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A historical remembrance of Paulo Freire in South Africa: A tale of two activists

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This article is based on our two narratives through which we explore how Freirean thought had an impact on our respective praxis as academic activists in apartheid South Africa. We reflect specifically on the influence the work of Freire had on informing and advancing our respective struggles against apartheid education. This article therefore emanates from our process of thoughtful dialoguing and writing about how our understandings of Freire enabled us to contribute to the South African struggle for liberation in our respective spaces. We discuss, as a starting point, our early engagements with Freirean literature during our separate journeys. We then reflect through our latter discussion on our combined efforts to design, develop and implement a large-scale Freirean-infused national literacy campaign in post-apartheid South Africa. These efforts were informed by our understandings of Freirean thought.

The article aims to show the early and the continued relevance of Freire's work, during the struggle for liberation in South Africa in the last quarter of the twentieth century. It also shows how Freirean thought remained relevant in the early twenty-first century through, among other things, the implementation of adult literacy.

Keywords: *Freire, literacy, adult education, reflection-action and praxis, Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign*

Introduction

The apartheid period in South Africa from 1948 to 1994 was a period of institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination which denied black people political and economic rights and enforced segregation. This period gave rise to an intellectual culture of opposition in some South African universities within the broader anti-apartheid movement. Both authors of this article were at universities in the years before South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. They played an active role as education and literacy activists during a time when Freire's ideas had "an important influence in the Black Consciousness Movement, the trade union movement, and some of the organisations associated with the United Democratic Front . . . his ideas remain influential today, from trade unions to grassroots struggles" (Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2020).

This article presents our two intertwining narratives through which we reflect on how Freirean thought had an impact on our respective theory and praxis as academic activists. We share our historical narratives, and we interpret and reinterpret our accounts about how our academic–activist journeys and the development of our understandings of Freirean thought enabled us to, individually and jointly, contribute to the struggle for liberation in South Africa.

The narrative approach

Methodologically, our article utilises a reflective dialogue approach between two practitioners, an approach which Freire himself modelled as a dialogical interaction through which new knowledge is created. In our reflective dialogue, we make use of narratives[1], locating and reflecting on our individual experiences of Freire. We locate this in a historical context and capture the emotion of the moment. We used these reflections to interpret our present day use of Freire's work. This approach is modelled in the work of Torres (1997) and Shor (1993) who used reflective dialogue engaging Freire in their use of a reflective dialogue. There are numerous more recent studies adapting the use of reflective dialogue as a method

for community research such as those by McKay and Romm, (2014); Kazhikenova et al. (2021) and Tsang (2005). Moen (2005, p. 1) refers to the narrative approach as being both a “frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, [as well as] a research method, and a mode for representing the research study. Hence, the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method”.

We take, as a starting point for our discussion, our early separate engagements with Freirean literature and narrate the way in which Freire’s pedagogical influences in the areas of dialogical praxis and conscientisation informed our work.

Although our initial narratives of our early years were separated by the fact that our histories preceded the internet and the cell phone and by our geographical separation of some 600 km, our interpretations of Freire gave us a common theoretical basis that shaped our paradigms and provided a theoretical basis for collaboration on the successful implementation of the Mass Literacy Campaign.

The article therefore considers how our understandings of Freire informed and advanced our struggle against apartheid education[2] and influenced our subsequent work in the South African Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign, which we discuss in the latter part of this article. In this latter discussion, we share our combined narratives and consider the way in which the South African Mass Literacy Campaign encapsulates our understandings of Freire, providing a theoretical basis upon which we could draw and extend our praxis-oriented theory-practice conversations enabling the Freirean-infused implementation of the large-scale national literacy campaign in post-apartheid South Africa.

The combined narrative of Freire "living on" is pertinent for the special edition of the Australian Journal of Adult Learning in which we celebrate the life and work of Freire and his contribution to adult learning in South Africa.

The article begins in the next section with a reflective narrative from the first author, John Aitchison, and then proceeds to describe that of the second author, Veronica McKay. We present these two narratives in dialogue with each other. In the latter part of the article, our stories contribute to a single narrative of how, in the face of the demise of Freirean practice in South Africa, we were able to ensure that the South African Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign encapsulates Freirean thought.

