Hana Wani, Hana Kai

Hausa proverb: To refuse another is to refuse yourself.

The Quest for Liberatory EFL Teaching in West Africa

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Acknowledgments:

Before SIT, before my first reading of Paulo Freire, before I started traveling and teaching, I had an inherent understanding of the power of liberatory teaching because I had experienced it as a student. I offer my thanks to my eighth grade teacher, and good friend, Robert Smith, from Frontier Regional School in South Deerfield, Massachusetts, who opened my eyes to the power and passion of English. Few things have had a greater impact on my life.

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Abstract

What happens when an American tries to do Freirean-based liberatory teaching in the post-colonial, EFL context of West Africa? This independent professional project (IPP) explores the background of liberatory teaching practices in English language teaching, focusing on critical pedagogy, problem posing and the Participatory Approach. The author describes her education and development as a liberatory English teacher. As an American working in developing countries, she questions her ability to act as a supporter of liberation. Does her inherent position of privilege and power prevent her from promoting social justice and freedom from poverty? The author explores these questions, her own motivations, and ultimately defines her commitment to liberation and her teaching praxis.

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CHAPTER 1
The purpose of education is human liberation.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

“Hana wani, hana kai.” I learned this phrase when I was living and teaching English in Niger. While I was there I learned to speak some Hausa, one of the official languages of Niger. Translated, the phrase means, “If you refuse another, you refuse yourself.” It reflects a fundamental respect for the human dignity of others and the strong sense of solidarity that is valued by the Hausa people. It suggests that when we deny the humanity of another person, we end up denying our own humanity as well.

It is interesting to compare this proverb to a quote by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire: “No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so.” Although Paulo Freire came from a very different culture, his work in liberatory education is a testament to the same values behind “hana wani, hana kai.”

Like Paulo Freire, I believe that the goal of all education is to provide students with the ability and opportunity to liberate themselves and their communities. The ideal of liberation may never be fully attained by any society, considering humanity’s inherent imperfections. But when people possess the freedom and ability to critique our social order and take collective action to work for social change, we come ever closer to the goal of liberation. Peace and justice require a high degree of liberation, democracy is built on liberation, and teaching English can be a vehicle for promoting liberation. In this paper, I will describe the influence that liberatory teaching has had on English language
instruction, focusing on Freirean-based critical pedagogy, problem posing and the Participatory Approach. I will share my experience in learning about them and using them in teaching English in francophone West Africa. I will show the power that liberatory teaching can have in transforming students’ lives, and highlight ways that teachers can bring Participatory Approach ideals into their classrooms. I will also explore my own motivations and confront the question of whether or not a teacher from a privileged background has the ability to act as a true supporter of liberation.

**Personal Background**

I believe that each person’s individual understanding of reality is formed by their cultural background and that it is important to define who we are, so that others can judge for themselves the source of our perceptions and beliefs. As Reagan and Osborn state: “Gender, race, ethnicity, language, and so on, are not merely elements or factors in how one sees the world, but rather, constitute the fundamental scaffolding within which and from which one organizes experience and knowledge. This makes it essential that an author identify and position him or herself, so that readers will understand the social, cultural, economic, and linguistic context in which his or her arguments and insights occur.”¹

I believe this is true for teachers and learners as well; therefore, I will provide a brief background of my personal identity and work experience. I am a 34-year-old white, female English teacher from the New England area of the United States. I teach English to speakers of other languages in Francophone West Africa, currently in Cotonou, the

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capital of Benin. I have been teaching EFL for four years. I have studied Hausa, Djerma, French, Haitian Creole, Spanish and Chinese.

I am the daughter of second-generation Polish immigrants; my parents, as well as two of my sisters, are high school teachers. I would describe my upbringing as middle-class, liberal, Roman Catholic, and happy. I attended a good public high school and a great private college before heading into the work world.

From Development Work To Teaching

Prior to becoming a teacher, I worked for five years in the management and administration of international development programs in Haiti, Ecuador and the United States. In Haiti and Ecuador, two of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, I got an intimate look at the harsh world of poverty, political upheaval and poor education, as well as the response provided by donor and development organizations. In general, international development is difficult work done by well-intentioned and hard-working people, for outwardly noble goals: the promotion of peace, justice and dignity for all people, and the improvement of living and working conditions in the world’s poorest countries.

However, my work in development impressed upon me the fact that, as in any business where there is a lot of money involved, it is vulnerable to corruption of its stated goals. The programs that I worked in had admirable objectives, but the work was being directed by the wrong people – usually by U.S. citizens who had only a rudimentary understanding of the needs and reality of life faced by the local population. Although
claiming to work in partnership with the people, these programs often ended up fostering dependency, a sense of inferiority and ultimately, social inequity.

The projects that seemed most successful were usually in the education sector, where the students worked to improve their own communities themselves. I found myself being drawn again and again to the classroom, and during a break between jobs while in Dakar, Senegal, I took the opportunity to teach an English course open to adults and university students. After my first class, I realized I had found what I had been looking for – a way to help people who had decided, on their own, what changes they needed to make in order to improve their lives and their communities. They had identified their needs, they were motivated and invested in the process, and they were doing the work. As the teacher, I was an important resource that provided knowledge and an opportunity for them to explore and learn English, but the progress and successes were their own achievements. It was exciting to be a part of this, and with enthusiasm I started my new career as an EFL teacher.

**Oppressor as Liberator?**

But there were, and still are, nagging questions. My current students come from the educated middle and upper classes of their communities. They suffer from oppression on a global scale, but they are also the beneficiaries of privilege within their country. They can use their advantages to work for social change: I have had students who lead community development organizations that lobby for justice and provide vital services to the poorest members of their communities. But they can also use their advantages to
By teaching English, am I helping people who have the power to make positive change and work for social justice? Or am I the oppressor leading the oppressive, helping my students pursue individual, rather than social goals and supplying them with one of the resources they need to maintain their position of power?

And what should I make of the charge that the spread of the English language is a form of linguistic imperialism? Many scholars have argued that English is being used by Anglophone countries to maintain an oppressive world order, and that its spread is a deliberate attempt to disempower and destroy other languages and cultures. In a region where the difficult legacy of colonialism provides daily challenges to social equality and development, I cannot ignore this charge.

Finally, how does someone work for liberation when they are a member of a privileged class? As a white American, I have access to power, freedoms and material wealth far beyond many of my students. Could I foster liberation, when I was unwilling to give up my own personal advantages?

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2 Slavery is officially outlawed in Niger, but it is still very much a part of life in rural areas. Village life is very traditional, and it’s not unusual for the most powerful village families to own generational slaves. In this case, my student had married into a chief’s family from a distant village, and was given several slaves as a wedding present. She explained that she had to send them back, “because nobody keeps slaves here in Niamey (the capital).” It is a complex issue. Although by law they are free, by culture, tradition, the threat of violence, and the practical needs of survival they are bound to the families that they serve. The government of Niger has taken steps to enforce the anti-slavery law, but there is little money to be spent on these programs and enforcement is difficult outside of the capital.

3 For an excellent summary of the work done citing English as a tool for linguistic imperialism, see Alastair Pennycook’s essay “English in the world/the world in English”, in Power and Inequality in Language Education, ed. James W. Tollefson (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
**Critical Pedagogy and the Participatory Approach**

These are the questions I explored at the School for International Training (SIT) in Brattleboro, Vermont, and continue to explore in this thesis and in my work. Although answers to such complex questions are difficult to find, I have learned that the liberatory philosophy of critical pedagogy is helpful in addressing these issues.

Based on the work of Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy encourages students to use their awareness of the world around them to define, question, and work against the root causes of oppression. In English and literacy teaching, critical pedagogy has formed the basis of a teaching approach\(^4\) called the Participatory Approach (PA). PA seeks to empower students to clearly see reality, to recognize that they are actors with the power to change reality, and knowing that, to decide what they want to do about it. The approach can be highly motivating for students, as learning English becomes a tool for creating change in their lives and communities.

My work with PA has led me to believe that teaching English can be a way to work for social justice and support the values of “hana wani, hana kai.” Students have the ability to decide how best to use their power and privilege, and despite its danger as an oppressive language, I believe English is a powerful tool that they can use to work for greater equality and social change. This thesis will share my experience in reaching this realization, in using PA in my effort to become a more liberatory teacher, and will, I hope, encourage others to do so.

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\(^4\) The Participatory Approach is just one manifestation of critical pedagogy. In this paper, I use the term ‘approach’ to mean the underlying ideology and process that are inherent in a teaching practice. The term ‘method’ refers to the activities done within the process of the approach. For example, the Participatory Approach is a teaching approach that is based on the ideology of critical pedagogy. It uses several processes in its application, such as participatory research. Participatory research, in turn, uses various methods, such as freewriting, active listening, interviewing and document analysis.
CHAPTER 2

FREIRE’S CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND LITERACY EDUCATION:
THE BASIS OF THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is perhaps the most important inspiration for a participatory approach to ESL.

Elsa Auerbach, Making Meaning Making Change

Paulo Freire

The work of Paulo Freire, a literacy teacher from Brazil, is often cited as the founding philosophy for the Participatory Approach, and it was through his works that I first discovered critical pedagogy. Freire was born in 1921 to well-educated parents in Recife, a town on the coast of northeastern Brazil. Although they were middle-class, the family suffered through several years of poverty during Brazil’s Great Depression, when “Freire learned what it is to go hungry.”¹

Freire began his career in education in 1959 at the University of Recife, teaching philosophy and education courses. In the early 1960’s, illiteracy was an important issue in the Recife area; the adult literacy rate was only 60-70%, and literacy was a requirement for voter registration. In response to this need, the University created the

Cultural Extension Service, whose goal was to provide literacy training to the local population. In 1962 the University asked Freire to become the director of this program, which had received funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

As the director of this new program, Freire pioneered an educational approach based on critical pedagogy, a way of teaching through asking questions and engaging students in critical thinking. Freire centered his classes on the life experiences of his students. The problems, challenges and obstacles his students faced in their communities, such as the difficulty of getting clean drinking water, became the basis for class material.

Freire respected the richness of his students’ life experiences. In the literacy program, students were not seen as unintelligent, or unable to engage in critical discussions, just because they couldn’t read. Learning to read was presented as a relatively simple and straightforward skill that they could master, like many other skills they already possessed.

Learning to read “the word” was seen to serve a more important goal – that of learning to read “the world”. In other words, literacy was a tool that students could use to gain a better understanding of the world and their role in it.

**Education: The Practice of Freedom**

Freire believed that the process of education was not neutral. It could either be supportive of the status quo, and therefore domesticate students into accepting the world as it was portrayed, or it could be liberating and revolutionary, encouraging students to challenge and change the dominant power structures of society. In perhaps his most
famous work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire said, “Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration… into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

Freire believed that the traditional literacy education system actively disempowered students and contributed to their low status in society. This “banking model” of education saw students as empty vessels that possessed no knowledge, and considered them unable to create knowledge on their own. Students were seen as the passive and “lucky” recipients of knowledge that came from the powerful, beneficent knower, the teacher. The student was seen as powerless and incapable of critical thought, while the teacher was firmly in control of access to all knowledge, learning and advancement. This attitude towards teaching and learning, said Freire, conditioned students to be submissive, unquestioning and accepting of their lower status and powerlessness. This message was reinforced by the use of traditional teaching methods, such as repetition, rote memorization and materials that had little relevance to students’ lives.

