

A FREIRIAN DECONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN ALGERIA

UMA DESCONSTRUÇÃO FREIREANA DA EDUCAÇÃO ONLINE NA ARGÉLIA

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ABSTRACT: In his seminal and highly influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), the Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire refers to education as “becoming an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” Freire strongly criticizes what he calls “the banking model” of education, whether in schools colleges or universities. This model of pedagogy is prevalent and dominant in many countries of the world, and in Algeria—the country under focus in this paper. Nonetheless, with the many advanced technologies that are being integrated into educational institutions all over the world with the aim of building a more learner-centered pedagogy, Freire’s claims and views have recently been subject to many re-readings and revisions by contemporary educators. More particularly, on the recent attempts of the last couple of years to shift into online education so as to save the learning and teaching processes during the confinement imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic, much ink has been spilled regarding the sudden and forced appliance of MOODLE platform in Algeria. The latter, as will be argued throughout this paper, is nothing but a re-incarnation of Freire’s banking model. Therefore, a pivotal query in the present paper is to unveil how online education in Algeria applied since the outbreak of the Corona pandemic does correspond to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where the oppressed is always the learner.

Keywords: *Pedagogy of the oppressed*; Freire; Online education in Algeria, Banking model.

RESUMO: Em seu trabalho seminal e altamente influente *Pedagogia do oprimido* (1970), o estudioso brasileiro Paulo Freire refere-se à educação como “tornar-se um ato de depositar, no qual os alunos são os depositários e o professor é o depositante”. Freire critica fortemente o que chama de “modelo bancário” de educação, seja em escolas ou universidades. Este modelo de pedagogia é prevalente e dominante em muitos países do mundo e na Argélia – o país em foco neste artigo. No entanto, com as muitas tecnologias avançadas que estão sendo integradas em instituições

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educacionais em todo o mundo com o objetivo de construir uma pedagogia mais centrada no aluno, as reivindicações e visões de Freire foram recentemente sujeitas a muitas releituras e revisões por educadores contemporâneos. Mais particularmente, nas recentes tentativas dos últimos anos de mudar para a educação online para salvar os processos de aprendizagem e ensino durante o confinamento imposto pela pandemia de COVID 19, muita tinta foi derramada sobre a aplicação repentina e forçada do MOODLE, plataforma na Argélia. Este último, como será discutido ao longo deste artigo, nada mais é do que uma reencarnação do modelo bancário de Freire. Portanto, uma questão central no presente artigo é desvendar como a educação online na Argélia, aplicada desde o surto da pandemia de COVID-19, corresponde à *Pedagogia do oprimido*, de Freire, em que o oprimido é sempre o aprendiz.

Palavras-chave: Pedagogia do oprimido; Freire; Educação online na Argélia; Modelo bancário.

Modernizing education has long been the main quest of educators around the globe. Nowadays, and with the rapid development of new technologies together with the amalgamation of the virtual space with the real world, learning and teaching are now taking place in both spaces. As a matter of fact, online learning has become popular among students of colleges and universities all over the world. In fact, the many platforms that have emerged to represent a space where students can learn and extend their learning process in, saved the situation of many universities and colleges all over the world during the confinement that the Covid 19 pandemic caused over the past two years. Indeed, this virtualization and/or technologization of education, which was sudden in many countries, have not gone on unnoticeable for researchers in the field of educational studies, pedagogy and critical theory. Many questions are now being asked regarding the consequences and the aftermaths of merging an educational environment that is physical and real with another environment that is virtual and online.

In this article, I am posing one of the main questions that should be asked a propos the nature of online education through the lenses of critical theory, and from a perspective that is based on Paulo Freire's work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As an instructor who teaches both online and face to face, I was able to detect where online education converges with face-to-face education and how the former is different from this later. Indeed, what has

grabbed my attention the most is how my students, in my online classes, remain passive as much as they are in in-person classes. During two years of online teaching, I have not discerned a significant change in the way my students learn. I have not also perceived a considerable change in the way I teach my lectures to my students in terms of interaction, teacher-student rapport and communication with my students who often choose to be invisible by turning off their cameras.

