E. (2004). Problem-based learning: What and how do students learn? *Educational Psychology Review*, 16(3), 235–266. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:EDPR.0000034022.16470.f3>
- [8]. Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education. In D. Macedo & S. R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader* (pp. 3–23). Peter Lang.
- [9]. Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Prentice-Hall.
- [10]. Ministry of Education. (2020). *National education policy 2020.* Government of India.
- [11]. McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- [12]. Selwyn, N. (2016). *Education and technology: Key issues and debates* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury.