



Education for Liberation:

BY ELLIE FRIEDLAND

The International Literacy Conferences sponsored by the Guatemala Reading Association are always exciting learning and teaching experiences. I had attended and presented at the first three conferences, so I had an idea of what to expect when I went to Guatemala City for the fourth conference, in February 2003.

I knew that Guatemalan public and private school teachers who attended the conference would be hungry for new ideas and strategies. I knew they would eagerly participate in activities and that they would readily ask questions about how to implement them in their classrooms. They would effusively express their thanks after every presentation, and would line up to take any written materials that were offered.

I also knew that many of the teachers who attended this conference had grown up in Guatemala under an oppressive government. They were educated in a culture of silence, in which it was dangerous to voice any ideas. Guatemalan educators are working to change the approach to education in their public schools, but in many ways it has not changed. Most schools have few books or educational supplies, and teachers attend a year of normal school (in high school) as their only preparation to teach. Most teachers only know the methods by which they have been taught—rote copying from the board and recitation.

In the nine years I've worked with the

Guatemalan Reading Association and their American partners in the Guatemala Literacy Project (of the International Reading Association) I've given workshops for teachers all over the country. I have learned that many of them know about Paulo Friere and his Education for Liberation, and want to know more. Some have worked with him, or with teachers who have worked with him. Others have heard about his work and his ideas. They are hungry for change, and they understand his ideas and approaches. They have lived with true oppression and are fighting to learn and practice democratic approaches to education.

So I decided to make my conference session a learning and teaching experience based on Friere's ideas. I didn't anticipate just how appropriate that would be. What follows is a description of the experience the conference participants and I shared at the Fourth International Literacy Conference in Guatemala. I believe it is an example of how to practice education for liberation.

We began with identification and reflection on the reality of the participants and their current work to intervene in that reality. Through this dialogue, the content of the problem-posing method emerged. The participants wanted to learn teaching strategies, and I offered a model of a lesson with strategies they could adapt and use for many purposes. The lesson culminates in reflection, and is an experience that stimulates the deepening of critical understanding and awareness (which Friere calls *Conscientizacao*) (Friere, 2003).

The Cultural Reality: The Teachers' Strike

In February 2003, the public school teachers of Guatemala were on strike. They were striking to get books in their classrooms, to get basic educational supplies, and to be paid decent wages. When I arrived in Guatemala City for the conference, the friend at whose home I was staying picked me up at the airport. It was ten o'clock at night, but instead of going to his home he said we were going to the Ministry of Finance, where about one hundred public school teachers had been camped out for two days as part of the strike. They were trying to get the Ministry's attention, and were the focal point of the nation-wide strike.

We drove into Guatemala City and parked by the Ministry of Finance. Before I could see anything I heard lively music blaring from loud speakers. We got out of the car and walked toward the music. There was a crowd of men and women on the plaza, next to a row of makeshift tents of blankets hung over ropes. Many were dancing, and others were singing along with the music. Over the top of it all a few men were yelling "Strike, strike!" and "Books for schools!" (in Spanish, of course) into megaphones. My friend grabbed me and whirled me into the dancing.

These were the striking teachers. The atmosphere was celebratory, not angry, as I expected. People (not teachers) I had met in the Guatemala City airport had warned me to stay away from the Ministry of Finance, saying that the strike demonstration was dangerous, and that the teachers were volatile and ready to make

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MAKING
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THINKING
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CREATING

A Guatemalan Story



violence. But that was not true at all. The striking teachers were relaxed, friendly, high spirited, even joyful.

This was so different than what I am used to in the United States, and so different from what I had been told to expect, that I had to ask why. My friend and other teachers there told me they were happy because they were finally taking a stand. They were stating their passion for and belief in education, and they were excited because they were united and speaking out.

I began to realize then that these teachers were practicing education for liberation. They grew up in a country with a violently oppressive government, and were themselves educated into that oppressive system. Now, however, as that is beginning to change, they have looked critically at their reality and are taking action toward transformation (Friere, 2003).

The striking teachers told me that they were only somewhat hopeful that any of their demands would be met. The government officials had just agreed to negotiate with a small representative group of the teachers, but had also begun to fire striking teachers, assuring that they would not have jobs to return to after the strike. None of the striking teachers were making any money during the strike, and now they were facing the prospect of not being able to return to their jobs at all. There were indeed teachers striking all around Guatemala, but it was not at all clear that they would in fact make a difference in educational policy or practice through this action. Yet they were ebullient, because they were taking action and saying what it was vital to say. They were breaking the

culture of silence that accompanies oppression.

