

Critical Pedagogy and the Arts Management Classroom

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Abstract

Paulo Freire, a twentieth-century Brazilian educational philosopher, is well known for discussing how our educational systems are oppressive through a critical theoretical lens. One form of this oppression is the “banking concept” of education, which involves teachers giving information to their students, and the students then collecting this information and depositing it into their “knowledge account,” with no opportunity to think critically or transform themselves with the knowledge they are given. Freire believes this style of oppression is not a valuable concept for our students as it only serves the teachers (the oppressors) and not the students (the oppressed). This paper will help establish a foundation of Freire’s theories and discuss a possible way in which critical pedagogy can be incorporated in the arts management classroom. An example is presented to explain how the author incorporated these critical pedagogical ideas in their arts administration class, the challenges they faced in this approach, and the outcomes of teaching critically.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, arts management, arts administration, arts management education, arts administration education

Paulo Freire is well known for discussing how our educational systems are oppressive through a critical theoretical lens known as critical pedagogy. One form of this oppression is the “banking concept” (Freire, 2000) which involves teachers giving information to their students, and the students collecting this information and depositing it into their “knowledge account.” In other words, it is a model of education that “dumps information into passive individuals” (Chapman, 2019). Freire (2000) believes the banking concept gives students no opportunity to think critically or transform themselves with the knowledge they are given. He further believes this style of education is not a valuable concept for our students as it only serves the teachers by placing the teacher in a position of authority in an effort to justify the teachers’ existence (Freire, 2000).

Freire’s theory helps us understand that how an educator teaches impacts the lives and characters of their students. This paper therefore uncovers the concepts of critical pedagogy, and provides information on the realities of teaching critically as it can relate to the arts management classroom.

Freire’s “Banking Concept”

Freire believes the banking concept is oppressive because it implies the teacher is more knowledgeable and they therefore “bestow” this gift of knowledge to the students who are assumed to know nothing (Freire, 2000). The teacher then assumes that their students are taught as soon as information is given to them. The banking concept actually minimizes the students’ creative power in an effort to serve the interests of the oppressors (the teachers) as they do not care to have their world transformed (Freire, 2000). This is because it constitutes the oppressor’s right to live in peace, to live in a world where they are “right” so that they can justify their existence as a teacher (Freire, 2000).

Freire is not arguing that educators should not teach students information. It is important to remember that the reason students are in school is to learn. Educators are indeed responsible for helping students develop their knowledge. Therefore, oppression does not relate to the information taught. To teach oppressively is to view the classroom as an “object of domination” (Freire, 2000), and to always assume that students cannot think for themselves. Should educators teach students in a way that instills the concept that they know nothing, then the students will continue to believe they know nothing. Furthermore, if educators only give students information for them to deposit, with no opportunity to question, discuss, or analyze the information given to them, the less the students actually learn.

There are several factors that give in to oppressive teaching styles. The following thoughts and actions are what Freire (2000) deems as oppressive:

- The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
- The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing.
- The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
- The teacher talks and the students listen.
- The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
- The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply.
- The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
- The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.

The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.

The banking concept stimulates these behaviors, whether consciously or subconsciously, and further perpetuates the cycle of an oppressive society (Freire, 2000). These behaviors are presented in order to help educators understand the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student. It helps educators become aware of their own approach in the classroom and how they can improve their students' chance for success. Should educators rely too heavily on the banking concept, or even fully believe any of the above practices, then it is possible to inadvertently destroy students' self-confidence, and even destroy the relationship between teacher and student by changing them into "inanimate things" as a way to achieve complete domination in the classroom (Freire, 2000).

Critical Pedagogy in the Arts Management Classroom

Freire offers these thoughts in a way to help educators understand how they can better serve their students. How, then, can arts management educators incorporate critical pedagogy in the classroom? Awareness is the first step. Only through awareness can an educator begin to see their school not just as an area of instruction, but also as a place that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation (McLaren, 2009). This includes an awareness of how certain pedagogical practices are so natural that most educators accept them as normal (McLaren, 2009). This can include utilizing the banking concept in one's classroom (Freire, 2000), rewards and punishments as control devices, teacher-centered pedagogical approaches, and even competitive grading (McLaren, 2009), to name a few. Critical pedagogy therefore helps an educator become aware of these normal practices and understand that these are not hard-set rules to abide by, but instead are socially constructed guidelines that society has just accepted over the years (Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2009).