Freire called for a revolution that would break teaching out of this domesticating mold and encourage them to actively participate in the creation of knowledge. To do this, Freire used a “situated pedagogy,” where the regular events of students’ lives became the subject of their learning. Students looked critically at the world around them and questioned why it was as it was. Students began to see themselves as having an active

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role in creating this reality, and as having the power to change that reality. Freire called
this “conscientization,” or the gaining of critical consciousness. As Elsa Auerbach
describes the process, “This radically transforms their [the students’] relation to
education, making them subjects of their own learning; at the same time, because literacy
becomes a tool for addressing problems, it transforms their relation to the world, making
them subjects of their own history. Education thus is part of a liberating process, rather
than a domesticating one.”

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As Freire’s work progressed, teachers became known as “coordinators,” reflecting
the move away from the traditional teaching model. Ideally, teachers were drawn from
the local community; when this was not possible, coordinators lived and worked in the
community before beginning the classes. For many aspiring teachers, this meant “class
suicide” – the acceptance of lower wages and a lower standard of living than they were
accustomed to. But Freire believed that only by being a part of the community and
sharing in their students’ way of life could the coordinators begin to understand and
effectively teach in their students’ reality. Otherwise, the teacher, no matter how well
meaning, would be in a patronizing role. A middle class teacher in a lower class
community would be in danger of maintaining the power structure of teacher as the
dominant knower and provider of knowledge, which could foster a sense of
powerlessness and dependency in the students. Meaning, knowledge and change had to
be created by the community itself; it could not be given to the students.

3 Elsa Roberts Auerbach, Making Meaning Making Change, (McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics
and Delta Systems, 1992), 17.
Four Processes of Freire’s Critical Pedagogy

Freire’s critical pedagogy entailed four processes: listening, dialogue, reading/writing, and action. While Freire initially designed the processes to be sequential, in practice they are often woven together; dialogue, in particular, is usually ongoing.

In the first process, listening, Freire and his coordinators would spend time in the community listening to people’s stories, discussions, problems, successes and challenges in daily life. From that, the teachers identified social concerns that were most important to the community. Simple drawings were created that portrayed these issues, which Freire called “codes,” or discussion generators. The pictures were used to illustrate the differences between nature and culture.

In the second process, dialogue, students reflected on the code pictures and discussed their different aspects. The pictures helped students realize that people use nature to create culture. For many illiterate people, the realization that they were the creators of culture, and not just passive observers of it, was revolutionary. This realization fostered a sense of pride and self-confidence. If they created culture, then they could change it and in doing so, change the situation that they lived in.

At this point, students were motivated to learn how to read and write. The coordinators chose 15-18 multisyllabic “generative words,” or key words, which could be broken down into syllables and reorganized to create new words. The key words were chosen based on their ability to generate discussion on the issues that had been raised during the listening and dialogue stages.

Students discussed how the key words were relevant to them, and learned how to read and write the syllables that made up the words. Students then moved on to forming
new words with the syllables. Because Portuguese is a highly phonetic language with a limited number of phonemes, this proved to be a very effective process for learning to read and write.

The final stage in the literacy process was action. With the understanding of the meaning and implication behind the words, and the ability to manipulate them in spoken and written language, students became encouraged to use this knowledge in ways that would improve their lives. During the dialogue stage, students gained the awareness that they were the creators of their own reality, and possessed the power to change their world. With the support of their group, many students began to take action in their communities, such as registering to vote and becoming active in the political process. This cycle of reflection, action, and reflection on the action, which Freire called “praxis,” was the program’s final goal.

**Impact Beyond Brazil**

The literacy program was highly successful; three-quarters of those who began the course were able to read and write simple texts in 30-40 class hours. The work was so successful that the middle and upper classes began to feel threatened by the increasing participation of the poor in the political process. In 1964 the Brazilian military staged a successful coup d’etat; Freire was arrested and jailed for 70 days, and then exiled with his family. Ironically, by exiling Freire, the Brazilian military catapulted his impact to a global scale. Working first in Chile, and then in the United States and Europe, Freire continued to promote critical pedagogy as a powerful force for teaching literacy and fostering social justice. Teaching at Harvard University and the University of
Massachusetts, Freire collaborated with American educators interested in his liberatory practice and continued to write prolifically about critical pedagogy and its role in promoting social justice.4

In 1970 Freire accepted a position with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland. This work took him to African and Asian nations that had recently broken free from colonization and become independent states, including Guinea Bissau, Angola and Mozambique, former Portuguese colonies that were struggling to start literacy programs for their people.

Freire and his family were able to return to Brazil in 1980, as the military’s hold on the Brazilian government softened. He continued his work in literacy and critical pedagogy on both the national and international scale until his death in 1997.

4 See Appendix 1 for a complete list of Freire’s works.
CHAPTER 3

THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

A critical approach to TESOL is more than arranging the chairs in a circle and discussing social issues.

Alastair Pennycook, “Introduction: Critical Approaches to TESOL”

Participatory education was active in the United States long before Paulo Freire. In 1932, adult educators Myles Horton and Don West founded the Highlander Center in Monteagle, Tennessee. The mission of the Center was to educate “rural and industrial leaders for a new social order.”¹ Behind the Center’s guiding philosophy was the belief that “the answers to problems facing society lie in the experiences of ordinary people.”²

The Center became active in organizing labor unions and advocating for the rural poor. It supported the growing civil rights movement by sponsoring literacy campaigns that helped thousands of African-Americans gain the right to vote. Its literacy and voter registration programs were “the largest and clearly the most effective mass literacy campaign ever undertaken in the U.S. – successful largely because the campaign was not about literacy but about the right to participate in a democratic society.”³

So in the 1960’s, when Freire’s philosophy of education and liberation became known beyond Brazil, it struck a deep chord with many North American educators. It was

² Ibid., <http://www.hrec.org/a-history.asp>.
a time of great political and social upheaval in the U.S., and many voices were calling for changes to the traditional education system.

North American educators began to expand Freire’s critical pedagogy to literacy, health, community development, peace building, safety and workplace issues, as well as teaching English as a second or foreign language. Critical pedagogy proved to be particularly appropriate for students excluded from the traditional power structures in the U.S., such as recent immigrants, refugees, and people who were illiterate.

**Problem Posing**

Nina Wallerstein, from the University of New Mexico, and Elsa Roberts Auerbach, from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, began applying Freire’s work to their ESL programs for recent immigrants. Recognizing the need to refashion Freire’s approach to their own teaching situations, Wallerstein and Auerbach integrated critical pedagogy into the Participatory Approach, adapting Freire’s dialogical method, called problem posing.

As described in Wallerstein and Auerbach’s book *ESL for Action: English for the Workplace, Problem posing at Work, Teacher’s Guide*, problem posing followed a similar structure to Freire’s literacy education program, with three processes: listening, dialogue, and action. Learning English was seen as a stepping stone to a larger goal, that of enabling students to transform and improve their living and working situations. The classes focused on community building and social action, and students were encouraged to take control of their learning at all stages: organizing class logistics, making decisions

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on curriculum, providing content and materials for classes, leading discussions, and evaluating their learning and results. The teacher, acting as facilitator and resource, helped students break down and manipulate the grammar and usage of English. Students used their English to better communicate on the job, with government agencies, with their unions, and in their children’s schools.

**Listening**

The first process of problem posing is listening. By becoming familiar with her students’ lives, the teacher learns about issues that are important to them, called “generative themes.” This can be done in several ways – in class discussions designed to elicit issues, in structured activities such as grammar exercises, in informal conversations before or after class, or by visiting students’ homes and places of work. Students are asked to share as much as they feel comfortable about their families, their jobs, and their feelings about learning English. The teacher can ask questions to help stimulate discussion, such as: What makes you happy? Sad? Worried? Afraid? Excited? Angry? Hopeful? The teacher may suggest that students express themselves in their native language, if that makes it easier or more comfortable for them, and then follow up with English. Often, the teacher may ask other students or volunteers to help with translation between the two languages.

Together, the class identifies its strong feelings and emotions, especially those with the potential to block learning. As Wallerstein describes,

The blocks can be emotional (such as low self-esteem), structural (such as lack of contact with English speakers), or socioeconomic (such as job instability or prejudice). Yet, the emotional power behind these hidden voices can also inspire learning. By helping students articulate their concerns
in the classroom, teachers help students understand the blocks and move beyond them.\(^5\)

Students can act as reporters on their jobs, describing to their classmates what they see and hear at work, as if it was the first time they had been to their worksites. Students might ask themselves: How do people act at work? Who is in charge? When do people take breaks? What are the working conditions? What happens if someone gets sick – or if someone’s child gets sick? What kind of benefits do the workers get? What are the hours?

The teacher can introduce the idea of anthropological research, encouraging students to do observations, interviews and document analyses, and use this information to create ethnographies of their community or work culture. Students can bring to class documents, objects from work, home videos, photographs, drawings, charts, or anything that tells a story about their lives. Wallerstein notes, “These participatory research strategies provide a structure for students to be coequals in their learning. Through investigation, students develop critical thinking tools of analysis, use their English outside the classroom, and realize their potential for participating in decision-making.”\(^6\)

**Dialogue**

In the second process, Dialogue, an identified generative theme is brought into the class as a “code,” or a “concrete physical representation of a particularly critical issue that has come up during the listening phase.”\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Ibid., 37.

\(^7\) Ibid., 38.
Codes are often developed by the teacher at first, but ideally the creation of codes is taken over by the students. A code can take many forms, such as a dialogue, poem, picture or object. An effective code focuses on a single problem, makes the issue instantly recognizable and provokes a strong emotional reaction. A code should show all points of view, be open-ended and offer no solutions.

Working with codes allows students to discuss personal, highly emotional issues with the comfort of some distance and the benefit of perspective. As Wallerstein describes, “… we are dealing with loaded issues that may be too threatening to approach directly or too overwhelming or embarrassing to confront individually… If the discussion becomes too personal, you, as teacher, can redirect attention back to the code and the neutral object.”

Problem posing follows a five-step process in discussing the code, designed to encourage critical thinking. The steps are:

1. Describe the code
2. Define the problem
3. Share similar experiences
4. Analyze the root causes of the problem
5. Strategize possible responses

The following dialogue is a sample code, from the student’s edition of *ESL for Action: English for the Workplace, Problem Posing at Work.*

**Lesson 3 The Double Shift: After Work**

Maria: You look tired.

Jan: I am. I was up till midnight again.

Maria: How come?

Jan: I had a lot to do after work. The kids didn’t get to bed till nine. Then I had to clean up, do the wash, and do some cooking.

Maria: What was your husband doing?

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8 Ibid.
Jan: After dinner he watched T.V. for a while and then he had to do his homework for English class.
Maria: Did you get your homework done?
Jan: Are you kidding?\(^9\)

As Auerbach and Wallerstein describe, students can ask themselves these questions, following the five-step discussion process:

1. **Describe the code:**
   What is happening in this dialogue? Who do you think these people are? How would you describe them? Why are they talking about this? How does Jan feel? How does Maria feel? How do you think Jan’s husband feels?

