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# A Dilemma for Critical Educators?

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**ABSTRACT** *This article addresses some of the philosophical issues arising from debates over "political correctness" and "great books" in the early 1990s. Partly as a result of these battles, the notion of "correctness" now carries a highly pejorative connotation. The author suggests that a distinction needs to be drawn between (a) transmitting a political or moral view and (b) doing this in a dogmatic way. For one well-known educational figure, Paulo Freire, a "correct" approach to moral matters is a "critical" one. Freire believes certain moral values—those associated with the promotion of questioning, dialogue and reflective human activity, for example—ought to be promoted in all educational settings. His approach in conveying this ideal is, however, profoundly anti-dogmatic. This article defends Freire's position against one well-developed critique (by James Paul Gee), and considers some of the implications of the Freirean view for moral educators.*

Over the past decade, the charge that education has become "political" has been uttered with increasing frequency. The stimulus for many accusations of this kind has been the often heated debates over "political correctness" in the curriculum and the classroom. More often than not, those accusing others of politicising education have been strong defenders of a traditional approach to education. One of the most visible manifestations of this process at work was the battle over "the canon" in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Following the release of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1988), a book combining advocacy of a "great books" approach to higher education with a polemical attack on social and cultural life in the United States, vigorous exchanges on the question of what students ought to read (and why) ensued. Some theorists argued that traditional great books programmes relied rather too heavily on texts by dead white males, and supported the introduction of further works by women, ethnic minorities and Third World writers. Changes of this sort were necessary, the reformists argued, if diverse experiences, political views and literary styles were to be conveyed, encountered and appreciated. Defenders of more traditional programmes labelled the reformists "liberal McCarthyists" and "new fundamentalists", and claimed that universities had become breeding grounds for "tenured radicals" (Kimball, 1990) intent on foisting their agenda for social transformation on unsuspecting students. The reformists countered with the argument that education always had been political, and that conservatives had simply failed to recognise or own up to the ways in which their own interests were being served by traditional programmes.

In the latter half of the 1990s some of the heat in these battles has dissipated, but one of their lasting effects is a deep suspicion of anything resembling what might be called "moral correctness". By this I mean any process involving the prescribing of a moral (or political) view for others. The notion of "*political correctness*" has certainly been associated with some highly controversial policies and practices. While some university educators regard "political correctness" in a positive light and affirm their commitment to it, the weight of opinion from the debates in the earlier part of this decade has imparted a strongly pejorative flavour to the term. It might be expected, then, that an encounter with a theorist who speaks—on occasion—of "correct" ways of thinking and "correct" positions will leave many educationists feeling somewhat uneasy, if not openly hostile. Paulo Freire is one such thinker. While the notion of "correctness" does not figure prominently in Freire's philosophical vocabulary, he does use the term often enough for it to be noticed by some critics.

This article pays particular attention to the programme of adult education initiated in Sao Tome and Principe in the 1970s (with which Freire was closely involved) where the phrase "thinking correctly" is used repeatedly. Freire's tacit endorsement of this phrase in his analysis of the programme is given more explicit expression in his occasional references to "correct" thinking in other writings. James Paul Gee (1988) finds Freire's use of the concept of "correctness" problematic. I suggest, however, that the negative connotations of the word "correct" ought not to distract us from examining the substantive practices to which this word refers. The evidence from Freire's theory and practice suggests that, for him, "correct" thinking is synonymous with (rather than antagonistic to) "critical" thinking. Seeking to justify *this* form of correctness (but not all forms of correctness), I argue that a distinction needs to be drawn between (a) transmitting a political or moral view and (b) doing this in a dogmatic way. Freire wants to do (a) while avoiding (b). The article concludes by noting some of the implications of the Freirean position for moral educators.