They had decided the time was ripe for hopeful action. "One of the tasks of the progressive educator, though a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be" (Friere, 1995, p. 8). The teachers knew there was a good chance their strike would not bring about the transformations they were seeking, but they also knew that the time was right to make a beginning.

Critical and Liberating Dialogue

I arrived at the room for my presentation early, and it was already filled with people. The energy of the people in the room was high. It felt expectant and charged, not unlike the energy I'd felt the night before outside the Ministry of Finance. I had been told by some Guatemalans I had talked with that most public and private school teachers supported the strike, but I had been told by others that the strikers were a minority and that teachers around the country did not support them, and regarded them as out of control and excessively volatile.

Confronted with two opposing views of the situation, I didn't know what the reality was. I didn't know how to interpret the charge I felt in this room of almost one hundred teachers, but I knew that if I was going to be true to my presentation topic "Education for Liberation," we had to address the political and educational realities in which they were immersed. Friere calls this critical and liberating dialogue,

and names it as a critical first step in education for liberation (Friere, 2003).

So I began my presentation by acknowledging what I knew about the strike and the controversy surrounding it, and by asking the teachers in the room if they were concerned with it and its ramifications. More hands than I could count shot up to be called on to speak. For the next forty-five minutes individual after individual stood and spoke with passion. About half of them were public school teachers, and the other half were private school teachers, artists, and others concerned with education and literacy in Guatemala.

One after another they spoke about how vital education is to the future of Guatemala, and they said that children have to learn to think for themselves, and so teachers have to think for themselves and express themselves freely. They said that their government has to support education more, that they need books in their classrooms and they need to learn new ways to teach. They said they do not want to teach by writing sentences on the board for students to copy. They were taught that way, and they knew few alternatives, but they said they wanted their students to participate in their learning, and to ask questions, solve problems, and think critically and creatively.

The energy with which they spoke was the same energy I had felt among the strikers camping out at the Ministry of Finance. They were excited and passionate. They spoke with fervor but not hostility or anger. I asked the participants to describe how they felt when they expressed their ideas to the group, and wrote their re-

sponses on a large piece of newsprint. The list included “powerful, intelligent, inspired, confident, effective,” and other strong words.

Next I introduced the discussion of Paulo Friere’s work, and acknowledged that my title was drawn from his work, and the participants nodded in enthusiastic recognition. They knew that they had only experienced what Friere called the “banking concept of education” in which “...the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized.... His task is to ‘fill’ the students with the content of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (2003, p. 57).

They knew they did not want to teach that way. They expressed this fervently, then went on to express their frustration that they did not know how to teach any other way. They had only experienced rote teaching and learning in school. They knew the possibilities offered by different approaches to learning and education, but they did not know what they could do next. They were fighting for some resources through the strike, but they had come to this presentation looking for other resources they needed.

I knew I could participate in this moment of education for liberation by offering more information and examples of the kinds of teaching and learning these teachers hungered for. The second part of the title of my presentation was “Making the Classroom a Place for Thinking and Creating.” It was time to do that, as long as I remained true to Friere’s dialogical process.

I did not want to show these teachers “how to do it” or teach them the right approach, or even one good approach. I wanted to facilitate their dialogue, their thinking and their creating. I also wanted to make sure I didn’t assume that my educational or cultural views and approaches were necessarily appropriate for them or their situations. I wanted to present possibilities so they could create and educate in ways appropriate to their cultures and identities.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

During my first trip to Guatemala in February 1999 I had learned that February 22 is the holiday that celebrates Tecun Uman, the great hero of the Maya. Guatemalan adults all know the story of Tecun Uman and Pedro de Alverado, the leader of the Spanish Conquistadors who invaded the Mayan land in 1524. Pedro de Alverado and his army defeated Tecun Uman and the Maya. In one important myth, the

quetzal, the national bird of Guatemala, is said to have flown into the chest of Tecun Uman in the moment of his death; this is why the quetzal bird is red. Tecun Uman is revered in Guatemala as a great hero of the Maya, but many adults actually think of him with ambivalence. Many view him as overly naive, or backward, because the story says that he was defeated in part because the Maya had never seen horses before, and assumed that horses and riders were one being. Because of this, they aimed their arrows and spears at the horses, and did not stop the Conquistadors.