2. **Define the problem:**
   What problems do we see here? Does Jan have time to study English? Does her husband? How many jobs does Jan have? How many jobs does her husband have? What are they?

3. **Share similar experiences:**
   In your family, who works outside the home? What do you do after work? How do you relax? Who does the housework? Why? How do you feel about that? Do you have time to do your English homework?

4. **Analyze the root causes of the problem:**
   Why is Jan expected to do all the housework? Why doesn’t her husband help? Is housework “real” work?

5. **Strategize possible responses:**
   What could Jan do to address this problem? What would happen if she asked her husband to help? If she stopped doing the housework? What would you do if you were Jan? If you were Jan’s husband? If you were Maria? Would any of these solutions work in your situation?\(^10\)

In the fourth step, analyzing root causes, the teacher can encourage students to look for the deeper roots of a problem by peeling back the layers of reasons, and continuing to ask “why?” or “how come?”\(^11\) For example,

- **Why is Maria tired?** Students may respond: – Because she has to do the housework on top of her full time job.

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\(^9\) Auerbach and Wallerstein, *ESL for Action*, 134.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) This method of asking a series of “why?” questions was developed by D. Werner, *Where There Is No Doctor* (Palo Alto: Hesperian Foundation, 1977.)
Why does she have to do the housework? – Because her husband won’t do it.

Why won’t her husband do it? – Because he expects her to do all the housework. In his culture, men don’t do housework, that’s the woman’s job.

Why don’t men do housework in his culture? Etc.

Action

In the final process of problem-posing, action, students respond to the problem represented in the code, but now personalized to their own situation. As Wallerstein describes it, “Action for students means learning to see themselves as social and political beings, with rights to access the political systems in their workplaces or their cities. Plans for action evolve from students understanding the immediate and root causes of problem, as well as having visions of better conditions.”

The type of action taken is completely up to the students. By talking about the issue, students have already taken the first steps: naming the problem as a problem, creating a supportive community to investigate the problem, and improving their English skills to handle the problem. Other steps that students may decide to take include conducting further research and contacting organizations or agencies that could help. Students may decide to educate other people about the problem, organize people in the community, and talk to work supervisors or community leaders who could make change. Students may file a complaint, write letters to the editor, or put together a newsletter or website. Wallerstein notes: “Regardless of the level of action taken, students learn through the experience of action itself, that people can effectively interact in the U.S.

political system to transform their reality. If actions are unsuccessful, students will gain new knowledge and perspectives to try another strategy.”

Action may happen in ways that are subtler. Sometimes change is seen as a shifting of the teacher-student relationship, as the students take on more responsibility and control in the classroom. Students may become more active in class, suggesting changes and participating in heated discussions. They may help each other with problems and begin working cooperatively. They may decide to make changes in their personal lives, such as joining a local club or community organization. The point is not for students to suddenly rise up and take on political challenges; it is that they gain confidence in their ability to critically analyze reality, make decisions, and take the action that is right for them. As Auerbach notes, change often happens inside the classroom before it is organized outside the classroom.

As such, action may not, as we originally thought, be the direct result of particular curriculum units; rather, it may be the result of invisible changes – the cumulative building of confidence, validation of experience, and reflection on context. Very often it takes months or even years of germination before students are ready to move outside the classroom with their actions. During this time, the changing social relations within the classroom, the critical examination of day-to-day reality, and the development of language and literacy are all functioning as a kind of rehearsal for external action.

Because the participatory approach asks students to become responsible for their own learning, it naturally follows that they are responsible for the evaluation of their learning. Traditional methods of testing and student assessment reinforce the role of teacher as the powerful knower and gatekeeper of advancement. Problem posing therefore asks students to do self-evaluations of their learning and of the class. Students

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13 Ibid., 43.
can evaluate how their language skill has changed, how well the class has helped them improve their English, and identify areas where they need more work. Students can also be encouraged to outline changes that they think need to be made to the class, to better further their learning.

New Directions in PA

The nature of critical pedagogy is to challenge assumptions about our world, including assumptions about teaching and learning. As such, critical teaching practices like the Participatory Approach are open to constant reassessment and change. I will highlight a few of the new directions that contemporary teachers and theorists of PA are following.

As described in TESOL Quarterly’s special issue on critical approaches to teaching English (Autumn 1999), critical teaching practices are being adapted to focus on finding solutions to problems. The guest editor of the issue, Alastair Pennycook, notes that fostering transformation involves moving beyond awareness, which can create a victimization mindset. He notes, “A critical approach that claims only to emancipate people through a greater awareness of their conditions is both arrogant and doomed to failure.”¹⁵

Pennycook advocates using critical pedagogy not just to unmask inequality, but also to imagine a better way of being, and to suggest ways to get there, which he calls transformation. He makes a case for seeing critical theory as “a problematizing practice that questions the role of language or discourse in social life, that asks hard questions

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about social and cultural categories (e.g. race, gender, ethnicity) and the way they may relate to language learning, and that constantly problematizes the givens of TESOL.16

Pennycook calls for a “pedagogy of engagement” that places issues such as class, gender, race and sexuality at the center of English teaching, recognizing the fundamental role they play in language, culture and identity. In doing so, the critical element in TESOL becomes the natural backdrop to language learning and opens the possibility for transformation.

A former ESL program at El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City provides a good example of fostering transformation by conducting popular research projects. As described by Klaudia Rivera, El Barrio provided Spanish literacy and basic English classes to a largely Hispanic female population. The program addressed issues that the students identified as having an impact on their lives, such as their experiences with the inequalities of class, race, and gender. Students investigated these problems through self-designed research projects, such as a survey on local attitudes towards immigration. Using participatory research techniques to collect, interpret, and publish the research, the students were able to frame the debate, define and voice their identity, and apply their discoveries to concrete situations in their lives.17

Practitioners of the Participatory Approach have begun using new technologies as democratic tools in the sharing and legitimization of previously marginalized voices. At El Barrio, students used video recorders to produce documentaries that were shown on

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16 Ibid.
public-access television; one documentary on the practice of exploitation in local garment factories won a national award.18

Computers and the Internet are increasingly being used to allow students to do research, network with other organizations, publicize their reports and advocate their opinions. In Nicaragua, students at the Nicaraguan/Northamerican Cultural Center (Centro Cultural Nicaragüense Norteamericano) created a website to describe their country’s culture and way of life. The United States Embassy asked the administration at the Center to create a website that would describe Nicaragua to prospective visitors. Sarah Renata Wright, the Academic Director for the Center’s English Language Program, turned the project over to the students, giving them the opportunity to share their voices and describe their country from their perspective, instead of relying on the views of American staff.19

The role of students continues to grow in critical approaches to teaching English. Many critical teaching practices call for student-directed curriculum. The use of student-generated materials, such as textbooks, articles and videos, leads to greater self-definition and power sharing in the classroom. As minority voices are given space, new issues are being addressed, such as the ways in which sexual identities emerge and are suppressed in the ESL classroom. As more teachers become excited about PA, there is a danger that the practice of PA may fall victim to the “bandwagon effect.” Inexperienced teachers may ask for “the right way” to do critical teaching, and publishers are all too ready to provide quick-step guides that simplify PA into a rigid method. This commodification of

18 Ibid., 493. The video, titled “Lo que hay en los vestidos: Nuestras experiencias en la industria de la aguja” (What there is in dresses: Our experiences in the garment industry), produced by the El Barrio Popular Education Program in 1995, won first prize in the 19th National Hometown Video Awards.
19 The website can be found at: <http://www.geocities.com/nicabook>.
PA directly undermines the questioning nature of the critical practice. As teachers of PA recognize this, greater emphasis is being placed on developing independent, customized critical teaching practices that are based on local realities and needs.

The use of critical pedagogy in ELT has become global in its reach. For example, the government in China has been supporting several new participatory initiatives in English language teaching. In his article “Ready for a Great Leap Forward,” Alan Pulverness describes how the Basic Education Project in the Gansu Province is now “promoting a participatory approach based on the principles that learning is a joint enterprise shared by teachers and learners, and that appropriate teaching should be needs-driven. The emphasis is on the development of educational capability, rather than the memorization of static information.”

English Imperialism

Implicit in this global reach is the danger that critical pedagogy will contribute to the growing domination of English and English language teaching. As English becomes more widely used, there is a mounting fear that it brings with it the overwhelming influence of American and British economies and culture, resulting in a form of imperialism that can destroy local languages and culture. Critical pedagogy can be used to fight against English imperialism, but it can also become complicit in its spread.

The question of English imperialism is an controversial one, especially for those who work in non-Anglophone countries. TESL-EJ (Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language – Electronic Journal) held an online forum in June of 2002 discussing
this issue, and it provides a fascinating look at the current debate from teachers’ points of view.

As John Harbord, of the Central European University, Hungary, points out, the demand for English is undeniable. “This is not to say, of course, that the high value of English on the globalised, capitalist-oriented, Anglo-centric market is necessarily a good thing: it is, however, indisputably there, and the students want it, just as their – perhaps less educated (perhaps not) – compatriots want hamburgers and English pop music.”

But this demand is often based on a perceived need, not want, and there can be resentment at this “need.” Joel Boyd, a Language Specialist at Western Michigan University, writes: “Although most [students] would readily agree that they have chosen to learn it, they seem to have the feeling like the world has conspired to force them into that choice.”

Benjamin Davis suggests that teachers encourage their students to share how they feel about learning, or having to learn, English. “But many students are ambivalent about how immersed in English-speaking culture they want to be, in the long term. The teacher and the students need to have an honest conversation about that, in today’s ‘globalizing’ world. To do otherwise is to promote linguistic imperialism, exactly by not teaching about its existence.”

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Nikki Jordan, of Boston, Massachusetts, notes the questions she has in balancing the benefits and drawbacks to teaching English and takes the middle road. “So, as English teachers, are we cultural imperialists or are we merely helping people who need/want what we have to teach? Maybe we’re both. Perhaps we just have to learn to live with this ambiguity, and ought to figure out how to ameliorate the negative aspect of our imperialistic behavior as much as possible.”

Harbord suggests that the focus on whether English is ‘good’ or ‘evil’ is distracting and gets away from the more important question: “…whether their own language, as a repository of culture, thought and identity, will be weakened by their study of English.”

A few teachers noted hopefully that the continuing spread and decentralization of the language could actually lessen the effects of English imperialism. As the number of “non-native” English speakers surpasses “native” English speakers, the acceptance of localized varieties of the language grows. Karen Stanley, of Central Piedmont Community College, Charlotte, North Carolina asks, “Is it possible, as more people claim ‘ownership’ of different varieties of English, that the capacity to be imperialistic as relates to the teaching of the language decreases?”

Graham Hall believes so. In his investigation into the dilemmas raised by critical approaches to ELT, he argues that encouraging ever more local, contextualized English teaching practices will have a democratizing effect. In his working paper for the Centre...

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26 As the identification and variety of world Englishes grow, the validity of the terms “native” and “non-native” speaker are called into question. Many people who first speak other languages before learning English may well speak English more accurately, in their local context, than any “native” speaker.
for Research in Language Education, Lancaster University, he notes, “Linguistic imperialism cannot occur within a framework of localized co-operative action.”