John's story

In 1970, I was released after five years of total political and social restriction without trial by the apartheid regime. It was hard finding employment and finally I got a part-time job working as a printer for a church education project. One day the person in charge brought me a book which he thought I would be interested in. It was a rather dull grey book without a cover that had been sent to him by a friend in the United States of America. It was by Paulo Freire and was called *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972b). By the time I had devoured it, it had been banned by the South African government (as a politically subversive book) and mere possession of it could have resulted in a jail sentence. It was not an easy book to read; it was rather dense and assumed a high level of academic literacy. But despite that, the book was entrancing for it put together into a whole the various strands of thought that had been slowly weaving their way into the struggle against the apartheid environment.

The first strand was the Marx of the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* (1988) which had relatively recently become available in English and a few copies had been smuggled into the country. A friend from the underground Communist Party lent them to me. Here was a different and philosophically more speculative Marx with less of what Marx later described as "the economic shit" he had to write about. Here was a Marx who wrote about work as a life purpose in which human beings act on and transform material things and thereby also transform their identity as human beings. This process, however, under conditions of exploitation, leads to alienation and estrangement. Freire had taken this strand of thought and shown the vital conscientising role of education in this transformative process. It enabled people to understand that they were transforming human reality through their work (including their cultural work), but again, albeit that education could itself be turned against liberation in what he called "banking education" (Freire, 1972b, p. 80).

What was exciting about Freire was that he went beyond the Marxist analyses, highlighting that education was not merely a reflection of the economic base but that it was important, with educators having real agency. This view of the teacher was in line with Gramsci's translated works which in the 1980s and 1990s exercised a similar and more strident influence with his theorising the role of organic intellectuals.

The second strand was the European hermeneutic philosophy after the Second World War in which Freire was well versed, taking ideas from Gadamer, Benjamin and others. In essence, there was a need for methodical contemplation of our experience to reach understanding. Such thought was influential among some theological teachers in South Africa who applied it to the exegesis of scriptural texts and to the "text" of South African society. This strand is of crucial importance to the actual literacy teaching methods that Freire recommended.

Lastly, there was Frantz Fanon, the Algerian writer on colonialism, the struggle against it and its aftermath. All his books, and notably *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), were banned. They provide much of the backing for Freire's acute analysis of colonial political and psychological oppression and the pitfalls that hamper post-colonial reconstruction (vividly confirmed in what happened in many African states and South Africa itself after liberation). Fanon was a growing influence on the Black Consciousness Movement associated with Steve Biko and on the associated black theology movement.

It was a heady intellectual mix.

What happened next, which I had to observe somewhat from afar when I was re-restricted in 1971 for another five years, during which there was the gradual growing of Freire's influence. His influence increased on literacy educators, the Black Consciousness Movement and finally on the United Democratic Front which galvanised the final years of internal struggle against the apartheid regime (Luckett, Walters, & Kotze, 2017; Sefatsa, 2020).

I heard that an old friend, Angela Norman, who worked for the South African Council for Higher Education (SACHED), was running literacy classes and using and propagating this "socio-psychological" method. The SACHED, despite its official sounding name, was an alternative body originally set up to help black students expelled from universities because of their anti-apartheid activities and which ran distance education programmes. The "socio-psychological" method was not overtly called Freirean because his works were all banned but it drew on Freirean concepts. One of her co-workers was Anton Johnson who later worked with his partner, Agneta Lind, on world literacy initiatives. These ideas were taken up by the short-lived University Christian Movement (UCM)), another anti-apartheid body (also eventually banned), that circulated a summary of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and

set out to run a literacy project. The literacy project was compromised as a police spy had infiltrated and gained control of the distribution of the materials. What was crucial was that the UCM adopted Freirean conscientisation methods in its organisational practice. The situation in the late 1960s, early 1970s is well summed up by the well-known education activist, Neville Alexander (1990, p. 57):

In South Africa, the discovery of Freire's method and his concept of conscientisation came at just the right moment, so to speak. Helbig, basing himself on various South African sources, has shown how Freire's ideas were introduced to the University Christian Movement and through it to SASO in about 1970 by Rev. Collins. Although the government banned Freire's works, about 500 or more copies of Pedagogy of the Oppressed made the rounds at the historically black universities and were eagerly studied by the young activists of the Black Consciousness Movement. In Freire's works, they saw the mirror image of that which they rejected in the Bantu-Education system as well as the possible way out of the cul-de-sac. Informal courses in Freire's methods were conducted at these unintended 'breeding grounds of communism' (an accusation levelled by Verwoerd and his minions against the liberal English universities in the 'fifties'!) and soon some of the SASO students and others had begun conducting literacy and other conscientisation projects in urban and some rural townships.

