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Freire's Dream or Foucault's Nightmare?: Teacher-Student Relations on an International Computer Network

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Abstract

There is much research and discussion on the effects of computer-mediated communication on classroom power structures. Many language teachers and researchers have reported evidence of egalitarianism in electronic communication networks. Others have discussed how networked communication can intensify the controlling eye of a Foucauldian electronic panopticon. Exactly what is responsible for educational networks turning into Freirian spaces of liberation or Foucauldian means of social control has yet to be determined. In an effort to better understand how electronic networks serve to empower and/or discipline students, two teacher-researchers analyzed the discourse on a group of international e-mail discussions lists created for learners of English, examining in particular how students and teachers responded to conflicts that arose on the lists. The results of this analysis indicate that there are many variables in computer-mediated communication which make use of this communicative space difficult. It is highly improbable that any model for online communication can be developed which is completely safe from disruption. However, such disruptions can result in a deeper understanding by both teachers and learners of the nature of education, communication, and power. The authors recommend that educators interested in Internet-based education tap into these learning resources.

Freire's Dream or Foucault's Nightmare?: Teacher-Student Relations on an International Computer Network

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teachers cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers.....They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow."

Paolo Freire (1994:61)

"At the other extreme, with panopticism, is the discipline-mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come."

Michel Foucault (1979:209)

Does electronic computer networking in the classroom help facilitate the development of new teacher-student roles such as called for by Freire, or does it result in more effective coercion as described by Foucault? To answer this question, this paper explores the theories of these two writers, looks at the relationship of these theories to issues of computer-mediated communication in education, and then focuses in on concrete examples from an 18-month international Internet project involving students and teachers from around the world.

Freire's Pedagogy for Liberation

Born in 1921 in Recife, the center an extreme situation of poverty and underdevelopment, Brazilian educator Paolo Freire has devoted his life to developing and implementing a pedagogy of transformation and liberation.

Freire (1994) sharply criticized the "banking concept" (1994:53) of education, in which an all-knowing teacher deposits knowledge into passive students. In the banking model, students are restricted to receiving, filing, and storing the information deposited by the teacher, and in the end it is "the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity" (1994:53).

Freire contrasts this concept with a liberatory pedagogy based on dialogue and problem-solving in which, "teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and therefore by coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge." (1994:51)

The following are essential elements of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed:

- Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information (1994:60).
- This cognition comes about through dialogue between co-investigators, with teachers and students jointly responsible for a process in which all grow (1994:61).
- The content of education is based on the generative themes important in students' own lives (1994:90).
- These themes are best dealt with through a problem-solving approach which seeks a link between themes, recognizes their historical-cultural context (1994:89), and integrates both reflection and action (1994:107).

As a result of this process, students achieve a *conscientização*--a fuller perception of social, political, and economic contradictions which enables them to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (1994:17).

Foucault's Relations of Power

In contrast to Freire's visions of a liberatory future, French philosopher Michel Foucault offers a sober analysis of a conflictive past. In works such as Madness and Civilization (1965), The Birth of the Clinic (1973), and Discipline and Punish (1979), Foucault analyzes the history of various institutions to understand the development of underlying power relationships in human society. Whereas Freire stressed the potential for human beings to become Subjects who free themselves from unequal power relations through a liberatory pedagogy, Foucault understands subjectification as part of a long historical process of social formation where the subject has little, if any, self-determinate agency.

The most subtle and therefore "diabolical" (1977:156) architecture of power that forms the human subject for Foucault is "panopticism" (1979:195) a theory of social control and formation that Foucault derives from Jeremy Bentham's 19th century panopticon. The panopticon consisted of a circular building with a guard tower in the middle and the prisoners' cells arranged around the periphery. The design allowed the guards to continually observe the prisoners without being seen. Since the prisoner is never sure when he is being observed, he becomes his own guardian. "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power...; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 1979, p.202-203). Even the guards were caught in the same disciplinary web, since the panopticon included a system for observing and controlling the controllers (Rabinow 1984).

Foucault claimed that a similar process took place in the educational system, with school having become "a sort of apparatus of uninterrupted examination" (1979:186), thus helping create a panoptic system of "surveillance and observation, security and knowledge, individualization and totalization, isolation and transparency..." (1979:249).

Computer Networking: Liberation or Discipline?