### **A Critical Contradiction?**

The promotion of a critically conscious mode of being has long been a cornerstone of Freirean pedagogy. In a range of publications over the past 25 years (e.g. Freire, 1972a, 1972b, 1976, 1985, 1994) Freire has consistently encouraged learners to problematise everyday existence, question established policies and practices and theorise possibilities for building a better social world. The critical, dialogical, praxical human subject lies at the heart of Freire's moral philosophy. The concrete manifestation of this ideal is to be found in Freire's advocacy of collective action against oppression in countries such as his native Brazil. To be critical is, for Freire, not merely an option but an ontological *vocation* for all human beings.

Freire's elevation of critical thought to a prime place in his ethical and educational theory has attracted a number of strong criticisms over the years. Peter Berger (1974) attacked the concept of conscientisation in the 1970s, Bowers (1983) objected to Freire's pedagogical interventionism in the 1980s and a number of

feminists and post-structuralists have found fault with the modernist assumptions underpinning Freire's ideal in the 1990s (see Weiler, 1991; Luke & Gore, 1992). I have attempted to address some of these critiques elsewhere (e.g. Roberts, 1996a, 1996b) and will not deal with them directly in the present discussion. This article focuses on a rather more specific problem, namely, the question of how Freire's support for critical consciousness might be reconciled with the idea of "correct" thinking.

Before turning to one example of a critique directed at Freire's explicit references to, and tacit endorsement of, the process of *thinking* correctly it is instructive to consider briefly how the notion of correctness might be viewed in other domains. Readers may not recoil in horror when they happen upon references to "correct" thinking in Freire's writings, but many are likely to find this notion at least slightly uncomfortable. This stems, perhaps, from the idea that "correctness" implies the existence of only *one* "right" (or "true", or "legitimate", or "authentic") answer, solution, political position, way of thinking, mode of acting, etc. which must be enforced or imposed on everybody. If there is only one "correct" way of doing X, or being Y, then anyone who is *not* thinking or acting in this manner is "incorrect" and hence, in the most obvious sense of that term, "wrong". Despite being constantly told how to think and act in our daily lives (by television advertisements, politicians, teachers, parents, church leaders, etc.), and seldom questioning such intrusions, the overt use of the term "correctness" in written discourse typically evokes irritation or hostility.

Arguably, however, the negative connotations of "correctness" are specific to certain uses of the term. Few people flinch, for example, when mathematicians insist on students finding the "correct" answer to a problem in algebra, or when scientists claim to have found the "correct" way to combine certain chemicals in order to produce a given reaction. This might suggest that the difficulty (or discomfort) arises when a shift is made from the "hard" sciences to areas of inquiry which take human beings as their main concern. Yet, multiple choice tests which assume the existence of a single "correct" answer to questions premised on highly contestable assumptions about human beings and human interaction (e.g. in economics or psychology) attract remarkably little critical comment. Obviously, an adequate explanation of the ready acceptance of the notion of "correctness" in such settings demands a form of historical and sociological investigation which is not possible in the space available. None the less, it is clear that the idea of being "correct" is less controversial in some discursive domains than others. In fact, in a number of academic spheres, the use of the term is barely questioned at all. "Correctness" also has an acceptable face in some areas outside academia: chess players, for instance, talk of a move being "correct" when it is demonstrably the *best* move, given the placement of pieces on the board at a particular moment in the game. When employed in relation to questions of politics or morality, however, the notion of correctness is far more apt to cause offence. When it comes to political and ethical matters, some people are willing to concede that one position may be "better" than another, but these domains of inquiry are not, it is often felt, areas in which one can, or should, be "correct" or "incorrect".