An arts management educator, then, should first examine how these practices may be constructed in their own classrooms. How is a typical class organized in terms of its agenda and hierarchies? Are students encouraged to use their own voice? Is the classroom socially constructed in a way to allow students to live authentically and in partnership with the teacher? Additionally, how do students develop their critical and creative thinking skills?

Partnership

In examining the constructs of a class, it is important to note the power hierarchies that may exist. These power hierarchies refer to how the teacher views themselves in relation to the students. In an oppressive state of mind, the educator almost always brings with them their own prejudices and lack of trust in their students by assuming their students have an inability to think, want, and know for themselves (Freire, 2000). This therefore places the teacher in a dominating role in the classroom in an effort to prove their legitimacy (Freire, 2000).

In contrast, a critical pedagogue aims to build a partnership between teacher and student (Freire, 2000). This partnership, in a way, takes a constructivist role in that it places the learning in the hands of the students, and embraces the understanding that learning happens when we actively involve students in decisions, provide them experiences that challenge their thinking,

and place them in environments that incorporate social learning (Schunk, 2012). It thus places the students on the same hierarchical level as the teacher. It additionally requires the educator to remain open to learning from their students (Freire, 2000). In banking education, the teacher “owns” the knowledge (Freire, 2000). A critical pedagogue is aware that they do not know everything, and remain open to the possibility of learning from their students, just as much as their students may learn from them. This partnership therefore allows teaching and learning to be a process of inquiry, critique, constructing, and building a social connection between teacher and student (Freire, 2000). It further allows learning to not be carried out by “‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B,’ but rather ‘A’ with ‘B’” (Freire, 2000).

Encouraging Student Voice

Critical pedagogues aim to improve their relationships with their students by developing respect and trust between teacher and student (Freire, 2000). A great way to develop respect and trust is to encourage students to develop their own voice in the classroom (bell hooks, 1994; Freire, 2000). This begins with educators allowing space for their students to question, analyze, and discuss the information presented to them through dialogue. According to Freire (2000), dialogue is the key component of both learning and knowing. Dialogue allows students the opportunity to think critically, develop their self-confidence, and incorporate a sense of respect and trust in the teacher-student relationship (Freire, 2000). By allowing students to share and develop their own voice through dialogue, it allows them to live *with* the world they reside in, opposed to living *in* it (Freire, 2000).

Helping develop the student voice also encourages authenticity. It allows a safe space for the students by allowing them the freedom to not only be themselves, but to also think for themselves. According to Freire (2000), it is quite frequent that students begin to participate in dialogue using their own authentic voice, to then stop short by claiming they do not know anything. They then wait for the teacher to give their own opinion because the teacher knows all. A critical pedagogue instead encourages their students to continue in the dialogue, in an effort to develop their own authentic thinking (Freire, 2000), as well as to show the students it is a safe space to speak. Communication is thus the only way to allow the necessary space for student authenticity (Freire, 2000). By allowing the students a voice in the classroom, the teacher-student relationship grows as they are both free to be themselves and think for themselves. Respect and trust therefore grow stronger.

Further research beyond Freire’s theory has also supported the encouragement of student voice. Walmsley (2013) believes that educators should restructure to a “lead-learner role” where educators partake in discussions with their students in the classroom to help their students identify how and what they learn. This allows students to develop their critical thinking skills, and further develops their authentic voice. According to Walmsley (2013), taking part in a lead-learner role will result in a power shift, one in which respect is garnered between student and teacher.

Additionally, bell hooks (1994) encourages “engaged pedagogy.” This takes the approach of empowering not just the students, but also the teachers in the classroom. It builds on the teacher-student relationship by valuing both student and teacher expression in dialogue. This creates respect and trust, and builds on teacher-student authenticity.

Students should feel safe in the classroom to develop their voice and authentic selves. The solution is not to form the students to the pre-existing structure, but instead to transform the

pre-existing structure to allow students to be their authentic selves (Freire, 2000). Critical pedagogues therefore find ways to break down the oppressive barriers that prevent students from sharing their voice in the classroom. Encouraging student voice is a sure way to develop this.

Critical Thinking

Freire's banking concept and oppressive teaching styles also prohibits students' ability to think critically (Freire, 2000). Critical thinking skills are a raising concern among educators as more and more students show a lacking ability to think critically (Paul, 2018). However, if educators are relying on a banking concept as a form of educating students, it is no surprise that students are unable to think critically as the banking concept does not provide students the space to work critically or creatively with the information they are given (Freire, 2000). Encouraging student voice and authenticity is one way to develop students' critical thinking skills. However, Freire (2000) states that true dialogue cannot exist until critical thinking is engaged. In that regard, educators must then structure their classroom in a way to develop their students' critical thinking skills.