As an Algerian university lecturer, the experience of teaching students online since 2017 was/is remarkable though. The departure point of my journey with online teaching was the search for a space where my students can build stronger knowledge, develop their critical thinking, increase their self-determination and widen up their horizons to become agents of change in their society. This quest was at the origin of the deep impact understanding the theory of “Critical Pedagogy” has had on me as an educator. Though often ignored in Algerian academia, critical pedagogy has gained much attention since the late 1970s thanks to the revolutionary works of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux. Often considered as a pedagogical approach that is in line with critical social theory, critical pedagogy must be thought of as both a way of understanding education as well as a way of highlighting the performative nature of agency as an act of participating in shaping the world in which we live. (BARROSO, 2013). It also refers to the quest of teaching from a stance that is particularly interested in building equity. In the words of Kincheloe, critical pedagogy is a “philosophy of education that has developed and applied concepts from critical theory” (KINCHELOE, 1997). “It views teaching as an inherently political act, reject the neutrality of knowledge, and insist that issues of social justice and democracy itself are not distinct from acts of teaching and learning” (GIROUX, 2007). So, critical pedagogy transforms teachers into agents of liberation and transforms the classroom into a democratic space. It is by challenging students to examine the power structures and status quo of their surroundings, in addition to establishing social justice inside the educational institution and in the classroom that critical pedagogy liberates the students.

From another perspective, Peters (2005) argues that Critical Pedagogy aims to bring change in the field of academia and pedagogy as a wider project of democracy for the growth of democratic values, norms and dynamic citizenry. It also helps to understand the relationship between knowledge, pedagogy and power. Supporting this stance, Knight and Pearl (2000) argue, in the same line of thought, that critical pedagogy has mingled democratic values such as inclusiveness, participatory decision-making process, equal rights, significant knowledge, nature of authority, and empowerment of the ignored, marginalized, and oppressed. However, academic values had dramatically changed into skills in the digital era, and in the current time, these institutions were shaped by the strong force of neoliberalism to assistance the labor market (MACFARLANE, 2019). In Algeria, that is considered by many political commentators and politicians as a pseudo-democratic country (VOLPI, 2006; VOLPI, 2020; NYADERA; AGWANDA, 2019), education and higher education are still public and therefore still politicized (GHOUATI, 2012). Although there is an unprecedented rise of private schools in Algeria, there is no single private university in this country. On the one hand, free education in Algeria can be valorized for giving equal chances to all categories and social classes to be educated. However, having no private university until now can also be read as a repression considering the fact that a public university is funded by the state and therefore is strictly controlled by the ministry of Higher Education. Giroux's description of public education is quite relevant in the Algerian context. Indeed, Teaching to the test and the corporatization of education become a way of 'taming' students and invoking modes of corporate governance in which public school teachers become deskilled and an increasing number of higher education faculty are reduced to part-time positions, constituting the new subaltern class of academic labor (GIROUX, 2010). Therefore, it seems that the transition from a traditional pedagogy of repression to pedagogy of freedom and hope (FREIRE, 2014) could be hard to achieve mainly by educators as long as the politics in this country does not allow for enough space for individual liberties.

On a different scale, in modern education that has become more and more technologized and hybrid, the notions of the pedagogy of the oppressed and critical pedagogy are to be reconsidered however and at many levels. While distance learning and/or online learning may promote more learners' freedom and learning flexibility, teachers must also be suspicious about the nature of online education and to what extent it could be detrimental vis-à-vis the intellectual independence of students. In both cases, this unprecedented rise of online learning in universities and colleges does present a challenge for educators who are willing to apply critical pedagogy. It is true that the latter was put forward by Paulo Freire in a pre-Internet era; yet technology integration, in an era that is digital par excellence, represents another dimension and parameter that should be reconsidered when referring to critical pedagogy and the pedagogy of the oppressed. For Freire (1988), educators have to think critically about the use of technology and to find new ways of seeking and creating knowledge with the aid of technology.

However, in many countries, and in Algeria in particular, the technologization of education that is supposed to increase the chances to establish equity and equality in educational institutions has failed to make teaching and learning more flexible, personalized and independent. In Algeria, for instance, the digital divide that exists between the various universities and institutes around the country is alarming. While the universities of big cities like the capital Algiers, Oran, Bejaia and other cities are often well-equipped with technological materials and internet network, other universities of southern cities like Ouargla, Ilizi and Temenrasset clearly lack the same opportunities mainly in terms of internet network and equipments. So, one of my main concerns in this article is to bring to light how the move to online education in Algeria was just another form of social injustice, and it is a re-embodiment of the pedagogy of the oppressed.