Whatever connotations the word "correctness" currently has in different discursive spheres, there is nothing intrinsically or universally negative about the term. This point is important in considering a critique of Freire's work by James Paul Gee (1988). Gee focuses an adult education programme in Sao Tome and Principe with which Freire was involved almost two decades ago. Gee develops his analysis of the notion of "thinking correctly"—a phrase used liberally in the workbooks (*Popular Culture Notebooks*) for adult learners in Sao Tome and Principe—in two steps. First, he cites a series of passages from the workbooks and Freire's commentary on them, noting, for example, references to critical perception, debate, creation and recreation through the act of study, the concern with stimulating and challenging learners, etc. "All this", Gee says, "sounds open and liberating" (p. 207). Gee then contrasts these statements with a series of references in the *Popular Culture Notebooks* to "thinking correctly", prefacing these citations with the comment: "Freire comes up square against Plato's problem: what is to ensure that when people read (either a text or the world) they will do so 'correctly'?" (p. 207). Gee draws attention to what he believes is a glaring contradiction:

It is startling that a pedagogy that Freire says is "more a pedagogy of question[s] than a pedagogy of answer[s]", that is radical because it is "less certain of 'certainties' " ..., in fact knows what it is to *think* correctly. The student is told not to repeat what others say, but then the problem becomes that in re-saying what the student reads for him- or herself, he or she may say it wrong, that is, in conflict with Freire's or the state's political perspective. Thus, the literacy materials must ensure that he or she thinks correctly, that is, re-says or interprets both the text and the world "correctly" (p. 208).

Gee claims, with regard to the *Popular Culture Notebooks*, that "any thoughts which do not fit 'the new man the new woman', which do not agree with 'the People's cause', will count as 'misrepresentations', as the internal voice of the oppressor, and thus, as false" (p. 209). He is quick to point out, however, that this would (normally) apply to any form of literacy. All literacies have "built-in perspectives and assumptions that serve as a test of whether one is correctly practising that literacy" (p. 209). Gee shares with Freire the view that literacies are never neutral: there is, he says, "no way out of having an opinion, an ideology, and a strong one—as did Plato, as does Freire" (p. 208).

### **Correct and Critical? Addressing the dilemma**

The force of Gee's critique depends, in large measure, on readers finding the notion of "thinking *correctly*" objectionable. The semantics of "correctness" thus have an important bearing on Gee's judgement of Freire. I contend that if the statements about "correct thinking" in the *Popular Culture Notebooks*—and the adjoining commentary by Freire—are properly contextualised, Gee's criticism of Freire loses much of its effectiveness. My argument turns on a recognition of two levels—semantic and substantive—on which Freire's statements can be interpreted, and reinforces the

need for a holistic reading of Freire's work. A distinction can be drawn between (a) transmitting a political or moral point of view and (b) doing this in a dogmatic way [1]. Encouraging critical thinking is inconsistent with (b) but quite compatible with (a). Freire, I want to suggest, has the intention of doing (a) without doing (b). He wants his students to accept certain moral principles—including the notion of critical thinking as a worthwhile mode of human activity—but he does not want to do this in an indoctrinatory or dogmatic way. Indeed, avoiding dogmatism is an important part of the (critical) moral ideal Freire seeks to uphold. Gee mistakenly believes that Freire is in favour of (b) because he endorses (a). This is why Gee draws the wrong conclusion that Freire's support for a political view is inconsistent with his plea for critical thinking.

In the majority of cases where Freire uses the notion of "correctness", it is in relation to the process of thinking. To think correctly, as several passages from Freire's work indicate, is to be curious, to create and re-create, to seek the reasons behind facts, to relate theory to practice, and so on (compare, for instance, Freire, 1972b, pp. 79–80; 1993, pp. 24, 112; 1994, p. 42); but these are precisely the features, or at least some of the key dimensions, of critical consciousness for Freire. In his classic statement in *Education: the practice of freedom* (1976), Freire has this to say:

The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analysing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old—by accepting what is valid in both old and new (p. 18).

Later, Freire observes that as people become (increasingly) critically conscious they begin to recognise "the impossibility of theory without practice, the impossibility of thinking without a transforming action in the world" (1985, p. 104). In discussing his approach to the act of study, Freire (1985) argues:

This critical attitude in studying is the same as that required in dealing with the world (that is the real world and life in general), an attitude of inward questioning through which increasingly one begins to see the reasons behind facts (p. 2).