There are different methods available that help develop one's critical thinking abilities. One of the more well-known methods is the framework of Bloom's Taxonomy, which is a six step process of developing and evaluating a student's critical thinking abilities (Paul & Elder, 2010; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017). However, critical pedagogy is not just about utilizing the methods to develop critical thinking. It also requires educators to understand that critical thinking involves not only reflection on what is already known, but also how to use that knowledge (Kuhn, 1999). Though understanding specific content is important in learning, development of understanding the "when, where, and why" of the content is crucial in improving student performance and developing critical thinking skills (Schunk, 2012).

It is also important to remember that critical thinking does not happen quickly; it is a slow, gradual process (Duell, 1986; Schunk, 2012), one in which a critical pedagogue must have patience to develop. In order for this to occur, it is important to practice and develop the skills being taught in the classroom (Kuhn, 1999; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017). Practice allows those skills to strengthen, and also helps foster a deeper understanding of these skills to know when and how to use them outside of the classroom (Kuhn, 1999). Practice of skills within the classroom also allows the students to be "critical co-investigators" with the teacher, opposed to docile listeners (Freire, 2000).

Other research indicates that critical thinking includes engaging in tasks such as comparing and contrasting, conceptualizing, paraphrasing, summarizing/synthesizing, and evaluating (Paul, 2018). Regardless of how critical thinking is described, it is an important concept in critical pedagogy and in leadership (Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017). Relying on the banking concept or any other form of oppressive teaching prohibits the development of critical thinking. Developing students' critical thinking abilities, along with encouraging students' voices and authenticity, will further prepare them to become arts leaders through a critical pedagogical framework, and provide them the opportunity to reflect and act upon the world in order to change it (hooks, 1994).

Realities of Teaching Critically in the Arts Management Classroom

Freire (2000) argued that achieving a thorough understanding of oppression is only possible through some form of class analysis. Therefore, I have put this theory to practice with my own undergraduate level course titled Introduction to Arts Administration. The course explores basic administration and management practices as it relates to the visual and performing arts. Topics we discuss include: leadership, governance, human resources, program planning and evaluation, fundraising, financial management, marketing, audience development, community engagement, arts education, and arts advocacy. I will therefore discuss how I incorporated critical pedagogical ideas in this class, the challenges I faced in this approach, and the outcomes of teaching critically.

Background

This particular class is my first arts management related class I have taught in higher education. Previous to this, I had taught four years as a music teacher at a private university, where I taught a music appreciation class for non-majors. During the time I taught that class, I was not aware of critical pedagogy. I approached the class with the oppressive mindset of believing the students knew nothing, and that they expected information handed to them. This resulted in me teaching the information, the students writing down notes, memorizing the information for a test, and then moving on to the next subject. I never incorporated any type of dialogue in the classroom, or gave them any activities to encourage their own critical thinking. Having the knowledge of the theory now, I realize there was so much more I could have done to empower those students with their own learning. I do not blame the students for their inability to think critically. I was the one that did not have faith or trust in them. I, therefore, was the one responsible for enabling the pedagogical oppressive cycle. I therefore set about creating my Introduction to Arts Administration course much differently in an effort to teach critically.

Construct

Critical pedagogues have to ask themselves, “Why is this knowledge being taught in the first place?” (McLaren, 2009). This question forces the educator out of the socially constructed style of oppressive teaching, and instead makes them think more deeply on how they can empower their students (Freire, 2000). The most basic answer to this question, as it related to the class I was about to teach, is that it is to teach students about the field of arts administration. However, I knew this was not the answer. Upon further reflection, I realized that this knowledge of arts administration is being taught in order to prepare these students for life outside of the classroom. It is not to turn them into arts administrators (the students in this class are not arts administration majors, nor even arts majors in general), or turn them into artists. It is to help them develop the knowledge to understand the role the arts play in society and how they can help support it through the understanding of this knowledge. In order to incorporate this understanding in my class, I therefore built my class around the core concepts of critical pedagogy: encouraging a partnership between student and teacher, encouraging the student voice, and develop their critical and creative thinking skills.