On the TESL-EJ Forum several teachers offered suggestions for fighting English imperialism: respecting and using local languages in English class, shifting the policy and management of ELT to local governments and entrepreneurs, protecting local languages through sponsored development, beginning the teaching of English only at the university level, promoting greater awareness of linguistic imperialism among English teachers, and requiring courses in the history of thought and consciousness for prospective English teachers.

To counter English imperialism, critical teaching approaches are being called to turn their own lenses back on themselves, “lest critical theory come to play a role that is equally unchallenged as the ideas it seeks to challenge.” In TESOL Quarterly’s special issue on critical teaching, Pennycook argued for seeing critical approaches as “always being in flux, always questioning, restively problematizing the given, being aware of the limits of their knowing, and bringing into being new schemas of politicization.”

Change, then, has been and will continue to be an integral part of critical teaching approaches. For the Participatory Approach, this means that its progress from its Freirean roots to today’s emphasis on localized practice and transformative pedagogy is still open to innovation and revolution.

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30 Ibid., 349.
CHAPTER 4

YEARNING TO BE LIBERATORY:
MY EXPERIENCE LEARNING AND USING THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

“To affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce.”

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

**Dakar: My Introduction to Teaching**

I began teaching in the summer of 2000, in Dakar, Senegal at the American English Language Program (AELP), a US State Department-sponsored language education program for adults and university students run in many countries.

The majority of my students were professionals who needed, as quickly as possible, to improve their ability to communicate in English at their place of work. With no formal experience in English language teaching, I was counseled to follow the AELP’s communicative teaching approach. I focused on my students’ practical needs: improving their conversation and written skills. My teaching style was based on what I had experienced in the classroom as a student: friendly, but fairly traditional. The students sat in rows and I stood at the front, teaching from the book. I used quizzes and tests to assess the students’ progress. I tried to get to know my students personally
through informal conversation and games, and hoped to foster a classroom community with a warm and fun atmosphere. There was very little feedback from the students, which I took to mean that all was going well.

We used the World English series developed by the State Department’s English program, consisting of six levels that progress from beginning to advanced English. It didn’t take long to realize why many of the teachers at the AELP used the World English books as little as possible, supplementing materials from other sources. The books were 20 years old, focused on American business culture, and embodied traditional, mainstream American values and norms. The situations were often irrelevant to the West African context, such as the section on cold-weather activities like skiing and ice-skating. The humor could be lame, culturally incomprehensible, or at times downright offensive, often using two homeless people as comic relief.

The series advised using an approach that combined the communicative methods for listening and speaking, with an ALM approach for working on grammar. The grammar explanations were sparse and often confusing – as a new English teacher, I often had to go to other texts to figure out the grammar point that I was supposed to be teaching. Like the other teachers, I began to use supplementary materials on a regular basis, sticking to the formal outlines of the World English series enough to let my students continue from level to level.

Luckily, the administration at the Dakar AELP didn’t object to this. The US State Department required us to use the World English series; despite complaints from many AELP’s around the world, there seemed little chance of getting another English teaching text. But the administration in Dakar recognized the deficiencies of the books, and gave
the teachers plenty of leeway in using them in their classrooms. As long as students were progressing to the next level, no questions were asked.

Encouraged by this freedom, I began bringing in newspaper articles, excerpts from magazines, and popular music songs into the classroom, and my students responded with great enthusiasm. We used these topics to launch into interesting conversations about current events and life in Senegal. The classes came alive as students engaged in heated debates, and I began to learn much about daily life in Senegal. I sensed a change in the classroom, and a different, exciting, more effective way to teach; in short, I was ready for SIT.

**First Summer at SIT: An Introduction to Liberatory Teaching**

In the spring of 2001 I applied to the Summer Master’s of Arts in Teaching (SMAT) program at SIT. I chose SIT because of its reputation in the ELT field for producing dynamic and effective English teachers, as well as its international focus. I believed that my background in international development would be seen as an asset, and that my personal interest in issues of poverty and inequality would be encouraged at a school that was known for its work in promoting peace and social justice. I was not disappointed.

In my first summer, my introduction to liberatory teaching practices came in the class Culture and the Language Teacher, taught by ani hawkinson. I was captivated – I now had a name for the philosophy and approach I had felt drawn to during my first year of teaching.
In our class we read *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1997), by the feminist educator bell hooks, professor of English at City College in New York. In this book, bell hooks described the liberatory teaching practice that she used to encourage students to transgress the racial, sexual and class barriers that restricted their freedom. By fostering awareness in her students, she helped them to read the reality of this world with a critical eye, to realize that their actions affected it, and then to decide what they wanted to do about it.

bell hooks gave students space to develop and share their opinions, especially those whose voices were traditionally marginalized, such as minorities and women. She cared for her students as whole people, and encouraged a high degree of student control in the classroom. She also described the great impact of Paulo Freire’s philosophy of critical pedagogy on her teaching, which was my first introduction to his work.

I was impressed by hooks’ commitment to allowing her students to think for themselves. In Chapter 1 she described how one of her students, named Gary, expressed his intention to join a black fraternity that was exclusively male. Although she personally opposed such institutions as sexist and oppressive of women, she did not react with disapproval; instead, she questioned him about his reasons and feelings, and encouraged him to look at his motivations for joining the frat. As a result of his own critical thinking about the role that fraternities play in fostering sexism and disempowering women, he eventually decided not to join the fraternity. hooks writes, “Ultimately, Gary felt that the decision he had made to join a fraternity was not constructive, that I ‘had taught him openness’ where the fraternity had encouraged one-dimensional allegiance. Our interchange both during and after this experience was an example of engaged
pedagogy.”1 This was exactly the kind of critical thinking I hoped to foster in my
students.

In Culture and the Language Teacher, ani hawkinson encouraged us to explore
our own definitions of culture. I came to see culture as the framework we create in order
to make sense of the world, what we use to access and live in the world. As such, culture
can be a form of politics and power, and is often used for domination.

As a final project, ani asked us to examine how culture is used in our own
classrooms, and, knowing that, what we planned to do about it. I taught at the American
Cultural Center – the name itself implied the importance that was placed on teaching
American culture. First of all, the cost of the classes was a barrier to most people
struggling with poverty. For the students who could afford to attend, many probably felt
less than free to criticize American culture, considering the fact that the classes were
being offered by the American Embassy. Students with strong opinions against a U.S.
dominated world order would probably not be inclined to sign up for classes sponsored
by the U.S. government.

It appeared that “culture” in my classes was being used to domesticate and
disempower my students. American culture was held up as both the ideal and the norm,
the “normal” or “right” way of life, suggesting that other ways were deviant and wrong.
This view of American culture justified American dominance in the world and implied
the inferiority of other cultures, languages and people. By teaching this to the upper and
middle classes of West African society, it perpetuated American dominance.

So, what did I plan to do about that? My studies during the summer had awakened me to the possibilities of using liberatory teaching to subvert the system – to show people the possibility of transgressing the boundaries that limited them, as bell hooks described. I could try to create an atmosphere that would encourage my students to be critically aware – including a critical look at the role of the U.S. in the world. If my students realized that they were creators of culture and reality, and that they had the power to change it, then perhaps they would.

My first summer in the MAT program also provided me with the chance to explore other approaches to teaching. In our core class, Approaches to Language Teaching, our instructor, Jack Millet, introduced us to several teaching approaches that had a big impact on my philosophy of teaching. In studying Community Language Learning, I learned how to create a supportive community in the classroom, and how this could foster free and creative thinking in my students. When we studied The Silent Way, I was impressed by the connections to liberatory teaching practices: the respect for students’ inherent abilities, the intention of building on what students already knew, the fact that the action of learning was completely owned by the students, and that the students created meaning and knowledge for themselves.

Indeed, Jack’s own way of teaching was an inspiration in creating a liberatory practice. He fostered a warm sense of community and support in our classroom. Caring for his students as whole persons, he encouraged honesty and openness, and a feeling of trust grew in our class. By asking us to examine our own motivations and “go deeper” into our learning and teaching practices, he fostered our critical thinking skills and helped us to define for ourselves what teaching and learning meant.
Our final project in this class asked us to craft and share our own personal approach to language teaching. This project dovetailed nicely with our final assignment for Culture and the Language Teacher, and prepared me for the next step in the SMAT program, the Interim Year Teaching Practicum (IYTP).

Interim Year Teaching Practicum in Niger

The SMAT program is designed for working teachers. The coursework is completed during two consecutive summer sessions, and in the year between the two summers, the program participants return to their regular classrooms. During this time, each SMAT candidate is tutored by an advisor, who helps them reflect on their teaching through regular written assignments and works intensively with them during an extended visit to their school. Of all of my experiences in the SMAT program, the IYTP had the biggest impact in my learning about liberatory teaching.

At the end of the first SMAT summer, my husband and I moved to Niamey, the capital of Niger. I transferred to the American Cultural Center in Niamey, which, as in Dakar, ran the English Language Program sponsored by the US State Department. My IYTP was marked by three major influences: the reading I did, the visit from my advisor, and my teaching.

I started my IYTP with a commitment to learning more about liberatory teaching practices, and I found several books to be particularly helpful with this. The *Paulo Freire Reader* (1998), edited by his daughter, Ana Maria Araujo Freire and his longtime collaborator Donaldo Macedo, provided an excellent introduction to all of Freire’s important works. Readings from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968, 1970) and *Education
for Critical Consciousness (1973) gave me a firm grip on the basics of Freire’s theory of critical pedagogy.

Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea Bissau (1997, 1978) provided me with an excellent picture of Freire’s work in action, in a West African, post-colonial situation that was similar to my own teaching context. I found Freire’s ideas to be most approachable when he was engaged in conversations with other liberatory educators, such as in Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter (1993).

Of particular importance was my understanding that liberatory education wasn’t something a teacher does to her students – it could only be done by the students themselves. I began to see that the direction liberatory education takes is dependent on the students. A teacher could help create an atmosphere of critical thinking, and encourage students to “read” reality, but only students could do the actual reading. I learned that trying to liberate someone was like trying to teach someone to read by reading aloud to them. Liberation, by its very nature, could only be reached through the collective work of the students and teacher together.

Learning this was easy, but putting it into action was much more challenging. The more I read, the more excited I became to use critical pedagogy in my classroom. But I was at a loss as to how to actually do it – until I read FREIRE for the Classroom, edited by Ira Shor (1987).

In FREIRE for the Classroom, I found a handbook for implementing liberatory teaching activities in my classes. This book provided examples from classrooms that were putting into practice the theories I had read about. I learned about the steps involved in problem-posing activities, as well as a layout for using generative codes to catalyze
critical thinking in the classroom. With practical advice and clear examples, I was able to start organizing critical thinking activities in my own classes.

Collaboration with Marti

The greatest source of inspiration and learning came during the best part of the IYTP, the collaboration with my advisor, Marti Anderson. I was fortunate to get an advisor who was not only experienced in using liberatory teaching approaches, but also had experience working in the post-colonial African context of Botswana. In regular email dialogues, such as this excerpt from January 2002, we shared a common interest in promoting social justice and a concern about our own motivations as foreign teachers.

Althea: I first learned about critical pedagogy at SIT last summer…I was immediately drawn to it for several reasons, mainly because of my background work in international development and my inability to shake the annoying feeling that I have to do something “good” in this life. (Probably due to my Catholic upbringing – I’m really good at guilt!)