Themes from Freire's earliest statements on critical consciousness have been reaffirmed in his more recent work:

If the great popular masses are without a more critical understanding of how society functions, it is not because they are naturally incapable of it—to my view—but on account of the precarious conditions in which they

live and survive, where they are "forbidden to know". Thus, the way out is not ideological propaganda and political "sloganizing", as the mechanists say it is, but the critical effort through which men and women take themselves in hand and become agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the "why" of things and facts (Freire, 1994, p. 105).

Thinking "correctly", then, appears to be compatible, if not synonymous, with thinking (and being) "critical". Gee seems to ignore this. Yet, the very book in which Freire discusses the Sao Tome and Principe programme, *Literacy: reading the word and the world* (Freire & Macedo, 1987), along with almost every other text published by Freire in the past 25 years, quickly renders the similarity between "correctness" and "criticalness" explicit. Gee relies heavily on the semantic "work" done by the notion of "correctness"—i.e. its pejorative connotation—to effect a contrast between what "sounds open and liberating" and something which supposedly is *not* open or liberating. If it is true, however, that there is (for Freire) a conceptual link between "correctness" and "criticalness", the contradiction between being "less certain of certainties" and knowing "what it is to think correctly" disappears. For knowing what it is to think correctly is, among other things, knowing not to be too certain of certainties—i.e. always being restless, curious, and ever prepared to question.

This is where the distinction mentioned earlier (transmitting a moral view on the one hand, and doing this in a dogmatic way on the other) becomes important. Freire certainly believes there is moral value in encouraging people to think critically. He argues that this ideal should be promoted at every level of the education system—from primary school to university and beyond (see Freire's comments in Dillon, 1985). Additionally, he frequently stresses the value of dialogue, questioning, intellectual rigour and reflective action. While sensitive to postmodern criticisms of universalist thought, Freire none the less believes these are qualities worth promoting for all human beings. In this sense, then, he wants to transmit a particular view of the world to others—whether this is through his work as a teacher, or as an administrator, or a writer; but he is adamant that this ought to involve a simultaneous revealing of *other* positions:

What is altogether impermissible, in democratic practice, is for teachers, surreptitiously or otherwise, to impose on their pupils their own "reading of the world", in whose framework, therefore, they will now situate the teaching of content. The battle with the authoritarianism of the Right or the Left does not lead me into that impossible "neutrality" that would be nothing but a cunning way of seeking to conceal my option ... The role of the progressive educator, which neither can nor ought to be omitted, in offering her or his "reading of the world" is to bring out the fact that there are other "readings of the world", different from the one being offered as the educator's own, and at times antagonistic to it (Freire, 1994, pp. 111–112).

Gee arguably allows the negative connotations of the term "correctness" to

override his critique of Freire's substantive position. Where Gee does deal with substantive issues, his assertions have a decidedly speculative character. He *assumes* that should a student in the Sao Tome and Principe programme answer a question in a manner which conflicts with "Freire's or the state's political perspective", this will be considered a "wrong" or 'incorrect' answer. However, there is nothing in either Freire's analysis or the excerpts Freire provides from the *Notebooks* to suggest that this is the case. Similarly, Gee claims that any thoughts which do not "fit" the ideal of "the new man and woman" or agree with "the People's cause" will count as misrepresentations; again, however, no evidence is either provided by Gee, or easily mustered from Freire's text, to support this hypothesis. The Sao Tome and Principe campaign, to be sure, was promoting a particular view of human beings and the world, as was Freire in his literacy work in Brazil and Chile, but—and this is a point Gee explicitly acknowledges—this is true of any literacy or educational programme. Gee does not consider the possibility that were a student to question the vision of "a new man and new woman" presented by the state in Sao Tome and Principe, such questioning might be accepted as legitimate and *valued* as a sign that the objective of "correct" (critical) thinking fostered in the programme was being realised. This alternative possibility seems at least as plausible as the scenario Gee describes. Indeed, even on the evidence presented by Gee there appears to be a stronger *prima facie* case for this interpretation. Gee outlines many of the features of a critical approach to reality—including a statement from the *Notebooks* which stipulates that studying is *not* merely repeating what others have to say (see Gee, 1988, p. 207)—but assumes that these features will be ignored should political views other than Freire's or the state's be aired.