In the mid-1970s, a number of small literacy organisations began to be set up, largely by young anti-apartheid white people, in urban areas that adopted a Freirean approach. One of the earliest and best known of these was Learn and Teach. By the early 1990s, there were over a hundred of these organisations, amalgamated in a National Literacy Cooperation and almost totally dependent on foreign donor money. Most of them used Freire's literacy methods quite directly. However, because many of them ran English language literacy groups, that did not work as well as it would have had they taught basic literacy in the South African indigenous languages so as to derive the benefits from learning to read in one's mother tongue. It also has to be noted that because most of these were small organisations the scale of activity was minute, and the impact was limited by the scale.

In 1985, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed and from the start education and literacy was one of their concerns.

Many of the new literacy organisations worked with COSATU. COSATU became a major influence in the early post-apartheid development of adult basic education (ABE) in policy, legislation and as a constitutional right. It wanted literacy, numeracy and worthwhile knowledge which at that time had leanings towards decolonising knowledge.

The final important influence of Freire was on the United Democratic Front (UDF), the broad coalition of nearly a thousand organisations, large and small, that took the internal struggle against apartheid to its final crescendo. The UDF used Freirean conscientisation with a vengeance to mobilise and educate. One of the powerful agents here was a set of three training manuals, originally developed in Kenya by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel (1984) and then published by the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, called Training for Transformation. It was a seemingly bizarre amalgam of T-Group theory, Freirean conscientisation and literacy teaching, very basic Marxist economics and papal encyclicals. It became the training Bible of a large number of UDF activists in the 1980s, particularly of those working outside the labour movement.

Veronica's story

At six years of age, I was with my family on a trip to a farming area in the north of Pretoria when I saw a white farmer chasing a black child who was about my age and who had allegedly stolen an orange from the farmer's crop. The child in tattered clothes screamed as the farmer beat him with a sjambok (leather whip). The screams remained with me as one of my earliest recollections that all was not well in South Africa.

This feeling of "unwellness" was reinforced, growing up in a community surrounded by the Johannesburg gold mines with thousands of migrant mineworkers. I was always puzzled as to why these big strong mature black men needed to ask me to read an address or a price tag or to check the change they received in a shop. I began to realise that the lack of literacy skills was a deeper symbol of the unwellness of South Africa but was too young to understand the political and historical roots.

Later in the mid-1970s, as a university student, I volunteered to teach literacy through a Catholic outreach programme for students. Although I did this without any theoretical understandings of adult education, I gained exposure to the importance of activist fellowship. My university life gave me my first exposure to Marxism, tear gas and the pain of a

police baton – all of this confirming my commitment to the struggle against apartheid and the imperativeness of literacy.

The students' protests against apartheid education (see endnote 2) in Soweto (Johannesburg, South Africa) in 1976 came as no surprise as schoolchildren ignited national student protests in a struggle against the state, calling for the abolition of apartheid education. The students expanded their focus from educational demands to broadly political ones while mooting the slogan "liberation before education". This ushered in a new political culture. It was recognised that no element of the apartheid regime could be dismantled by the students alone without mobilising workers and other members of the communities.

In the early 1980s, I joined the University of South Africa as a Junior Lecturer in Sociology. The university did not traditionally have a liberatory tradition and the management took a dim view of any activism. Later my friend and colleague Elizabeth Mokotong recruited me as a member of the Mamelodi Education Forum which was part of the newly established National Education Crises Committee. This Committee was established with the intention of moving beyond protests and boycotts towards a mass-based popular attempt to deal with the national crises in education. Although both organisations were banned and political activism was a dismissible and reportable offence in our university, we continued with our academic–activist engagement. We did this while teaching Marxism and Humanism and drawing on Freirean thought from Hope and Timmel's (1984) *Training for Transformation*, which, as John mentions above, was the holy grail for activists at the time. I was fascinated by Hope and Timmel's focus on participatory education as a catalyst for identifying the root causes of problems people faced in their lives.