What then is the relationship of these theories to computer networking in education? Since computer networking involves new patterns of communication and interaction, many believe it can upset traditional

power relations, resulting either in a more liberatory education or alternately in more powerful methods of discipline and control.

Most educators writing about this issue take the optimistic view. Kern (1995) and Sullivan (1993) provide quantitative evidence that students participate more frequently in computer-mediated communications as compared to traditional oral classroom discussions which tend to be dominated by teachers. Numerous composition and language teachers claim that this difference is not just quantitative, but qualitative with the locus of control in electronic discussion shifting to the students (Barson, Frommer, & Schwartz 1993; Batson 1988; Beauvois 1992; Chun 1994; Cummins 1991; DiMatteo 1990; DiMatteo 1991; Faigley 1990; Kelm 1992) "I no longer have hegemony over classroom language; no longer select who is to speak, what questions are to be answered, what style is to be used" (DiMatteo 1990).

With teachers no longer dominating discourse, students are more free to select their own topics and themes (Kelm 1996; Tella 1992) Easy transfer of documents and one-to-many communication facilitate collaborative thinking and writing (Barker and Kemp 1990; Flores 1990). The written mode of communication helps students to better analyze the ideas being expressed (DiMatteo 1990; DiMatteo 1991; Kroonenberg 1994/1995). Collaboration with students around the world combined with autonomous access to information facilitates a problem-solving approach to learning (Barson and Debski 1996; Barson, et al. 1993; Vilmi 1995).

As a result of all this, computer networking "can support and enhance a project of possibility... by withdrawing 'learning' from the pre-scripted texts controlled by the dominant group in society... Within this type of network or 'construction zone', the generation of meaning is directly and actively under the control of the learners; and all participants, both teachers and students, are, by definition, learners" (Cummins and Sayers 1990).

In contrast to these glowing views, other educators warn of the darker side of computer networking in the schools. Social inequalities can be magnified if students with dominant personality traits (Hiltz 1990) or more computer knowledge (Eldred 1991) take advantage of the network's power to control discussions. The relative anonymity of computer-mediated communication can result in "a set of asocial monologues", (Moran 1991:51) or hostile attacks (Janangelo 1991; Sproull and Kiesler 1986).

Janangelo (Janangelo 1991) and Hawisher and Selfe (1991) both employ the panopticon metaphor to illustrate how networks can actually increase teachers' power over students. Janangelo, in an article entitled "Technopower and Technopression" (1991), gives examples of how teachers have used computer networks to more carefully police the behavior of students, for example, by checking at what times they log on and off. Hawisher and Selfe discuss the power relations involved when teachers take samples from network discussion to use as positive or negative examples. "[The teachers] are employing electronic conferences to discipline, to shape the conversations and academic discourse of the students... In addition, many students who know a teacher is observing their conversation will self-discipline themselves and their prose in ways they consider socially and educationally appropriate" (1991:63).

There are certainly positive, as well as potentially negative, aspects of teachers helping shape the academic discourse of their students, and of students gaining the self-discipline to appropriately manage their own discourse. Nevertheless, even this type of benign control could be considered at odds with Freire's view of a problem-solving community of "teacher-student with student-teachers" (Freire 1994:61). engaged in a process of dialogue and co-investigation.

The Learner Lists

To further shed light on the relationship between students and teachers in computer networking projects, we will look at several examples from the international "Learner Lists". The Learner List project was started in February 1994 to give college and university students around the world an opportunity for intercultural exchange and English language practice.

The project involves nine international e-mail discussion lists: seven devoted to specific topics (such as sports, movies, and music) and two general discussion lists based on English-language level (TALK-L for beginning students of English and CONVERSE-L for advanced students and native speakers of English).

Altogether more than 3,000 students and 100 teachers from 35 countries participated in the learner lists during the first 18 months of their existence. The students were approximately equally divided between students of English as a Second Language (ESL) in English-speaking countries (principally the U.S. and Australia) and students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) from other countries around the world (mostly in Europe and Asia). A small number of native-English-speaking American students also participated.

Participation varied greatly, with many of the subscribed students only "lurking" (reading messages but not posting), some students posting occasionally, and a small percentage of the students posting frequently. Some of the students participated in the lists as part of official course assignments (either during class time in a computer lab or privately for homework); many others participated voluntarily after being informed of the lists by their English teachers.