The first key component of my class, then, is to have discussions. In order to facilitate discussion, I assigned readings prior to class and required them to write a one-page written

reflection each week before class. The written reflection ensured that they not only did the readings, but also so that they had time to think about the readings before coming to class. Additionally, the written reflection purposely asks for the students' opinions and thoughts on the subject matter that they just read. The reason for this is to help them think more critically and creatively, as well as to encourage their own voice in the process of learning the key concepts. I remind them that I am not wanting a reiteration of what the textbook says; I instead want to hear what they think of the material, and how it may apply to what they already know. This then sets the students up for class discussion when I open each class with asking them what they thought about the readings. Additionally, instead of dictating where the dialogue will go, I instead act as a moderator to the discussion. This ensures that we discuss as a class the key concepts of that day through their own answers, thereby ensuring their voice is encouraged in the process.

I additionally incorporate group activities in class. This encourages the students' voice and authenticity with their peers instead of just with me. The group activities will include case studies where I ask them what they would do in the presented scenario. The scenarios are either from the textbook, or I pull from real-life scenarios that have recently occurred. This not only encourages their voice, but also builds their critical thinking skills. Group projects are also assigned in order to encourage dialogue with their peers more. The projects do have a set of structured requirements, however the students are allowed to choose any real-life arts organization to base the project off of. This provides them the opportunity to make their own decisions, therefore empowering them to do what they feel is best.

The most important component of the class is to make the information relevant to the students. According to McLaren (2009), knowledge is only relevant to a student when it begins with the experiences the students bring with them to the class. This requires me figuring out where the students are with their previous knowledge and experience as it relates to the arts. I ask them about those experiences, and then relate that experience to the subject matter we are discussing in class. By relating the information to what they already know, they are able to develop more curiosity about the object of knowledge (Freire, 2000). For example, when discussing fundraising, I always ask the class to talk about their fundraising experiences in high school, whether that was for a music program or sports program. I then help them transfer some of the fundraising knowledge in arts administration to what they previously have experience in, such as their sports booster clubs. By continuously relating the subject matter to what the students know and are interested in, I therefore help transform their knowledge which further empowers the students themselves (McLaren, 2009).

Challenges & Outcomes

Though the above certainly incorporates the characteristics of teaching critically, it did not come without its challenges. The most crucial challenge was the obviousness of how the students were indoctrinated by the banking concept of education. From the first day, students came into the class expecting there to be a power point slide on the board with all the notes that they would copy, be given tests to study for, and then move on to the next topic. They were surprised to hear that they were to write reflections that incorporate their own opinions, and must come into class ready to discuss the material at hand. All this I learned from the questions they asked after I went over their syllabus.

What further proved their indoctrination of the banking concept was their written reflections. It took several attempts before many of the students finally understood that they need

not re-write what the textbook says. It was a foreign concept to them that I did, indeed, want to hear their own opinions and how they could relate that information to what they already know. They were very much used to just re-writing what a text says, and to take what a text says as “truth,” that they had no idea how to actually think beyond what is in front of them. I continuously made sure to incorporate this concept into discussions in class so that they had the space to practice this form of thinking. Once they understood how to voice their own opinions and think more critically, they actually started to enjoy the class much more as they knew their voices and minds were valued.

By the end of the semester, the students were much more comfortable speaking their thoughts in class and engaging in discussion. However, it did take a lot of patience and perseverance on my part. Some days, the students were actively engaged and motivated; other days, they were not. However, no matter how challenging the day was, I always made sure to not fall back to the banking concept of education. Those challenging days were the ones where I would stop my questioning and ask them if everything was ok, and would ask them if there was anything I could do differently that day to help them. Sometimes I would receive answers about how they were all tired from some long assignments they had for their other classes. Other days I would receive silence. Regardless of the response, taking the time to ask was a way for me to show that this space was safe for them to share their voice, and that I was not the sole authority figure. The class was a partnership, and if they were having difficulty with anything, I would make sure to meet them where they were at and support them through the process.

Conclusion

Critical pedagogy can be incorporated in any classroom no matter what subject area one teaches. The experience presented in this paper is just one way in which critical pedagogy can be incorporated in an arts management classroom, specifically that in an higher education undergraduate class. However, in an effort to be a critical pedagogue, there is the challenge that there may be students that do not understand how to think critically or engage in discussion. These are the students that have most likely been indoctrinated by the banking concept for far too long. To these students, the thought of expressing their analysis or opinions on the subject matter could be very foreign to them, and even quite frightening. When mixed with high performing students in the class, this can then pose a challenge to us as teachers in order to serve each and every one of our students best.

This, then, can hopefully lead an arts management educator to ask how they can incorporate a critical perspective within their classrooms. In the arts leadership classroom, this is especially important to truly prepare our students for leadership roles. We must ask ourselves, are we developing a partnership with our students out of respect and trust? Are we encouraging them to share their voice and authenticity? And how are we developing their critical thinking skills?

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