Many Guatemalan elementary schools note this holiday by having children make headdresses and shields like Tecun Uman. I have visited schools while children were engaged in this activity, and no child I asked knew what Tecun Uman did or why they were making headdresses and shields. They said he was a hero, but that was all they knew. This is a classic example of how important cultural and historical knowledge is left out of what we do in schools.

The same kind of opportunity is missed in the United States when teachers have children cut out turkeys and make Pilgrim hats at Thanksgiving. There are other important historical and cultural aspects in these stories, but for my purposes both represent stories of the history of oppression in our countries, and should be examined fully and critically in this context.

The history of the Maya is always relevant for Guatemalan teachers and students, but in this political moment it could be particularly powerful, so I decided to create learning activities that focused more deeply on Tecun Uman and the historical and cultural significance of the events of 1524. I wanted to be able to guide the participants through learning experiences that would begin with their culturally embedded understandings, but then challenge them to look at these critically, and to understand the complexities of learning available in this cultural and historical story. Then we could also relate it to their current political and cultural reality.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Friere’s “pedagogy of the oppressed is the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation” (2003, p. 53). He says that this pedagogy has two distinct phases.

“In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases

to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation.... In the first stage this confrontation occurs through the change in the way the oppressed perceive the world of oppression; in the second stage, through the expulsion of the myths created and developed in the old order, which like specters haunt the new structure emerging from the revolutionary transformation.

The pedagogy of the first stage must deal with the problem of the oppressed consciousness and the oppressor consciousness, the problem of men and women who oppress and men and women who suffer oppression. It must take into account their behavior, their view of the world and their ethics....” (2003, pp. 54-55)

Praxis:

Application of Theory in Action

I created a structure for learning activities that would bring out this focus for the conference participants. However, this structure can be adapted for any educational level, from elementary school through high school. It can be varied to meet a number of different purposes and objectives, in addition to the understanding of oppression. I originally created it as an activity to teach reading and writing at the elementary level, since it includes opportunities for students to do historical research and use it to write a presentation to the class. I have used it with university students to help them understand how to structure learning experiences that are truly student centered and creative.

I knew that most of the participants in the conference group were teachers who wanted strategies to take away that they could use immediately in their classrooms. So I introduced the activity by saying that it could be adapted to focus on many curriculum goals. It is a strategy for teaching writing, for reading and doing historical research, for oral presentation, for understanding history and culture, and for building confidence and self esteem. I encouraged the participants to change the structure and purpose of the activities to suit their students and situations, and to focus on the curriculum area they want to emphasize.

I let them know that I had some structures for our activities, and that they would be creating the learning experiences. I also shared my belief that participation is necessary for learning—that is, we as teachers will actually do the learning activities, not just talk or read about them. Friere describes an alternative to banking education as problem-posing educa-

tion: "The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own" (2003, p. 81).

We turned to the list of qualities the participants had said they felt when expressing their opinions, and I suggested we connect these qualities to the idea of heroes and heroines. The group immediately responded with enthusiasm, saying how it is indeed heroic to take a stand for what you believe in. In Guatemala that has been especially true, since for a long time people were executed and "disappeared" for expressing their beliefs.

We extended our list of qualities by brainstorming about heroes/heroines. We made a list of qualities they have and express. I wrote them down on a large newsprint pad so everyone could see the list. The list included words like brave, strong, intelligent, compassionate, valiant, and dedicated.

Now I took on the role of facilitator, and told the group that I would be doing what they could do in a classroom, and that the strategies I used should be changed and adapted to their situations, students, and to their own styles. I noted that this week was the holiday celebrating Tecun Uman, and that our list of words describing heroes could be applied to Tecun Uman. There was enthusiastic agreement with this. Then I said that from the Spanish point of view, these words could also apply to Pedro de Alverado. He too was a hero who was strong, intelligent, and all the rest. There was an immediate chorus of "Boo!" and "No!" from the group.

This was the moment to challenge them to see the perspective they never look at: to understand their history more fully, and to look beyond the one-sided view they are used to. So I reiterated that now we were looking at this "from the Spanish point of view..." and they understood and were excited to see where we would go next. I explained that this activity would involve a series of role-plays, and that it was important for people to know when they began that they would have an opportunity to play out all the roles. We would also have time for reflection after the activity.