Of course, to be fair to Gee, it would be difficult to avoid being speculative if the focus of one's critique is Freire's account of the programme in Sao Tome and Principe. Freire is hardly likely, given his repeated attacks on manipulation and authoritarianism, to admit openly that political views other than his own (or those he sanctions) should be "corrected" or suppressed! Unless Gee seeks empirical evidence from the people of Sao Tome and Principe, or from others who have conducted research along these lines, he must advance his case largely by inference. Still, if Freire's constant written references to the importance of adopting a critical approach toward the world are borne out in his educational practice, it would seem very odd for Freire to support a deliberate suppression of opposing political views.

While the notion of correctness is predominantly applied to thinking and qualities of consciousness in the *Notebooks*, a different application of the term "correct" can also be detected. The *Notebooks* speak of "a correct sense of political militancy" as one in which people learn to overcome "individualism and egoism" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 92). It might be claimed that there is a shift in this case from telling people *how* to think to telling them *what* to think: i.e. to recognising only one position as the "correct" one. Yet this example must be contextualised. The phrase "a correct sense of political militancy" occurs in a passage in the second of the *Popular Culture Notebooks* where the theme is "The New Man and the New Woman" (p. 92). Here, the characteristics of a particular human ideal—one which, for the organisers of the Sao Tome and Principe programme, was commensurate



with life in a society undergoing revolutionary reconstruction—are set out in some detail. In considering some of the qualities of “the new man and the new woman”, the *Notebook* says: “[o]ne of these qualities is agreement with the People’s cause and the defence of the People’s interests” (p. 92). This is very clearly a prescriptive political statement, suggesting that if one is to be a “new man” or “new woman”, one must accept the principles undergirding “the People’s cause”. That this cause may be democratic and arguably in the best interests of those being asked to agree with it is beside the point here: it is the implied notion that this is the *only* acceptable political view which is of interest for present purposes.

Taken as isolated phrases, these statements certainly appear to be problematic. Note, however, that agreement with “the People’s cause”, and with the “correct” sense of political militancy, is conditional upon prior acceptance of the view that there is, or will be, or can be, a “new man” and “new woman”. The prescribing of one political position as the only correct one is thus a prescription *within* an articulated ideal—an ideal which, in the very programme in which it is being promoted, people are invited to think critically about. Indeed, even within this section of the *Notebooks*, criticism is encouraged. Participants are told:

To study (a revolutionary duty), to *think correctly*, to develop curiosity in the face of reality, to create and re-create, to criticize with justice and to accept constructive criticism, to combat antipopular activities—all these are characteristics of the new man and the new woman (p. 92, emphasis added).

Hence, the ideal represented by the notion of “The New Man and the New Woman” comprises a commitment to “the People’s cause”, a particular position on the question of militancy, *and* qualities which—with the possible exception of combating “antipopular activities”—resemble those of Freirean critical consciousness. The texts from the programme give evidence that “the People’s cause” is precisely a cause in which people are encouraged to become critically conscious. Similarly, *if* the critical approach fostered by “the People’s cause” is to emerge, it cannot be based on egoism and individualism, for these qualities are antithetical to not only the wider social objectives of this cause but the very idea of critical consciousness. In other words, if a consciousness is to be “critical”, then it must—on the view advanced in the programme—be anti-individualist. That is, it must recognise the necessarily social nature of the struggle which is “the People’s cause”.