The literacy network grew alongside the national struggle and subsequently within the emergence of the trade unions in 1985. Labour unions and workers played a key role in the struggle against apartheid. There was an expansion of the intellectual culture of opposition in South African universities. During this time, I received a copy of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from a friend who had returned from exile. I treasured the book which spent most of its time under my mattress knowing full well that being found with it could land me in trouble. The book was significant in enhancing my theoretical understandings of the role of education in

transformation. It garnered my interest in Freire's notion of praxis and reflection as an action and this informed the action-oriented methodology I applied in feminist consciousness-raising research (McKay, 1989).

I later honed this methodology in my doctoral study, *A sociological study of people's education in South Africa: A humanist evaluation* (McKay, 1990). The study focused on the period of "people's education for people's power", as a direct counter to apartheid education. It explored popular education movements in general and focused specifically on the transformative potential of people's education as a growing social movement in South Africa. The movement was not for merely deracialising education but rather opened possibilities for exploring a new vision of education with transformative epistemologies and pedagogies being developed in preparation for a democratic society. Freirean thought provided the bedrock of my study and subsequent writing (cf. McKay & Romm, 1992).

I was also fascinated by large-scale literacy campaigns and was fortunate in being able to visit Cuba and Venezuela in 2006 to observe the implementation of the *Yo, sí puedo* literacy campaign which was guided by Cuban advisors. I previously had the opportunity to meet literacy campaigners Rosa Maria Torres (who had led the Equadorial Literacy Campaign) and H. S. Bhola during their visit to South Africa at the dawn of our democracy in 1993 and remained inspired by their deep understanding of literacy as praxis.

Rosa Maria Torres' (1997) article *One million Freires* includes her dialogue with Freire and explains the range of interpretations of Freire as being analogous to the tower of Babel. She says the following:

Some refer to Paulo Freire's *method* (or *methodology*), others to Paulo Freire's theory, others to Paulo Freire's *pedagogy*, others to Paulo Freire's *philosophy* . . . others to Paulo Freire's *program*, others to Paulo Freire's system. [And, Torres says] I asked him once which of those denominations he felt most comfortable with. 'None of them', he answered. 'I didn't invent a method, or a theory, or a program, or a system, or a pedagogy, or a philosophy. It is people who put names to things.'

Be that as it may, my research and my teaching of adult education and Sociology of Education used these "names" drawing on Freire's methodology, philosophy, theory and pedagogy. Freire emphasised the

emancipatory components of praxis, the notion of generative themes as concrete representations and the importance of dialogue in learning – as opposed to banking education. Importantly, Freire's notion of praxis as reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed resonated with my earlier learning from the Hope and Timmel (1984) manual and with Giroux's (1988, p. 121) notion of the "teachers as transformative intellectuals". Giroux (1985, p. xix) gives a clear explanation of the way in which Freire's pedagogical model offers "theoretical signposts" that come to be decoded as they are applied in specific contexts. My own work[3] was undergirded by the continuous decoding of "signposts" which needed to be applied to my praxis. I draw on Freire's conception of reflection and action and use participatory methods which, for Freire, are derived from dialogue and self-reflection and are instrumental in bringing about emancipatory social transformation.

Critical reflection in Freire's (1978, p. 99) terms is an action.[4] He explains that there is no dichotomy by which praxis can be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. This is because critical reflection is the action of transforming ideas and the action of reflection on the options of consciously reflected alternatives. Freire's suggestion that "reflection as action" underlies much of his belief in the importance of reflection in social transformation. To ensure humanised praxis, Freire extends the notion of reflection, coupling reflection with what he calls an existential necessity – namely dialogue – which he indicates:

> *. . . is the encounter in which united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized. This dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person depositing ideas in another (Freire, 1985, p. 61).*

I consistently drew on Freire's conceptualisation of "reflection as action" in the emancipatory enterprise arguing that reflection is essential to emancipatory action as informed committed praxis accompanied by critical reflection. Freire's explanation of praxis as "the ongoing process of action and reflection of people upon their world in order to transform it" gave rise to my focus in my later work on the role of human agency in the enactment of emancipatory action which I discussed in McKay (2018, 2019).