Activity Structure

Here is the basic structure of the activities, which can be varied. The teacher asks the group to divide in half. One group will be in the role of Tecun Uman, and the other group will be in the role of Pedro de

Alverado. The teacher can begin by reviewing the history and the myths related to the historical events. Alternatively, the students can do this preliminary research to prepare for the activities. Once it is clear that everyone is familiar with the history and the characters, the teacher helps them get into role by demonstrating how to take on the qualities we had listed, and by guiding them through a process of becoming Tecun Uman or Pedro de Alverado by breathing the qualities into their bodies, and showing them in their physical language.

For the group in role as Tecun Uman she would say something like:

You are Tecun Uman. It is 1524. You are the great leader of the Mayan people. You are strong, intelligent, and brave. Show these qualities in how you stand, how you breathe, and how you hold your head. Know that you are a great leader; you have no room for self doubt or hesitation. Breathe power and sureness into your body, and show it in every aspect of your expression. You, Tecun Uman, know that today ships are arriving, and you know they bring invaders. You know you are likely to face defeat and death. The gods are unhappy today, as are your people; but you shall not fail them in this dark time. The heart of the great quetzal bird is in you and will sustain you. Think about what you shall fight for, and what you shall stand for. Breathe. Stand strong and sure for your people.

The teacher would guide those being Pedro de Alverado into role the same way, with the same list of qualities to take into their bodies. Then she might add,

You are Pedro de Alverado, great conqueror; great Conquistador! You have traveled far for the glory of Spain. You shall defeat these savages and show them the true light of civilization. You believe deeply in your cause. You shall show these people the true way to a better life, and you will reap the rewards of great service! Think now about all you shall fight for. Stand strong and sure for your cause.

All participants now stay in role, either as Pedro de Alverado or as Tecun Uman. The teacher gives them the direction to write a speech to the Mayan people, in role. For those enrolled as Tecun Uman, their speech is to the Mayan people. The moment in time is just before the Conquistadors arrive. They are invading with a clearly superior force, and Tecun Uman is preparing his people for battle.

You know it might be your final address to your people. Write it now.

They stay in role as Tecun Uman and write a one-minute speech to the Mayan people. The teacher encourages them to

stay in role as they write, by reminding them to sit up straight, to feel like a hero, to be Tecun Uman. This has a powerful effect on students' writing. Research has shown that writing in role changes the power of what is written.

Those in role as Pedro de Alverado also write a speech to the Mayan people, but the moment in time is different. They will give their speeches just after the Conquistadors have conquered the Maya.

You have just killed their leader Tecun Uman and you are taking over their land and lives. Write your one minute speech to the Mayan people.

When they finish writing, all participants come out of role and transition to get ready to play a variety of roles. The teacher tells them they each get to be in a number of situations and rolls. First: One person volunteers to give her/his speech as Tecun Uman. Everyone else is in role as Mayans (including those who were previously in role as Pedro de Alverado). The teacher helps them into role:

The moment in time is just before the Conquistadors arrive to invade. Your leader Tecun Uman will speak to you. You are the great Maya. Respond to his words in role.

Then each person who wrote a speech as Tecun Uman stands up, one by one, and delivers her or his speech to the Mayan people. The group, all in role as Mayan people, cheer, raise their fists, and rouse themselves for battle.

Now the teacher sets the next scene:

Now it is the moment after the battle. The Conquistadors have won. Half the group stays in role as Mayans; half become Spanish soldiers. The Mayans sit on the floor while the Spanish soldiers stand among and over them, guarding them.

The teacher assists the group in creating this situation, and encourages them to be in role as powerful soldiers or as Maya being forced to sit and listen. The soldiers disperse themselves and stand among the group of Maya, who sit on the floor.

All are gathered to hear Pedro de Alverado. Those who wrote speeches as Pedro de Alverado deliver their speeches to the Mayans, one by one. All react in role.

If necessary during these speeches the teacher again helps people stay in role, encouraging soldiers to cheer Pedro de Alverado and making sure the Maya are quiet and obedient.

When half of the speeches have been delivered, the teacher can direct the Mayans and Spaniards to switch roles. This ensures that each person experiences the role

of being conquered and being conqueror. In addition, the entire activity could be done again, with role changes. Those who wrote and delivered speeches as Tecun Uman would do so as Pedro de Alverado, and vice versa. This ensures that each person has the full range of experiences and perspectives.