Marti’s reply: Sounds familiar – only I was raised with the Protestant version of guilt – equally delightful! And, seriously, I do think that “doing good” is part of our goals as teachers. I am also very much drawn to critical pedagogy – and other approaches that work on a transformative level.2

Marti asked me to keep a journal recording my classes, which I found useful for gaining perspective on my teaching and my students. In monthly essays to Marti, I would reflect on certain journal entries, giving me a chance to take a closer look at issues that arose in my teaching. More than just providing teaching tips, Marti helped me to look at my assumptions behind using the Participatory Approach. In particular, she pointed out the danger of approaching my teaching with the belief that I needed to enlighten my

students, and she reminded me that most of my students probably already had well-developed critical thinking skills. She stressed the necessity of focusing on what was important to my students, instead of what was important to me.

To get a closer look at my teaching, Marti spent a week with me in Niger. The visit was an intense, creative, productive time that helped me to improve my sense of how critical pedagogy works in the classroom, and look at the individual challenges I faced in becoming a liberatory teacher.

During the visit we were able to work on some important mechanical problems I was having – in particular, with lesson planning. We worked on formulating lesson plans that would better match the goals of liberatory teaching, using the experiential learning cycle. We talked about concrete ways of using critical pedagogy in my classes. We identified areas that were slowing down my progress towards liberatory teaching. And best of all, we discussed the nature of liberatory teaching, the implications of its use, and in particular, the contradictions I faced in my context – a white liberal teaching the privileged classes of Niger a colonial language. These discussions went a long way to helping me better understand liberatory teaching and to inspire me to put the teaching into practice, while remaining aware of the inherent challenges in my teaching context.

**Diving into Liberatory Teaching**

I had been timid about trying some of the Participatory Approach activities; I was worried that I didn’t know enough yet to do them correctly. Marti encouraged me to dive in, telling me that if I wanted to be a liberatory teacher, I just needed to start.
So I did. I had been teaching intermediate and advanced students, using a mixture of follow-the-book exercises and conversations on social issues – the social issues that I thought were important to my students. Marti encouraged me to take some time to listen to my students and find out what they were interested in. With the start of the next semester, I asked my classes on the first night: what do you want to do in this class, and what do you want to talk about?

I wrote a list of traditional skills on the board: listening, speaking, reading, writing, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, and asked the students to indicate what percentage of their time in class they’d like to spend on each one. Then I asked them what kinds of topics they’d like to discuss, while working on these skills. While this was probably too direct a form of “listening,” it was a step in the right direction. Some of the topics chosen by students were the HIV epidemic, crime in Niamey, women in development, and even extraterrestrials!

This was all good; however, I was still the source of all the materials. I would look for newspaper or magazine articles related to their chosen topics – often my personal take on those topics – and lead the class through a reading and discussion of them. Finally one of my students suggested that I let them lead the classes by doing their own presentations on the chosen topics. This gave us a big leap forward toward a more participatory pedagogy.

Another misconception I had to get over was that was that my students had no critical thinking skills. Although I knew objectively that it wasn’t necessary for me to “enlighten” anybody, I sometimes had a hard time of letting go of that attitude. An excerpt from my final IYTP paper shows this:
I remember one discussion in particular. We were talking about gnoma, a terrible disease that infects young babies in Niger. It is caused by a bacteria that can easily get into a small sore or abrasion in a baby’s mouth. The flesh-eating bacteria severely disfigures the baby’s face, and most die of the ailment after several years.

I asked a doctor in one of my classes what caused gnoma, and after thinking a moment he said, “Really, it’s poverty.” He went on to explain that because gnoma is easily preventable by proper hygiene or the use of antibiotics, there are very few countries left in the world where the disease exists. Gnome was a scourge in Niger because of the lack of even the most basic health care and education services. This kind of critical thinking – of getting down to the root causes of social problems – was exactly what I had planned to do – and now I saw that my students were already ahead of me!

**The Hippo Roller**

Clearly, my students were ready to use their already-developed critical thinking skills. My first attempts at using “codes” were somewhat successful in working with these critical thinking skills, although I was still a long way off from promoting liberatory thinking.

One of the first codes I used was based on an issue that my students had expressed as being important to them – development in Niger. As a warm-up and schema-building activity, I asked the students to tell me some of the causes of poverty in Niger, and we put them up on the board in a mind map.

Then we read an article titled “Keep It Simple” (The Economist, December 2001, see appendix 2), about a device called the Hippo Roller. The Hippo Roller is a plastic barrel that carries water. It can be rolled on its side, allowing a woman to transport three times as much water as she could carry on her head, freeing up her time for other activities. It was developed in South Africa and sold, inexpensively and quite popularly, to low-income families.
To exercise their critical thinking skills, I asked the students the following questions, which in retrospect, were too leading: What problems is the Hippo Roller addressing? What makes this response effective? Practical? Realistic? Successful?

Looking back on it now, I realize that better questions would have been more open-ended, such as: Who do you think designed this? Who makes it? Who buys it, and how much do you think it costs? Is this a sustainable solution to the problem – and why? Could the Hippo Roller work in Niger?

After looking at these questions, the students formed pairs and each pair chose one of the root causes of poverty in Niger to work on. I asked the pairs to brainstorm possible solutions to the problem, choose the solution that seemed to have the best chance for success, and then outline a proposal for implementing the solution.

I hoped this would be a good exercise in problem solving, but there were several problems in my lesson plan. The students were unfamiliar with brainstorming, and had trouble coming up with more than one possible solution. Modeling a brainstorming session would have been helpful. There was also confusion about what the pairs were supposed to actually produce – modeling a format for the proposal would have been helpful again. Finally, the students needed far more time for this activity than I had planned.

Was this liberatory teaching? It was a good practice of critical thinking and looking for solutions, but it was too teacher-directed to be liberating. Although my students had expressed interest in the topic of development, the actual material that we used was too far removed from their own context (South Africa), and it was not
immediately applicable to my students’ lives – none of them, living in Niamey, had to carry water on a daily basis. Still, it was a start.

**Presidential Election in France**

My second attempt brought me closer to the liberatory ideal. In the spring of 2002, the presidential election in France captured a great deal of interest in Niger – many Nigeriens spend time in France, and it is their first country of emigration. I used a French cartoon about the presidential election as my second attempt at a code.

The cartoon depicted the myriad of candidates coming from leftist-leaning political parties – parties that would be more supportive of West African immigrants. It suggested that problems would arise with having too many candidates that seemed very much the same.

The students translated the French into English, and then discussed following questions:

- What does the cartoon mean?
- What problem is being described here?
- Why is there a problem?
- Why do people feel this way?
- How do people decide who to vote for?
- What are some of the important issues during this campaign, and what are the candidates’ positions?

We studied this cartoon one week before the actual vote, and their response was prescient. They mentioned that two of the leading issues in the election were crime and security, problems that were often blamed on recent immigrants, especially those from
Africa and the Middle East. They noted that there were few differences between all of the left-wing candidates, and indeed, few differences between the front-runners, Lionel Josepin and Jacques Chirac. No one mentioned the populist, far-right wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen; he seemed too unlikely a candidate to mention.

The next week, after the election took place, we talked about the disturbing results, in which Le Pen won 17% of the vote, beating out the leading progressive candidate, Lionel Josepin, to win a place in the run-off with the incumbent president, Jacques Chirac. Le Pen’s vitriolic hatred of foreigners (anyone not white) frightened people, and his proposed policy of the summary deportation of all foreigners, to be processed through “transit camps,” was very upsetting to my students.

I asked the students the following questions:

- How did Le Pen get 17% of the vote?
- How had he beaten Josepin?
- Why did so many people in France agree with Le Pen’s policies?
- What did they think would happen in the final run-off with Chirac?

There were many interesting answers. All of the students agreed that the main reason Le Pen beat Josepin was because there were too many candidates on the left, and they had split the vote; voter apathy was another problem – there had been a very low turnout. One student noted that because crime and security were important issues in France right now, and because foreigners were seen as the cause of these problems, the vote reflected those prejudices. Other students wondered if the vote might be indicative of some kind of backlash in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.
No one could believe that Le Pen would win the run-off against Chirac, but they were very disturbed that he had made it to the final round.

This lesson was much closer to liberatory teaching, because it was an issue the students felt strongly about, and which affected their lives. However, my students were still a long way off from seeing themselves as possible agents of change on this issue, and we did not begin to strategize and propose action.

Should Ted and Sally Move to Sun City?

My third attempt at using a code was even more successful. I wanted to try using critical thinking skills with the World English text we used in class. As stated before, I found the book to be lacking in several ways. However, one of the wonderful things about critical thinking seems to be that you can use almost any material, if the primary aim is to break down and explore the cultural clues. The worse the material, the more one can “deconstruct”, or examine the meaning behind what is literally written, and acknowledge and question the cultural influences that helped created it.

In the unit we were working on, Ted Burns tries to convince his wife, Sally, that the family should move to Sun City (a fictional city in the USA) because his company is relocating there. Sally is a primary school teacher, and she has strong family and social ties in their hometown, Midvale. She makes it very clear that she doesn’t want to leave her job and take the kids out of their school in order to move.

Sally is portrayed as being overly emotional and unwilling to listen to her husband’s rational arguments for moving. As the unit progresses, we see that Sally starts to change her mind, especially when she learns that her teaching job next year will be
with a class of the worst disciplined kids in the school. The final implication in the unit is that Ted, as the husband, not only has the last say in whether or not the family will move, but that this is rightly so because, as a man, his job is more important and he is more rational than Sally.

As we discussed this story in class, I asked the students to think about the motivations behind each character and the reasons they did or did not want to move. We talked about who had power in the relationship between Sally and Ted, and what kind of power.

Then we shared our similar personal experiences. Many of my students had moved to Niamey because of work. For the women in class, they had been forced to move because their husband had a better job opportunity here. We talked about the division of power in families in Niger, which are male-dominated, and the reasons why men had this power. It was a very interesting discussion, especially between the women and men in the class.

Liberatory? Not Yet.

But was it liberatory? In replying to my description of this class, Marti asked questions that cut to the heart of the matter:

Again, I’m curious as to the ‘energetic quality’ of this discussion… and did you feel that the students were grappling and looking at their own lives vis a vis the code? I would just like you to consider how this class was liberatory and/or what kind of liberation might have been fostered.  

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3 Anderson, personal communication, 4 May 2002.
While the code did lead students to talk about their own similar life situations, I am doubtful that any liberation had been fostered. We did create a space for the traditionally marginalized voices of women to be heard, but again, we were unable to move beyond that. It was easy to get students to identify issues that were important to them, and it wasn’t difficult for them to get use their already-developed critical thinking skills when evaluating these issues. But liberatory teaching requires taking another big step, one that we hadn’t been able to make yet. My students often saw culture – and all of reality – as a separate entity imposed on them. Because of its perceived separation from themselves, they felt that their lives had little effect on it. In my classes, we got good at reading reality clearly. But we tended to get stuck after coming to consensus, and ended up with platitudes: this _____________ (insert social problem) is a Very Bad Thing. Someone should Do Something About It. They didn’t see themselves as being actors in this reality, and therefore, they had trouble imagining themselves as part of the solution.