### **Implications for Moral Educators**

I want to conclude by exploring some of the implications of this view for moral educators in institutions of higher education. I shall focus, in particular, on the issue the paper started with: the debates over political correctness and “great books” in universities. Freire has long argued that education is a necessarily political process. In this sense, he is at odds with conservatives who proclaim their own neutrality while charging radicals with politicising the curriculum. Yet he has also spoken out against dogmatism and sectarianism on the left:

The left's sectarianism and dogmatism were always most unbearable and made them almost "religious", as they construed themselves into holders of the truth, with their excessive certainty, their authoritarianism, and their mechanistic understanding of history and of conscience. The results of all that were the deproblematization of the future and the decrease of conscience, reflections of the external reality (Freire, 1997, p. 53).

While "political correctness" remains a many-sided, highly ambiguous term, one of its most important applications—particularly from an educational point of view—was to practices and policies involving the imposition of one (political or moral) view as the only acceptable or legitimate one. "Political correctness", when understood in this manner, involves the suppression of questioning, difference(s), and opposing points of view. Thus defined, "political correctness" has no place in Freirean theory (see further, Roberts, 1997).

Freire has always been open about his political preferences. This, for him, is an important part of the teaching process. *All* teachers adhere to certain moral values in their pedagogical practice, although many prefer to keep their beliefs and principles to themselves. Freire believes teachers ought to make their "dreams"—their moral and political ideals—known to students, while explicitly encouraging critical interrogation of those views. The dogmatic teacher holds to a political or moral position even in the face of strong arguments against it. The Freirean teacher strives to obtain political clarity, and in so doing must be prepared to put his or her beliefs to the test. Supporting a moral position is not the problem; rather, the difficulty lies in the inability to take other moral views seriously. Dogmatism is typically anti-dialogical; it involves the entrenched suppression of "otherness". A Freirean approach to moral education, by contrast, makes engagement with otherness the very basis on which any view can be held with conviction. To put this another way, moral education, from a Freirean point of view, demands a willingness to confront and question one's own beliefs through the very process of arguing for them and about them with others who hold different views.

A key to the distinctiveness of a Freirean perspective on the debates over political correctness, "great books" and the university curriculum is to be found in Graff's (1992) suggestion that academics should "teach the conflicts". Graff argues that differences between antagonists in the culture wars should (themselves) become the object of class discussion. This allows students to gain both an understanding of some of the key arguments in the debates and an appreciation of the importance of diversity in ideas and values within a university. Freire, I believe, would have supported this approach but perhaps taken it further. Graff's proposal is firmly grounded in the model of the academic conference. This has its limitations. Graff calls for a recognition of difference without demanding an engagement with, and addressing of, those differences in a manner that shows they really *matter* beyond the confines of the academy. While Graff does not ignore questions about the lives students lead elsewhere, he has relatively little to say about the ways in which arguments about books on university reading lists need to be contextualised and located in a wider structural framework.

This is where Freire's approach has something unique to offer. Freire speaks as a man passionately committed to the ideals of the university—he defends virtues such as tolerance, critical inquiry and rigour at length—but his ethical position is, at the end of the day, strongly rooted in the (often harsh) realities of everyday life in Third World countries. For Freire, teaching involves *risking* oneself and one's moral values. This risk, in the situations with which Freire was dealing, was literally life-threatening. For all teachers, however, there are risks in making one's ideas, experiences and practices the subject of continuous, dialogical critical reflection. For Freire, it is not merely a matter of laying out opposing views (although this is vitally important); teaching also involves *working with* difference.