With literacy being an important catalyst for transformation and in view of the large proportion of South Africans who lacked literacy skills, I was granted permission to set up the Institute for Adult Basic Education at my university, the University of South Africa, at the dawn of the South African democracy in 1993. This department had to provide the critical mass of adult educators necessary to reach what we then believed to be 15 million adults with little or no education. John was already working at the Centre for Adult education at the University of Natal in Pietermarizburg. The Centre was originally established in 1971 as an extension unit and was later, in 1984, renamed the Centre for Adult Education with a view to embracing adult education and adult basic education more broadly.

Our two stories converge

With the establishment of our respective departments for adult education, our two stories merge. In our separate spaces we developed adult educator programmes which focused on anti-banking education, drawing on Freire's recognition:

> *Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality (Freire, 1972b, p. 80).*

Over the years we graduated tens of thousands of adult education practitioners who were to engage with adult education in all its forms – agricultural extension officers, literacy teachers, health and community educators, and trade union shop stewards. All had been exposed to Freirean thought and to the commitment to transformative learning.

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 as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1972b, p. 83)

The decline of the Freirean impulse

Unfortunately, in the period of political transformation after the formal dismantling of apartheid in 1994, what was known as Freirean-influenced practice declined.

In adult education, and particularly in literacy and ABE, there was the predictable desire for a large-scale provision of state adult education to undo decades of exclusion and discrimination. There was therefore no significant resistance, even from the most alternative of educators, to the idea of building a system for state adult education. The discourse about ABE (and by the mid-1990s adult basic education *and training*) replaced the previous non-formal discourse of the 1980s in which the term literacy was dominant. The quest for a workable ABE system led to a formalisation of curriculum and didactics that eventually stagnated as the government starved it of the resources as South Africa increasingly became part of the neoliberal world order (Aitchison, 2003a, 2003b).

During the early days of democracy in South Africa, many of the literacy activists were incorporated into in the development of the adult education system regarding the development of policy and research, but they were soon ousted by the new bureaucrats who slavishly followed the neoliberal developments and devalued the importance of adult education as redress and the benefits of sound policy, research and education.

What remnants survived of Freirean advocates who were still active soon went into further decline. This included:

- The small radical literacy NGOs from the 1980s such as Learn and Teach (mentioned above in John's narrative) and later ones such as the REFLECT network which wilted as foreign donor funds dried up since aid was now given directly to the state department of the post-apartheid government.
- Small organisations and community-based organisations that used to deliver Freirean literacy programmes died with the introduction of very formalised ABE provision by state departments.

Within a short time, the Adult Education Departments in the state sector were starved and increasingly marginalised in budgetary terms, with only 0.83% of the national education budget being allocated to them (Aitchison et al., 2000). Luckett et al. (2017, p. 269) referred to this period as one of "tensions, contradictions and diminishing collective hope".

The universities which had spawned a number of vibrant adult education centres and institutes, notably the University of Natal, the University of the Western Cape, the University of Cape Town and latterly, the University of South Africa, were by the year 2000 largely

destroyed as neoliberal managerialists took control of the universities. These managerialists determined that adult education and literacy was neither profitable nor a suitable career path for the new academic elite. There is some irony that the University of Natal's Centre for Adult Education was closed soon after it set up a Paulo Freire Institute.

The near end of the story

But the story does not end here.

One of the earliest visions in the anti-apartheid struggle had been a mass literacy campaign. The Freedom Charter of 1955 had a clause that stated: "Adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan."

South Africa had never had a literacy campaign and all the laudable work of literacy NGOs and the night school system of the state had had a minuscule impact. But finally, from 1999 to 2006 there was a serious state intervention to start a literacy campaign. This was partly influenced by South Africa's commitment to the UNESCO Education for All goal of reducing illiteracy by 50% by 2015. The first attempt in 2000, the South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI), had been somewhat abortive because the government department of Adult Education mandated to implement the campaign failed to mobilise learners or to set the campaign in motion. On realising this, the Ministry entered into an agreement with the University of South Africa's Institute for Adult Basic Education under the leadership of the second author, Veronica McKay, and the university was able to successfully reach approximately 300,000 learners, a momentum which was drawn upon in the later Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign.