In my final reflection paper for the IYTP I addressed this concern.

What I need to do is to help students realize that those things exist because we make them exist. That every day of our lives, we are creating the reality that is being lived. This isn’t easy to see – how did my life today affect, say, the problem of gnomia? And what possible effect is our class, right here and now, having on it?

Marti wrote in reply:

Althea, you are wading into some very deep and profound waters here. Good for you! Ultimately, I see this as a spiritual quest. For me, being fully human and embracing the interconnectedness of all life is part of the spiritual aspect of who we all are. Which is why I believe that we cannot be teachers (of good quality) without fully acknowledging the spiritual aspect of our work. ‘Things exist because we make them exist’ and the notion that we are all responsible for each other and for every being on earth…these are profoundly important – and challenging – thoughts.⁴

⁴ Anderson, personal communication, 11 June 2002.
My concerns ran deeper than just helping my students see themselves as actors in history. As a privileged foreigner, would I even be capable of fostering liberatory practice? In my paper, I continued:

My way of life is oppressive by its very nature. I teach people who are in the middle and upper classes of Nigerien society. This is the oppressor leading the oppressive. We’re going to make it to liberation? Who am I kidding?

Freire talks about the role of ‘nice oppressors,’ and notes how their humanitarian work usually does little more than enforce the status quo. I saw this clearly in my previous career in international development – that was one of the reasons I left that field. But the problem remains: without committing class suicide, and joining the oppressed in body as well as spirit, how does one work for liberation? I do not think I have the courage necessary to commit class suicide. Does that mean I can do nothing but perpetuate oppression?

I went on to answer my own question.

I don’t think so. I think there is a role for an oppressor to use her privilege (instead of rejecting it to reach praxis) to liberation’s advantage, and teaching may be one of the best ways to do it. That will be my second focal point during this upcoming summer. I believe there can be a role for a ‘nice oppressor’; I hope this summer to define it. And in doing so, I hope to come upon strategies for helping my students decide what they, as oppressors, want to do. These will be the last two steps to liberatory teaching: helping my students realize that they create – and therefore can change – reality, and then, knowing that, decide what they’re going to do about it.

Marti replied:

What can I say? You are sitting there at the heart of the matter. This is a painful and extremely important place to be…I think that while it is painful to feel oneself as the oppressor, it is such an important point. Because, in fact, by recognizing oneself in that role an important first step has been taken. I agree fully that when we are in a position of power and privilege – we must USE that with as much integrity and love as we are able. Because you cannot just throw that privilege away. It would not go away, anyway, even if you gave away all you have, went to live in the street, and put on your hair suit.
The privilege would still be with you – it is part of who you are. So what you must do, therefore, is use it to make whatever difference you can.5

**Second Summer at SIT: Four Skills and Sandanona**

So I returned to SIT for my second summer of classes with a passion for tackling these tough questions. During the second summer, there were two main influences on my development towards becoming a more liberatory teacher: my class Teaching the Four Skills, and the Sandanona workshop.

Teaching the Four Skills, taught by Paul Levasser, focused on how to integrate reading, writing, listening and speaking into lesson planning. Paul’s teaching incorporated many participatory ideals. In our section on reading, we studied Reader Response Theory (RRT), which asserts that it is the students themselves who make meaning of what they read. In RRT, the experience that students bring to a text, and their interpretation of it, is just as important as what the text actually says. Indeed, RRT asserts that a student cannot truly understand a text without engaging, mentally and emotionally, with it. This valuing of the student’s contribution reminded me of the value placed on a student’s interpretation of their life experience in problem posing.

In our section on writing, Paul stressed that what students say may be more important than how they say it. In studying the use of student journals, we learned that validating students’ experience and their ability to write was more important than the mechanical details of grammar and syntax. This reminded me of Freire’s literacy teaching, in which the rules about reading and writing were explained, but students were given room to experiment with them, manipulating syllables and creating new words. The

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5 Anderson, personal communication, 11 June 2002.
meaning behind the writing was more important than rules governing the grammar and usage.

In the sections on listening and speaking, Paul introduced the Way of Council, a process of communication and community building that resonates with liberatory ideals. The Way of Council promotes the sharing of voices and experiences through speaking with purpose and actively listening. The four intentions of Council, as defined by Jack Zimmerman and Gigi Coyle, are to speak from the heart, to listen from the heart, to be lean of expression, and to be spontaneous.6 Christina Baldwin’s description of the three practices of the Way of Council also highlight its liberatory nature: speaking with intention, listening with intention, and tending to the well-being of the circle by remaining aware of our impact and contributions.7 In doing so, participants form a supportive community, take turns sharing their feelings about a certain issue, and learn from the opinions of others. Paul demonstrated how the practice of Council in the English classroom can be liberating for students, especially those whose voices are often not heard.

**Participatory Approach to the Four Skills**

Paul encouraged me to follow my interest in liberatory teaching practices by exploring how the Participatory Approach could be integrated into lesson plans for each of the four skills. Paul himself was very interested in PA, and provided me with two books that had a great impact on my learning and progression towards liberatory

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These books refined my understanding of problem posing and other PA activities. In particular, I moved away from my previous need to stick to a rigid formula when doing problem posing, and learned the necessity of adapting to my students and teaching context. I began to see how important it was to avoid agendas and instead, to be open to going where the students led the class.

I infused my lesson plans for the Four Skills class with an approach to PA that was tailored to my teaching context in Niger. The first lesson plan, on reading, was based on a lesson I had done the year before with my advanced English class. Early in the year, my students expressed interest in talking about the terrorist attacks that happened in the United States on September 11, 2001. I found a survey in the International Herald Tribune that showed world opinions about the attack, and I used it as a catalyst for our discussion of the tragedy and its aftereffects. A copy of the lesson plan can be found in Appendix 2.

The lesson plan addressed my students’ desire to talk about this issue and express their opinions about it, but I was still falling into the habit of instilling my own personal views on the issues, by framing most of the discussion points as leading questions. In his comments on my lesson plan, Paul noted:

I sometimes felt that you were asking us ‘leading questions’; that you had an answer in mind that you wanted us to give. An example is, ‘Do you believe this survey?’ Could you ask a more open ended question that allowed students to reflect for themselves, e.g. To what extent do you think this survey is valid and why? You might also avoid yes/no questions, again, To what extent is this information important to you and why? You asked ‘Are
there any problems being identified here?’ This seems that you think there are. How could you ask the question in a more open-ended way?8

I tried to move away from yes/no and leading questions in my lesson plan on listening skills. In this lesson plan, we used the Ray Charles song “Busted” as a code for discussing how money problems are handled in the family. We went through the steps of problem posing, and I worked on making the discussion questions more open-ended:

- What does “busted” mean?
- Why is he busted? How do we know he’s busted?
- What has he done to try to get out of this problem?
- What are some other things he could do?

Students would then have a chance to share their own experiences in struggling with financial problems and the solutions they had found. A description of this lesson plan can also be found in Appendix 4.

**Sandanona: Bringing It All Together**

Perhaps the biggest influence on my work was the experience of our Sandanona conference. At the end of the second summer, every SMAT candidate is required to give a workshop, demonstration or presentation on a topic of their choice for the SMAT community, similar to the annual TESOL conference. The preparation and delivery of my Sandanona workshop was the capstone of my work at SIT.

I had the great fortune to be able to collaborate with one of my SMAT classmates, Sarah Renata Wright, in fulfilling our Sandanona requirement. Sarah was the Academic Director for the English Language Program at the Nicaraguan/Northamerican Cultural Center in Nicaragua (the Centro Cultural Nicaragüense Norteamericano, mentioned in

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8 Paul LeVasser, personal communication, 24 July 2002.
Chapter 3). Although our teaching situations were very different, there were many similarities. We were both teaching EFL in developing, post-colonial countries, and we served similar student populations: professionals and university-level students from the educated middle and upper classes. We also shared similar goals: promoting social justice through ELT, and similar processes: using liberatory teaching practices, such as the Participatory Approach. The proposal for our collaboration on the Sandanona workshop seemed natural and compelling.

We wanted to give our colleagues the chance to experience PA, the inspiration for trying it, and a concrete plan for using it in their classrooms. We laid out a plan to explain the theoretical background behind PA, and demonstrate how it works. We would give the participants a chance to try it in group exercises and share their ideas about using it in their classrooms.

The research and preparation for this workshop allowed me to deepen my exploration of PA, while the synergy of working with Sarah was creative, fruitful and exciting. Sarah’s work helped me to expand my view of PA beyond problem-posing activities. She moved us beyond doing single activities or lesson plans to integrating PA into course and curriculum planning. The response to our workshop was very positive. Several participants commented that they were already using similar activities in their classrooms, and they were glad to learn about the theoretical background behind them. It was a validation of their work and instincts as teachers, and we all benefited from the sharing of their experience.

Other participants who were new to PA responded that they were inspired to try this approach. They appreciated the emphasis we put on the practical application of PA;
many of them had wanted to try this approach but had been unsure of where to start. Now they had a plan for bringing PA into their classrooms. That had been our goal for the conference, and it was extremely rewarding to reach it.

**Back to Niger**

With the end of my second SMAT summer, it was time to go back to Niger, this time, with a refined sense of the background and implementation of PA. I went back with a renewed awareness of the importance of the listening phase for gathering generative themes from the students, and making them the basis of the class work – not my own personal agenda. I had a clear understanding of how to do problem posing, and how to adapt it to my situation. I also was excited to try branching out from problem posing, using it as a basis for other creative PA-style activities.

For my first class we used a code and a series of questions from *ESL for Action*.\(^9\) I made several changes to the code, to more accurately reflect the situation and culture of Niger.

*Dialogue: Learning English*

**Amina***: Hi Idrissa. Where are you going?

**Idrissa***: To English class at the Centre Culturel Americain. Are you taking a class there this term?

**Amina**: I don’t have time. I have my job, and then I have to go home and help take care of the family.

**Idrissa**: But you could get a better job if you spoke English. Then you would make more money for your family.

**Amina**: I know lots of people who speak English and don’t have a job. Anyway, I’ll never learn English. It’s too hard.

* In Niger, Amina is a common name for women; Idrissa is a man’s name.

Questions

1. Describe the situation:
What are they talking about?
Where is Idrissa going? Where is Amina going? Why?

2. Define the problems:
How does Idrissa feel about English?
Why doesn’t Amina want to go to English class? What reasons does she give?
How old do you think Amina and Idrissa are? Why?
What does Amina have to do at home? What does Idrissa have to do at home?

3. Share similar experiences:
Do you ever feel like Amina?
Why are you studying English?
When or where do you need English?

4. Analyze the situation:
Do you think Idrissa or Amina is right? Why?
Do you think it’s more important for Amina to spend her time taking an English class, or to go home to help her family? Why?
Will you get a good job if your English is good?

5. Strategize solutions:
What could Amina do to get more time for English class?
What would you do if you were Amina?
What do you want to learn in your English class?
What can your teacher teach you?
What can you teach others in English class?
What are some good ways to learn a language?
What do you think should happen in a language classroom?