In fact, Paulo Freire rejected the educational and dominance indoctrination of student teaching that supports the *banking education practice*, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor and in which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat just as collectors

or cataloguers of the things they store. The current model of online education, which is again public, used in many universities in Algeria, and in the faculty of foreign languages at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis of Mostaganem in particular, through the introduction of Moodle as the only platform used for online teaching/learning is typically a banking model of education as Freire described above. During the two years of Covid19 pandemic unprecedented propagation, teachers were asked to upload their lectures on Moodle so as their students would download them afterwards. It is as if teachers deposited information on the Moodle platform for their students so that the latter receive it passively, memorize it and then repeat it again through an assignment or homework. From my own experience, and that of other colleagues in the same faculty and even in other faculties of foreign languages in other cities, imposing the use of the Moodle platform on both teachers and students was/is not a viable or feasible decision the ministry of higher education has taken during the spread of the pandemic. In reality, a high percentage of students did not log in the platform to download the lectures uploaded by their teachers. Most students have found this method ridiculous and as similar as searching the information on Google or other search engines (SARNOU, 2021).

This method could be considered as a misguided concept of higher education. Using Moodle with my students, who were not prepared and ready to use this platform, has in a given way destroyed their creativity, inquiry, transformation, and critical thinking. As an educator who tried her best to use this platform to increase the students' independent and personalized learning skills, I assert that it is just another type of *banking education practice*. The latter does projects an absolute ignorance onto others, and it simply maintains students' enslavement to their oppressors. It also stimulates "a partial view of reality" since it supports the dichotomy of automotive thought, and fosters passive dialogue and consciousness (FREIRE, 2014, p. 72-81)

Freire believes that more and more, the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression. (FREIRE, 2014) Thus, in imposing the use of Moodle as the only official

platform on which teaching and learning would have taken place during the confinement has served as a repressive tool to control teaching and learning in an online, virtual fluid environment.

In many European, American, Canadian and even Asian universities, there are various online platforms and e-tools such as the Blackboard, Zoom, Google Classroom and the Virtual classroom that were and are still used to transfer learning and teaching into the virtual space mainly during the pandemic. Nonetheless, in Algeria, Moodle was the only official platform imposed on teachers and students alike. It is in this act of imposing this pedagogical and educational tool that I consider online education in Algeria as another modern form of pedagogy of the oppressed. Despite of the ministry's claims to offer equal opportunities to all students around the country, considering the wide and significant digital divide in Algeria makes this attempt as repressive as previous attempts of imposing other decisions that always aim at restricting the teachers' and their students' liberty and freedom. Moreover, teachers are increasingly reduced to the status of technicians, removed from having any control over their classrooms or school governance structures. (Giroux 2010) Though many teachers in my department opted for other options and platforms – like Google classroom, Google Meet, EDMODO and Social media networks, particularly the Facebook –to teach their students through (and I am one of these teachers), most teachers had to upload their lectures regularly on the faculty's Moodle because this operation was under the control of the faculty's Dean who was also obliged to send monthly reports containing statistics about the number of lectures being uploaded.

What was stated above could stand as a strong argument that higher education policy in Algeria is oppressive and repressive whether we are referring to in-class teaching/learning or even online/distance education. At this point, I am evoking Freire's concept of readiness to learn. I assert, here, that most students in my department were not ready for the experience of using the Moodle during the confinement, and many of them could not even have access to the platform. Our passive students have become docile bodies indeed (FOUCAULT, 1977). Throughout the previous 12 years of basic education, they were trained to

be as texts on which to inscribe dominant ways of doing things. The Algerian school produces learners who are receptive, passive and manipulated. From a Foucauldian perspective, in Algerian schools, bodies (or learners) are made to respond to signals that are implicit and yet tightly organized through the networks of relations that maintain order. The effect of this arrangement, as Foucault (1977, p. 138) describes it, is “a ‘political anatomy’” and a “mechanics of power” that “defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines”. In this regard, even university teachers have become docile bodies since they abide by whatever the ministry decides for them, and the use of Moodle is one perfect example that describes the oppression that is symbolically exercised upon university teachers. This oppression is, in many ways, transmitted to the learner when teachers also impose their preferences and way of teaching on their students.