Then in 2006, a detailed plan was prepared by a Ministerial Committee to which both of us were appointed and which afforded us the opportunity to visit Cuba and Venezuela to observe the *Yo, sí puedo* literacy campaign. This campaign was guided by Cuban advisors, used impressive community mobilisation strategies and used core texts to enable its large-scale implementation.

Based on our detailed plan, the South African government implemented the Kha Ri Gude ("let us learn") Mass Literacy Campaign from 2008 to 2017 reaching over 4 million adults. We drew on Freire when developing the campaign strategy and the campaign materials. We

also applied Freire's dialogical approach to the construction of a participatory assessment model through which we were able to gauge learner achievements. It is not the purpose to describe this campaign here but what needs to be noted is that the design of the literacy classes – small groups, a primer, and other support materials – was thoroughly informed by Freirean conceptions of conscientisation, with the use of illustrations as codes based on current social realities and the application of learning to everyday realities. This practice of literacy, as Freire (1972a, p. 27) explains, heightens awareness of how the socio-cultural reality shapes our lives and how in turn we have the agency and the capacity to transform it.

Freire lives

The Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign drew heavily on Freirean principles. Care was taken when preparing the materials to include what Freire refers to as generative themes and codes or problem-posing materials. These materials stimulated discussion in the learning groups, with each lesson starting with a carefully designed picture presenting a concrete experience of the theme to stimulate discussion (McKay, 2020). The pictorial codes based on generative themes were intended to raise questions and to stimulate the learners to think of different possibilities, or, as Freire (2000, p. 52) indicates, to stimulate problem-posing and problem-solving dialogue. The illustrations and generative words included in the learner materials were used to initiate discussions related to problems emanating from the apartheid era. These discussions were about, for example, the lack of education, forced removals, household food security, health and human rights.

We focused on using literacy, the generative themes, codes and words as a driver for conscientisation and for what UNESCO (2006, p. 138) calls more "adult-specific outcomes" that adult literacy programmes can produce. These outcomes include political awareness, empowerment, critical reflection and community action and enhance the political, cultural, social and economic benefits that literacy might offer.

Our exposure to other campaigns, including the *Yo Sí Puedo* campaign, alerted us to the need to develop a set of core national materials that could be used to scale and which were versioned to cater for the 11 official South African mother tongue languages (all of which

were embossed in Braille) and regionalised or customised insofar as languages were regional. In order to ensure that the materials were not only technical, we also drew on Freire's elucidation of learning as problem-posing and attempted to build in a process of reflection or action and an emancipatory praxis.

Moreover, commitment to engaged research is expressed by Freire (1978, p. 78) as highlighting the methodological interrelationship between theory and praxis and the use of generative themes. As he states: "the more active an attitude men and women take regarding the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality".

After having to hide our copies of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we now had a real opportunity of establishing a large-scale campaign that was grounded on Freire and backed by the political will to make it possible.

The campaign offered many possibilities for social change and for empowering a critical mass. All of the earlier South African projects that attempted to use Freirean approaches were small in scale with limited impact. Our campaign model was scalable and was delivered nationally by 40,000 volunteer educators who mobilised about 600,000 learners each year. It was akin to what Bhola (1984) termed a "crusade" with its annual roll-out of about 600,000 learners and approximately 40,000 small literacy clusters (of 18 participants), each with a volunteer educator who was grouped under a supervisor or support person despite the name.

The large-scale delivery gained a momentum of its own. Boughton (2013) highlights the vibrancy of campaigns as opposed to small-scale literacy programmes for scaling up literacy. This view is based on the belief that literacy campaigns contribute to a social impact because they mobilise communities into reflection and action. As Boughton (2013) points out, in these communities there is a need for change and broad-based, large-scale programmes enable this. He contends that literacy campaigns work to produce change simultaneously at the level of the individual and their social context. He and others liken mass literacy campaigns to Freire's (2006) *Pedagogy of Hope* and the social organisation of learning as elaborated on by Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (cf. Botman, 2014; Boughton, 2016; McKay, 1997, 2019, 2020; McLaren & Leonard, 1993; Shor, 1993). These authors highlight

the way in which critical pedagogy engenders a critical consciousness when groups of learners problematise generative themes from daily life.