When I wrote the code, I was trying to be true to the Nigerien context and avoid my own personal take on the situation. As it was read aloud by two students, I suddenly felt embarrassed by what I had written; my personal values gave me a revulsion for what I saw as stereotypical male and female roles. My feminist sensibilities were indignant; I
wanted to stand up and start a revolution. And that’s when I realized I was slipping back into my old habit of agenda-setting. My first instincts with writing the dialogue had been right. Women’s position as subordinate to men is the reality in Niger, and it is rarely challenged. The roles couldn’t be reversed without seeming strange and unrealistic to my students – they would not be able to identify with the characters. It didn’t matter where I stood on this issue, it mattered where my students stood. Although I found the dialogue to be offensive to my own sensibilities, it was a safe way to raise a thought-provoking issue for my students. It was aimed at them, rather than at me.

The students’ response confirmed this. They were able to take a good, critical look at the characters and define their probable age and family status. On the more difficult questions regarding gender issues, the class was divided. One man in particular, a talkative, outgoing fellow name Goukeye, strongly expressed his view that Amina’s place was at home, taking care of the family; that would be her first and most important responsibility. Several of the men in class voiced their agreement with Goukeye. There were, however, a few men who disagreed. They said that they would be willing to take care of children at home while their wives were in class – a position they stuck to, even after being teased by the other men.

There were 13 students in total in the class; three were women, and it was most interesting to see their response to the dialogue. Although they deferred to the men, they were willing to share their opinions when asked. They felt that there ought to be a way for Amina to go to class, and that her attitude (English is too hard) was wrong. One of the women, Akim, had an interesting response. She worked full-time as a nanny, and had three young children of her own at home. She was able to come to our classes because
her sister took care of her children while she was gone. The rest of the women in class agreed that this would be a good solution for Amina. The men also accepted this solution, as long as the sister was responsible.

I had hoped to move on to a more controversial question: What does Idrissa have to do at home? I was hoping to get to the issue of men not having to do any domestic work, and the great burden this places on women. I realized, though, that the class felt uncomfortable with this question, and it didn’t seem like the right time to take on such a previously unquestionable part of Nigerien culture. It was only the first class, and we needed to start slowly. We could move on to more controversial issues later, after we had established a sense of trust and community in the class.

Marti’s question from the year before echoed in my head: how was this class liberatory? The steps of looking critically at the dialogue, discussing the issues and looking at solutions were a good start. Just thinking and talking about gender issues was a big step; it normalized the possibility of accepting different points of view. It was not, however, an issue that my students had brought up on their own. Since this was our first class together, they hadn’t had a chance to identify their own generative themes; my next class would allow them to do that.

In my next class, I asked my students to do a freewriting exercise in response to these two questions: Why is your job important? What would happen if you didn’t do your job? After writing for 10 minutes, the students shared what they had written in pairs. It was interesting to see their responses (see samples in Appendix 5), and I felt like the exercise was an important way to validate their work and life experiences.
Following on this, I asked the students to discuss with a partner the best and worst thing about their job. If they were willing, each person shared with the class what their partner had told them. I wrote their answers on the board, and we looked for similarities and differences. We found it interesting that often, the two categories were related, as shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best thing about my job</th>
<th>Worst thing about my job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with workmates and customers</td>
<td>Office politics and impolite people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>Being away from the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working with Americans</td>
<td>Working with workaholics (Americans!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to glorify God*</td>
<td>Fighting evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training/Learning on the job</td>
<td>Stress, being tired from mentally or physically hard work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A reminder of the emphasis placed on religion in Nigerien culture.

We agreed to use these issues as generative themes for our class, and the students wrote their own short dialogues based on them to act as codes for the upcoming classes. Using their codes, we were able to go through the steps in problem-posing: defining the problem, examining the point of view of each character in the dialogue, sharing similar experiences and discussing possible solutions. To help move the theme of work from an abstract dialogue to a personal issue, I designed the following matrix and asked the students to fill them in, working in pairs. Each person was to fill in the matrix for their partner, to give them a chance to work on their listening and speaking skills.
Your job | What would help you do your job better? | What can you do to make those changes?

1. ____________________________
   a. ____________________________
   b. ____________________________

2. ____________________________
   a. ____________________________
   b. ____________________________

3. ____________________________
   a. ____________________________
   b. ____________________________

In the next class the students were eager to share their matrices. Some of my students’ responses can be found in Appendix 6. The exercise allowed students to use their critical thinking skills and, more importantly, to look for solutions of their own making. We were getting towards the goal of seeing ourselves as actors in reality, as capable of creating and changing reality and their environment. But the exercise was still focused on the individual level. To be liberatory, we would have to focus on collective action, working together to create change for everyone, not just for each person’s individual circumstances.
Liberation?

So, we still had a long way to go. Many students were skeptical that they had the ability to affect anything but superficial changes. Some students showed little interest in changing systems that while unfair to others, benefited them, such as the exploitation of the traditional role of women.

But we had taken some important first steps. We had created a place where everyone was able to share their opinions about issues that were important to them. It had been especially important to create a space for the women in class to share their experiences, feelings and opinions, and to have them recognized (if not yet respected) by men. We had looked at controversial gender issues and normalized them to some extent by talking about them. Some of the men in class had expressed support of the women; despite being teased they maintained their arguments, and I noted some of the younger men listening thoughtfully to them. The possibility of change was opened.

I realized, after this class, that the question of liberation wasn’t one of yes or no, all or nothing – it was a process that would take time. We wouldn’t have a smooth trajectory, and we wouldn’t suddenly pass through a barrier into the bliss of liberation. It would come in fits and starts, with surges and setbacks, with questions and readjustments. It would be messy, like most events in life. The end goal of liberation might still be a ways ahead, but we were clearly on our way.
CHAPTER 5

MY PRAXIS: WORKING IN THE LIBERATION CONTINUUM

No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so.

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The Oppression – Liberation Continuum

Freire asserted that education is never neutral, it either domesticates or liberates. However, I’ve come to realize that it is not an all-or-nothing proposition; that oppression and liberation operate along a continuum. We can be oppressed by people who are more powerful than us, and at the same time, act oppressively to people who have less power than we do. Likewise, my teaching follows a similar balance: it can foster greater or lesser degrees of domestication or liberation.

My first year in teaching was clearly more domesticating than liberating: my inexperience led me to use traditional teaching methods that positioned me as the knower and source of power in the classroom. The materials we used reinforced the dominance of American culture and the spread of English imperialism.

With my first tries at using critical pedagogy and problem posing I began moving towards liberation, but the fact that I used issues of my own choosing and followed my own agenda of social causes was still domesticating for my students.
As I learned more about critical pedagogy and the Participatory Approach, I began to follow my students’ lead: the students chose the themes and issues, wrote their own codes, and led the discussions. We focused on problems that were important to them and discussed possible solutions. At this point, I believe that my teaching practice became more liberating than domesticating.

Now, when I look at my teaching, I believe that I am closer to the side of liberation. In my classroom, we create space for all voices to be heard, especially those that are traditionally marginalized. The learning is meaningful and based in my students’ lives. We practice critical thinking and problem solving. We confront and mitigate English imperialism by discussing its causes and effects, by deconstructing American culture, and by emphasizing local culture and languages.

All good, but there is certainly further to go to reach true liberation. I need to help my students realize that we are a part of the world and its problems; that every day, we create the reality that is lived. As the creators of reality, we have the power to change it – we are the solution. We need to move from working for change on an individual level, which is what my students are doing by learning English, to a collective level, where we can critique society and look for ways to change it for the good of all. Supporting my students with this realization is my greatest challenge and current drive in my teaching praxis.

**Risking an Act of Love**

But realistically, how far along the liberation continuum can I go? Wealth is relative – in an American context I might modestly make it into the middle class, but here
in West Africa I am undeniably rich – we have a nice house, more than enough food, access to good health care and the ability to travel back to see our families once a year.

How much more could I do, if I put myself in the situation of my students? Freire’s ideal of class suicide haunts me. Freire’s literacy teachers renounced their privileged standard of living, went to work in their students’ fields and lived in their communities. If I were to give up my wealth and comfortable life, and take on the lifestyle of my students, I would better understand the challenges and difficulties my students face. Knowing this, I could better adapt my lessons to their reality – because it would be my reality as well. Together, we could share the work for liberation.

But cowardice holds me back – fear of not being able to get good health care for my son, fear of losing touch with my family, fear of the suffering that is intertwined in West African poverty. I see that wealth is like a drug – the more I have of it, the more I want it (or think that I actually need it) and the more I am willing to do to get and keep it, even if that means living a life that contradicts my values and ideals. Wealth keeps me from being the best teacher I could be. I see this plainly, but the simple fact is that I lack the courage to give it all away and commit class suicide. Does that mean I can do nothing but perpetuate oppression?

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire writes:

The oppressor is solidarily with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor – when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love. True solidarity is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis.¹

My praxis, then, must focus on love – love of my students as people who live in difficult circumstances and manage to thrive despite them. This act of love breaks through the barriers of wealth, class, ethnicity, nationality and culture that separate me from my students. It is this love that can help me reject the siren song of wealth as much as possible, this love that can give me courage to live closer to the level of my students. Every day is an opportunity to make better decisions between wealth and poverty, oppression and liberation. I am no saint, and I can’t change over night, but if I can make little changes, then the big ones may become easier. In the end, I think it matters less how quickly I progress than the fact that I am still moving towards the end goal. There is another Hausa proverb that rings true for me: “Sannu sannu ba ta hana zuwa,” – traveling slowly doesn’t keep one from arriving. Every day is opportunity to take another step.

**Tipping the Balance Towards Liberation**

The work I have done here in West Africa has helped me improve my understanding of poverty and injustice, and sharpened my commitment to teaching for liberation. My experience has helped me become a better person, as well as a better teacher. Here in West Africa, I can act as a resource for my students who have the ability to create change in their communities. My unfamiliarity of life in this region and my position as an outsider has some advantages – when I ask my students to teach me about their culture we switch roles, allowing them to be the experts and I the learner. As an outsider, I can safely pose questions that would be threatening from someone within their culture.
I can also make it clear that I find it not only acceptable, but necessary to critique the role of the U.S. in the world. I can acknowledge the damage of English Imperialism head on, and do my best to mitigate it. I can learn from the experience of my teaching colleagues here, and share with them strategies for making their teaching liberatory.

And finally, I believe that my praxis will eventually lead me to where I can have the most impact – working in a situation where my students and I are on equal footing. This means that I will return to teach in the United States. I believe that I can be most effective by fighting oppression at its source – by working with oppressors.

I hope to teach future language teachers, in an environment similar to the one I experienced at SIT. I would like to share my experiences with other teachers, and help them explore the possibilities of liberatory teaching. Perhaps I can help them to see the reality that we, as oppressors, create, and perhaps they will be inspired to work to change it. Perhaps some of them will be braver than I, and willing to take the next step, to commit class suicide, to live their praxis and be the change they want to create.

Perhaps that will do it, that will, in the end, clearly tip the balance of my life from one of oppression to one of liberation. I hope so. Perhaps that will be enough to satisfy my longing to work for freedom, despite my weakness in clinging to my position of privilege. Perhaps then I will stop denying the basic humanity of others, which causes me to deny my very own humanity. Maybe then I can be, as Freire says, “authentically human.”

I remember a dream I had one night shortly before I went to SIT for my second summer. The revolution had come; my station in life placed me clearly in the camp of the
oppressors; I was one of the first up against the wall. But as I pissed in my pants with fear for my life a small part of me, way in the back, was secretly rejoicing. Liberation had won.