In practical terms, this entails, among other things, linking *texts* to *contexts*. Whatever books are read—be they traditional 'great' books, or lesser-known texts by a wider range of authors—there is a need, from a Freirean point of view, for teachers to assist students in relating what is encountered in the classroom to struggles and concerns in the students' own social world(s). This could involve a range of pedagogical activities beyond as well as within the classroom. Dickens' *Hard Times*, for example, might serve as a foundation for classroom debate on issues of poverty and exploitation and could, for some students, lead to subsequent political action in trying to lobby politicians for improved wages or housing conditions for local urban workers. The teacher's responsibility is not to *prescribe* such action for the students, but to make it one possibility among a range of potential responses to the text. Teachers also have an important role to play in contextualising the production of texts—that is, in discussing the historical, social and cultural conditions under which books are written. This applies to *student* texts as well—including those produced (e.g. as critical essays) in response to "great books" or other works under class discussion. The notion of "greatness" should itself be subject to intense debate in the classroom. While Freire supports the reading of classic texts in given fields of study—a sociologist, he would say, must read Marx, Durkheim and Weber, irrespective of their agreement or disagreement with the views of these writers (see Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 83)—he makes it clear that the greatness of these texts cannot be taken for granted. Rather, the greatness of traditional classics must, in effect, be "re-established" each time a student gives such books a critical reading.

For Freire, there is no single "correct" interpretation of a text, but some interpretations or readings will be better than others. Correctness, from a Freirean point of view, applies not to the text itself but rather to the manner in which it is engaged. One can, Freire tells us, only come *closer* to understanding the essence of a given object of study (cf. Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 82). The "object of study" may be a book, an article, a political speech, an event, a process, a movement, or anything else to which intellectual energies are directed in a structured and purposeful way. The "correct" approach in seeking a deeper understanding is a critical, dialogical encounter with texts and contexts. Freire acknowledges that there are other ways to read books—e.g. for light entertainment—but makes it plain that for him, in his role as an educator in politically volatile situations, a critical stance is indispensable. He is not dogmatic, however, about the exact requirements for such a stance and has, over the years, modified and extended his conception of the critical

reading process. He has, for example, spoken about the aesthetic dimensions of reading and the formation of certain intellectual dispositions—restlessness, curiosity, a spirit of investigation, etc.—in developing a richer, more complex account of critical reading at the university level (see Freire, 1985, pp. 1–4; 1994, pp. 75–77; Horton & Freire, 1990).

Teaching, Harris (1990) has convincingly argued, is a necessarily interventionist occupation. Freire shares this view. In any structured pedagogical situation, certain moral principles will already have been assumed before a class begins; others come into being as teaching and learning proceed. To encourage people to think critically—which, from a Freirean point of view, is the “correct” way to approach social reality—is to favour a particular moral position. Teachers could, after all, *discourage* students from thinking critically, and instead promote (say) spontaneity, or individual happiness, or group cohesion as primary pedagogical goals. The critical ideal at the heart of Freirean theory and practice does, however, have some advantages over a number of other moral positions. While “correct” thinking for some theorists implies restrictiveness and closure, a “correct” approach for Freire is one in which educators disclose, discuss and debate their moral views with students while simultaneously fostering the exploration of alternative ethical ideals.

Teachers, Freire would say, should not be afraid to “put something forward” (see Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 34); indeed, they *cannot* avoid at least implicitly conveying some sort of conception of the way the world is or ought to be. Freire would be quick to add, however, that teachers also ought (as far as the limits of their classroom activity allow) to alert students to other ways of understanding reality. Alternative political positions and moral values should become the object of educative dialogue, where participants can test the validity of their own views without lapsing into defensive, dogmatic or hostile postures. The crucial question for teachers is not “Do I have the right to intervene in the moral lives of my students?” but rather “What *form* should this intervention take?” For Freire, the “correct” form of pedagogical intervention is one in which students are encouraged to engage a range of moral positions—including their teachers’, their classmates, and their own—through a critical, dialogical encounter with texts and contexts, in an environment free of dogmatism, sectarianism and intolerance.

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## Notes

- [1] I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for suggesting this framing of the argument.

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