According to Freire, learning is impossible without taking into account the position of the learner. This means that teaching and learning are not objective activities; instead they should be achieved when the subjectivity of the learner and the teacher have been taken into account. This was not the case with the sudden integration of Moodle in many departments and faculties all over Algeria. Moreover, Freire (2014) strongly critiqued the “transmission model” of education that is a mode of classroom instruction in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student, and this is exactly what teachers, at least in faculties of foreign languages in Algeria, were asked to do via the Moodle platform. In a footnote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes, “it is not the media themselves which I criticize, but the way they are used.” (FREIRE, 2014, p. 140) Thus, I am not criticizing the use of Moodle in my department and faculty, but rather the way the ministry has imposed this platform on teachers and their students to be the only official tool to use. Also, there was no prior planning for a smooth and well-studied move into the online/distance learning when the percentage of internet users, according to the official Algeria press service station (2021), is around 59%. The latter does not mean that all regions of the

country can have uninterrupted and speedy access to internet network. That is to say, many students could not have access to internet because of either the low network speed or the internet coverage or even for a financial incapability to afford the relatively high price of internet connection in Algeria. In this case, one can assert that online learning through the Moodle platform in Algeria, which is supposed to offer equal opportunities to all learners/students, does not represent, to a great extent, pedagogy of equity, of hope and of freedom.

The other issue that I am highlighting in this article is the aspect of “teaching to the test” (GIROUX, 2004) that characterizes higher education in Algeria since its independence (1962). When introducing, or rather imposing, Moodle during the second half of 2020, the pursuit of both teachers and their students was not to cover the rest of the program but rather to finish assignments, tests and exams. This was indeed chaotic for many teachers and students because of either their inability to access the platform, or their reluctance to use it. In my department, it is true that all teachers had to use Moodle during the total confinement of 2020 to ‘satisfy’ the authorities; yet many had to use either the FACEBOOK or the email to get the students’ assignments and exam papers. Here, I should evoke a notion that has long described the many Algerian governments’ political decisions and policies throughout independent Algeria’s history: *la politique de bricolage* or a political ‘patch-up’; by this later, I simply mean that the ministry of higher education does often take decisions randomly to save a given situation momentarily. What happened in Algerian universities during the peak of Covid19 spread back in the second half of 2020 and the first half of 2021 showcases that the Algerian university is still dependent to political decisions and not to what experts and teachers and their students themselves want and seek.

In a nutshell, because of the extraordinary spread of the Corona virus, the last two years of 2020 and 2021 have considerably marked higher education in Algeria with the introduction of Moodle as an online platform that supports in-class education in many faculties and departments around the country. Nonetheless, the latter was/is nothing but an extension of the same banking model and as repressive as the traditional pedagogy that the Algerian

university is built upon. As argued previously, the shift into a more technology-assisted educational system has not changed the oppressive nature of pedagogy in our universities since the teacher still is the depositor of knowledge, and since the student is always considered as passive and submissive. Moreover, the ‘teaching to the test’ that is still relevant when using online platforms makes it hard to believe that our higher education is moving forward and toward democratizing the University.

Indeed, there are other university-related issues linked directly to the politics of Algeria as an emergent ‘democratic’ country that were dismissed in this article for a number of reasons. Those are factors that go back to an ethnic, a religious and a political specificity of Algeria. Nonetheless, as a university lecturer who combines both in-person or face-to-face teaching with online learning, I strongly recommend that critical pedagogy, as framed by Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, together with critical theory of technology as developed by Feenberg (2009) should be considered for an effective and successful *technologization* and modernization of higher education in Algeria. Also, and more importantly, university teachers must be given more freedom in using the pedagogical and technological tools that respond to their learners’ needs and preferences. Most teachers have used social media platforms like Facebook, for instance, instead of Moodle as they do recognize that their students are social media users. This freedom in managing the appropriate use of technological tools in in-person or online classrooms would certainly give more chances for teachers to play their role as partners, facilitators, guiders, and knowledge-builders –instead of knowledge holders –with their students. There must be a radical reconsideration, indeed, of the role modern students who are digital natives and social media dwellers could play inside the classroom and in online classes. If rethought wisely, pedagogy in our universities would transform into a one of hope (FREIRE, 1994) for students and a one of commitment (FREIRE, 2014) for teachers.

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