I just hope I can be a part of it.
Appendices: Lesson plans and materials used

1. Complete list of Freire’s works

2. Hippo Roller (copy of article to be attached)

3. Reading LP on Sept 11

4. Listening LP on Busted

5. Freewriting on why your job is important (copies of student writings to be attached)

6. Job matrices (copies of student’s responses to be attached)
Appendix 1:

Here is a list of Freire’s works that have been translated into English, compiled by Daniel Schugurensky, Department of Adult Education and Counseling Psychology, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. From the website: www.fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/freire/freirebooks.html

- Education as a practice of freedom (1967, 1974)
- Cultural action for freedom (1968, 1970)
- Pedagogy of the oppressed (1968, 1970)
- Extension or communication? (1969, 1973)
- The political literacy process (1970)
- Witness to liberation, in seeing education whole (1970)
- Education for critical consciousness (1973)
- The importance of the act of reading (1982, 1983)
- The politics of education: culture, power and liberation (1985)
- Pedagogy of hope (1992, 1994)
- Pedagogy of the Heart (1997)

In collaboration with others:
- With D. Macedo. Literacy: Reading the word and the world (1987)
- With I. Shor. Freire for the classroom: a sourcebook for liberatory teaching (1987)
- With M. Horton et al. We make the road by walking: conversations on education and social change (1990)
- With J. Fraser et al. Mentoring the mentor: a critical dialogue with Paulo (1990)
- With M. Escobar & G. Niebla. Paulo Freire on higher education: a dialogue at the National University of Mexico (1994)
Appendix 2: The Hippo Roller
Appendix 3:

Lesson plan for Reading Skills – Survey of world opinion about the terrorist attacks on September 11 and the USA’s response.

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Four Skills; July 24, 2002

Reading Skills Lesson Plan: Reaction to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001

In my classes in Niger, there was a great deal of interest in talking about the terrorist attacks that occurred in the US on Sept. 11, 2001. I developed this lesson plan to meet that interest.

Teaching Context: The class is made up of about 15 adult EFL students at the high intermediate or advanced levels. The class is 2 hours long with a 10-minute break. Most students are university students or working professionals employed by the state, NGO’s, or private businesses. The students are highly motivated and want to learn English to get a better job or a better position at work.

Objectives: Students will be able to:
- Read and understand complex data provided in table format
- Look for and find salient information in tables
- Develop critical thinking skills in reading surveys
- Gain greater understanding of world opinion regarding the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks

1. Schema-building: 15 minutes

Tell students that we will be talking about the world’s reaction to the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Write “World Reaction” and “US Reaction” on the board, circle each one, and make a circular bubble map (spider web). Ask students what words come to mind when we say “Reaction to Sept. 11” and write these words in the bubble map. Ask students if they think the reactions they list are held by the entire world, or just by people in the US. Show commonalities by linking the bubbles where appropriate.

Explain to students that we are going to look at a survey of world opinion regarding the terrorist attacks that was published by the International Herald Tribune newspaper. Hand out three of the questions (Q1, Q5, and Q 14, marked on the survey, attached), without the survey results on them, and ask them to choose their own personal answer.

2. Reading the survey: 15 minutes

Hand out the actual survey. Ask students to look at the heading and the first question.

Establish with them:
Who organized this survey? When?
What is the International Herald Tribune and the Pew Research Center?
Who were the people who answered the survey? Who are “Global Opinion Leaders?”
Why are they the ones who were interviewed for the survey?
How is the information organized? Why do you think they organized it this way?
Are there any regions that are missing? (Africa – why?)
How many people in each region were interviewed?
Total number of people interviewed?
(Optional interesting question – why don’t the numbers add up?!? – could segue into discussion about the validity of surveys)

Ask the students how they responded to this question themselves by asking for a show of hands for each answer (new chapter in world history, not such a significant event, don’t know/refused). Why did they choose those answers? What do they think most Nigeriens would say?

3. Reading and Discussion in Groups: 30 minutes

Divide the students into groups of 3. Each group gets a certain number of questions to look at. For example: Group 1: Q2-4; Group 2: Q5-7; Group 3: Q8-11; Group 4: Q12-13; Group 5: Q14a-e.

Ask the students to read and discuss their questions, and be prepared to summarize each question for the group. Some points for them to consider:

- What do the numbers show?
- Where is there agreement? Disagreement? Why?
- Which statistics do you think are most significant?
- How would you personally answer the questions? Do you think most Nigeriens would agree with you?

4. Class Discussion: 40 minutes

Ask each group to present a short summary of each question, and allow a discussion of the various opinions of the class. (If time is short, focus on the following questions: Q2, 5, 8, 12 and 14). Ask students how they would respond personally to each question, and how they think most Nigeriens would respond.

When the questions are finished, ask the students how they would summarize the survey overall. Points to raise:

- What does the survey tell us?
- Do you believe this survey? Could it be inaccurate? How?
- Is this information important? Why?
- Are there any problems that are being identified here? What are the causes?
What could be done to solve the problems?

5. **Evaluation**: 10 minutes

Going around the circle, ask the students to share one thing they learned today, and how they felt about the lesson.

6. **Take home reading and writing**: homework

Ask students to take a copy of the following article (attached): IHT Insight: How the World Sees the U.S. and Sept. 11. Students should read the article and then write a personal response to the following questions:
- What do you see as the major cause of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks?
- What do you think would be the best way to prevent something like this from happening again?

This writing would be used as the basis for discussion in the next class.
Listening Skills in the Participatory Approach

A Sample Lesson Plan: BUSTED

The Participatory Approach naturally encompasses listening skills, because it encourages students to talk about what is most important to them, and to listen to their peers do the same. The first stage in the Participatory Approach, Listening, asks students to identify personal themes and issues that are important to them, and share them with the class. Later stages require the students to engage in listening to each other, as they share their opinions about issues and ideas for addressing problems in their lives and in their communities.

Following the Participatory Approach, the teacher doesn’t choose a topic or theme to work on in class – it is up to the students to identify issues that they want to address. But it is possible to imagine a lesson based on topics that are likely to be chosen by the students, and then to modify it to match the students’ chosen themes. Here is an example, based on the theme that is commonly discussed in my teaching context: how money problems are handled in the family.

Theme: How Money Problems Are Handled in the Family

Teaching Context: The class is made up of about 15 adult EFL students at the high intermediate or advanced levels. The class is 2.5 hours long with a 15-minute break. Most students are university students or working professionals employed by the state, NGO’s, or
private businesses. The students are highly motivated and want to learn English to get a better job or a better position at work. From previous classes, students are familiar with the problem-posing framework for this class activity. By the time of this lesson, the students know each other well and are comfortable sharing personal issues with each other.

**Objectives:** Students will be able to:
- In a supportive atmosphere, share how the issue of money problems personally affects them
- Identify some of the causes of money problems
- Identify how families in Niger often respond to money problems
- Strategize solutions for dealing with money problems
- Use vocabulary related to money problems

**Previous class activities:** For homework, students were asked to write a response in their journals to these questions: Who is responsible for supporting your family? What do you do when you have money problems in your family?

**1. Schema-building:** 5 minutes

Tell students that we will be talking about money problems. Write “Money Problems” on the board, circle it, and make a circular bubble map (spider web). Ask students what words come to mind when we say “Money Problems” and write these words in the bubble map.

**2. Warm Up:** 15 minutes

Tell students that we will start off by listening to “Busted,” a song by the American blues singer, Ray Charles. Ask students to share what they know about Ray Charles and the Blues. How did the Blues originate? What are common themes in the Blues?

Hand out the lyrics to “Busted” (attached), and play the song. As students listen they try to fill in the blanks to complete the song. Play the song twice.

Review the song together. First ask:
- a) What was the song about?
- b) What does “busted” mean?

Then go through the song together, line by line, with the students reading the lyrics. Review new vocabulary words and idiomatic expressions. Then ask:
- a) What does “busted” mean?
- b) What is the singer’s problem?
- c) Why is he busted? How do we know he’s busted?
- d) What has he done to try to get out of this problem?
- e) What is he planning to do now?
- f) What are some other things he could do?

Play the song one more time – students can sing along.

**3. Listening to Our Voices:** 10 minutes
Tell students that we are now going to talk about how we handle money problems in our own lives. Break into groups of three. Ask the students for one volunteer in each group who is willing to share what they wrote in their journals last night. One person in the group is the reader, while another person practices active listening and summarizes what the reader said. The third, the “reporter” listens, takes notes, gives the active listener feedback on her listening skills, and notes anything she missed. The reporter will also have to report back the group’s findings to the class.

4. Discussion: 20 minutes

In their groups, students go through the first four questions usually used in the Dialogue phase of problem-posing activities.
   a) Describe the problem shared in your group
   b) Define the problem
   c) Share similar experiences
   d) Explain why the problem exists - what are the root causes?

The students summarize their findings to share with the class.

5. Reporting Back: 30 minutes

The reporters from each group describe the problem that was shared in the group, define the problem, and identify the root causes. After listening to each group, the teacher asks the class to identify any similarities they heard between the groups. Were their similar problems? Similar root causes? Why? Note these similarities on the board.

6. Action in Groups: 20 minutes

Ask students to think back on the song “Busted”. What is the singer going to do about his problem? What are some other things he could do? Do you think he will be successful?

Encourage your students to see themselves as actors in their own history and the history of their families. What are some of the things they could do in response to the problems they identified in their groups?

Ask the students to return to their groups to strategize possible responses. Students can brainstorm for 5 minutes, focusing on ways to change the problem. Then students should discuss the consequences of each strategy - what would happen if they did that? What would happen if they did nothing? Which strategy has the greatest likelihood for success?

7. Action Together: 20 minutes

Ask the class to come back together. The reporter in each group shares the group’s agreed-upon best option, and explains the advantages and disadvantages of this strategy. Encourage the class to give their opinion about each strategy - do they think it can work? Is it realistic? Do they have any other ideas?
8. **Evaluation**: 5 minutes

Going around the circle, ask the students to share one thing they learned today, and how they felt about the lesson. The lyrics for “Busted” are below.

**Busted**

--- By Ray Charles

*My bills are all due and the __________ needs shoes and I'm busted.*

*Cotton is down to quarter a pound but I'm busted.*

*I got a cow that went dry and a hen that won't lay,*
*a big stack of _______________ that gets bigger each day,*
*the county's gonna haul my belongings away 'cause I'm busted.*

*I went to my __________ to ask for loan 'cause I was busted.*

*I hate to beg like a dog without his __________ but I'm busted.*

*My brother said, "There ain't a thing I can do.*
*My wife and my kids are all down with the _______________ and I was just thinking about calling on you and I'm busted.”*

*Well I am no __________ but a man can go wrong when he's busted.*

*The food that we canned last summer is gone and I'm busted.*

*The bills are all there and the _______________ won't grow.*
*Me and my family got to pack up and go.*
*But I'll make a living just where I don't know 'cause I'm busted.*

*I'm broke.*

_____________
*I mean, like nothing.*
*Forget it.*
*It's over.*
Appendix 5: Freewriting samples on “Why your job is important.”
Appendix 6: Job Matrices