It was for this reason that the materials developed for the Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign took a thematic approach drawing on the local, national and international millennium and sustainable development goals. Through the materials, we aimed to make explicit links between literacy and the MDG/SDG-inspired developmental objectives (highlighting, for example, HIV and AIDS, gender, democracy, human rights and environmental awareness). We immersed the teaching of reading, writing and numeracy in the development-related themes to accentuate the social, economic and developmental possibilities afforded by literacy acquisition. The pre-developed literacy materials were supplemented with educator notes and a volunteer supervisor or mentor provided support at the non-formal adult learning sites. In addition, educators were required to supplement these materials by sourcing relevant authentic texts from the life worlds of the learners.

We made a deliberate attempt to mainstream social justice issues across the curriculum to empower learners to think about related matters and to make applications in their everyday lives. Freire points to the structural conditions which form "people's thematic universe" and argues that the generative themes initiate the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom stimulating people's awareness and going beyond their existential experience.

Akter et al. (2017, p. 271) describe "empowerment" as being complex and multidimensional and varying across disciplinary traditions and contexts, pointing out that most definitions focus on gaining control over decisions and resources that determine one's quality of life or "translating choices into desired actions and outcomes". In this sense, we related praxis to agency and the ability to make purposeful choices. Hanemann and McKay (2015, p. 5) following Freire, stress that when assessing the impact of literacy acquisition there is a need to also assess the extent to which literacy programmes "help shape the trajectories of lives".

Conclusion

The success of the South African Kha Ri Gude Campaign was recognised by it being awarded the UNESCO Confucius Literacy Award for the Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign in 2016. This was international

confirmation that the influence of Freirean theory and practice was still relevant in the twenty-first century.

Through applying Freire's notions of praxis, we believe we were able to generate agency among the learners in the literacy campaign. Hanemann's research (2011, p. 7) suggests that agency was supported through the Kha Ri Gude Campaign's participatory system of learning and teaching, monitoring and strategic planning which allows for exchange and mutual learning and also for continuous improvement of the Campaign structure and practices. The structured reflection processes built into the Campaign practices improved the quality of the teaching and learning and empowered both the learners and the educators.

The sense of agency among the educators was expressed throughout their "communities of practice" as "communities of reflection". In addition to empowering the learners, the educators reported that the experience gave meaning to their own lives initiating the dialogue of education as the practice of freedom as it did for us as professors and managers who continued to decode the signposts of the Freirean approach. For us, it was not only using Freire in the empowerment of others but also believing that Freire's legacy lives through our own empowerment story.

We conclude our reflection by asserting that Paulo Freire leaves us a legacy which is far more superior, more significant and much more enduring than any literacy method or educational theory.

Indeed, Freire lives on.

[1] We recognise that the narratives of two activists engaged in a dialogue have the limitations of being limited to only our two voices; however, we merely use our narratives as a means to locate our experience and engagement with the work of Freire in various contexts.

[2] Apartheid education refers to education based on the apartheid state's Bantu Education Act of 1953 which was intended to teach African learners to be "hewers of wood and drawers of water" regardless of an individual's abilities and aspirations. The then Prime Minister Verwoerd, when explaining the introduction of the 1953 Act, pointed out that "natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans is not for them. . . . [that] There is no place for them in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour" (McKay, 1990, p. 17; Rose and Tunmer, 1975, p. 266). Moreover, since education for Africans was not universally offered, the absence of schooling and quality schooling as well as associated poverty resulted in high illiteracy rates in South Africa.

[3] Over the years my work contexts changed from training literacy educators to extension workers and included working with community development workers, youth development workers, literacy campaign operatives and teachers for the formal sector. Each context required the decoding and application of signposts.

[4] During an impact evaluation of the literacy campaign in 2017, the review found that the literacy learners not only felt more confident but that they also challenged patriarchy in their communities. They participated in and challenged decision-making in their communities and the wider socio-political environment.

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John Aitchison, when a student at the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg was restricted without trial for ten years by the apartheid regime. In 1981 he joined the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg where for many years he headed the Centre for Adult Education. Later he was head the School of Education there. He has played a significant role in national adult education policy development as well as in the development of schoolteacher upgrading programs. He has also been active in a number of human rights and rural development organisations such as the Association for Rural Advancement (of which he was Director for a time).

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