Reflection and Critical Consciousness

The reflection after these activities is the most important aspect of the learning experience. This is when participants and teacher together strive for emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality. This authentic reflection considers people in their relations with the world, and evokes the challenge to become committed to action (Friere, 2003). The teacher and participants should stimulate the discussion by asking questions such as:

- What did you experience in each role?
- What was it like to be Tecun Uman before the battle? Pedro de Alverado? What was it like to be a Mayan in the moment when you knew the conquerors were coming? What was it like to be a Mayan after the battle and be forced to sit at the feet of the soldiers and listen to Pedro de Alverado? What was it like to be one of those soldiers?
- What was it like to write in role as Tecun Uman and/or Pedro de Alverado? How do you usually feel when you write?
- Do you have those qualities of heroes and heroines that we listed?
- What is it like to express passionately held beliefs? What ideas are you passionate about?
- How did the Spanish view the Mayans and the Mayans view the Spanish? Who was right?
- What is it like to be oppressed? To be the oppressor?
- When have you experienced or when do you experience oppression in your real lives?
- How accurate were our portrayals? How can we find out what really happened? Where can we research this history to get both points of view?
- How could Pedro de Alverado and Tecun Uman both be heroes? Were they really?

- What did you find yourself doing in role that might be a stereotype?
- What situations in your country/history are similar?
- What is the effect of this history on your perspective about your country and yourself?
- Has your perspective on this historical story changed? What effect does that have on your perspective about your country and yourself?

Extensions of the Activities

A variety of discussions and extensions can follow these activities. These role-plays are a powerful beginning for exploring writing, speaking, history, and politics. People often have profound experiences during role-plays such as these. The experience at the Guatemalan Literacy Conference was especially moving, because the group made immediate connections with their history and the moment they were living.

When I returned to Guatemala in July 2004 I met with teachers who had been in the workshop a year and a half earlier. Some had tried the activity just as we did it in our class, and were excited about the depth of critical thinking their students showed. Others reported that they were using role-plays in their classrooms, and were experimenting with having students write in role. Some had picked up on the concept of heroes/heroines and were encouraging their students to experience themselves as having the power and possibilities of heroism. They had taken their own, brief experience in a workshop and had transformed it, in their own ways, into ongoing praxis.

The workshop provided teachers with new pedagogy and strategies, and became a model of Friere's problem posing education that they applied in their classrooms. "In problem posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not so much as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Friere, 2003, p83).

The Conference participants related their early history to the later oppression in Guatemala, and to their current experience with the teachers' strike. They were living Education for Liberation. They were transforming their perceptions and taking action to change their world.

Current Reality:

Since the Teachers' Strike

The teachers' strike lasted several weeks, and ended without accomplishing much. Initially all striking teachers were fired by the government, and didn't know if they would be hired back. They were in fact hired back, and they did "win" a pay increase of one hundred quetzals a month, which is about twelve and a half dollars. They did not succeed in getting books or supplies for classrooms (Gonzales, 2004).

Now that there is a democratic process in Guatemala, the government changes every four years. The government that was in power during the strike was voted out later in 2003. The new Ministry of Education has little money, but they are now at least planning to put books in schools, and to create professional development for first grade teachers throughout Guatemala.

Rosa del Carmen Gonzales, who was active in the strike, reported to me in July 2004 that teachers are skeptical about the government, but hopeful that some change might come soon. However, they continue to work creatively for change, in classrooms with seventy to ninety children, and virtually no teaching supplies.

Conclusion

Teachers in Guatemala have a practical understanding of education for liberation that is difficult for us in the United States to comprehend. They have experienced being silenced many times, sometimes violently. They continue to struggle with realities we can only imagine. In many ways, every act of teaching in Guatemala is Education for Liberation.

When teachers go further, and take the risk to encourage students to think, to question, and to speak for themselves, they are honoring their cultural heritage. They are fighting for children and for education, without the most basic tools and support that we take for granted. We can learn a lot from them.

Note

All photographs are by Ellie Friedland.

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Photo Journal

School children in Guatemala wearing Tecun Uman headress. It is unusual that they have books.



A statue of Tecun Uman on Lake Atitlan.

Children walking in Guatemala City near a city dump.



The teacher of this classroom has attended the Literacy Conferences. The classroom is arranged in groups instead of rows of desks with two or three children at each desk.

On the steps of the cathedral in the city of Chichicastenango, Guatemala.



The volcano Agua in Antigua, Guatemala.



A kindergarten classroom. A few blocks and Leggos were the only materials available.