The role of the teachers also varied quite a bit. Four of the participating teachers had started the project and were the list owners; they were ultimately responsible for the project's management and development. At any one time another 15-20 teachers were involved as volunteer monitors of the individual lists (usually two per list), whose job was to help students with any procedural questions (e.g., how to subscribe or unsubscribe), keep discussion going if it slowed down, and "watch out for inappropriate discussion...[such as] flaming inappropriate obscenity, or other things that could make an uncomfortable atmosphere" (posting on INSTRUCTOR-L by a list owner, July 15, 1995). Not surprisingly, this last category proved the most complex, as will be seen later in this paper.

The rest of the participating teachers communicated with each other, and with the monitors and owners, on a special list for teacher discussion, INSTRUCTOR-L. In addition, a number of the teachers joined the student discussions by sometimes posting messages on the learner lists; other teachers preferred to abstain.

Of the nine learner lists, the two general ones, TALK-L and CONVERSE-L, were the most active, with several hundred subscribers and 50-80 messages per week on each. CONVERSE-L proved to be particularly lively, and at times provocative, with discussions ranging across a broad range of social and political issues, including the war in Bosnia, U.S. policy toward Cuba, attitudes toward homosexuality, and female circumcision. Not all topics were so serious, however; personal introductions, chatting, joking, and banter also were frequent on CONVERSE-L as well as the other lists.

Teacher-Student Relations

In such a lengthy and complex project such as this, it is certainly difficult to make an overall characterization of the relations between teachers and students. Students were overwhelmingly responsible for choosing topics, and they often chose themes that were very immediate to the real issues and problems they were grappling with in their lives, from understanding male-female relations, to coping with life as an immigrant, to analyzing the current political situation. These discussions often took on an exciting international flavor, with students from several countries contributing different perspectives based on their own experiences. For example, in discussing U.S. policy toward Cuba, students from Hungary focused on their negative experiences with the previous Communist government in their own country, where students from Mexico emphasized instead the problems Latin American countries had with decades of U.S. domination.

Throughout these discussions, teacher participation was generally seamless and facilitative, with teachers jumping in as they felt appropriate to add additional perspectives, help answer questions, or raise new ways of looking at things. A number of teachers and students formed very tight bonds, with some of the more advanced students corresponding regularly in private with teachers to further discuss issues.

The exact role that teachers would play, though, was controversial, right from the beginning, with a number of the teachers arguing that any teacher participation on learner lists would be inappropriate and would rob students of their own opportunity to take initiative.

Other teachers felt that some teacher direction was essential. They argued that to invite students into a project without any teacher direction would be like inviting students into a classroom without any teacher direction--but even worse, since at least students in a classroom are all in one place and are somewhat familiar with the

norms of behavior and genre of communication, yet students in this e-mail project were scattered around the world and were quite unfamiliar with the nature of communication on this new medium.

A somewhat lengthy debate occurred about this issue on the teachers' discussion list, INSTRUCTOR-L. The issue was not decided definitely until the first international survey of learner list participants was completed. In that survey, the participants indicated overwhelming support for continued participation of teachers on the lists, and it was therefore decided that teachers could continue to participate as long as they didn't dominate discussion.

Authority and Authoritarianism

Freire himself criticized the view that a democratic education meant that teachers should abdicate leadership and authority:

I have never said that the educator is the same as the pupil. Quite the contrary, I have always said that whoever says that they are equal is being demagogic and false. The educator is different from the pupil. But this difference...must not be antagonistic. The difference becomes antagonistic when the authority of the educator, different from the freedom of the pupil, is transformed into authoritarianism (Freire 1985:76).

Elsewhere, Freire refers to this approach as "a radically democratic position", because it "demands directivity and freedom at the same time, with no authoritarianism from the teacher and no licentious freedom from the pupils" (Gadotti 1994:57).

However, as Freire hints at above, proper exercise of authority can be transformed into authoritarianism. And unfortunately, the nature and structure of the Learner List project was such that it made this an ever-present possibility and danger.

The Learner Lists were a completely open project, with students from dozens of countries around the world signing as they pleased. Many of the students came on with their classes, but others signed up as individuals with no organizational constraints. Included in the project were some students who were extremely nationalistic, others who were hatefully homophobic, and others who were quite prone to make offensive remarks to women. At times it thus became necessary for teachers to exercise a fair amount of authority to help make sure that the lists remained a comfortable atmosphere for the majority of participants, who just wanted a friendly place to discuss ideas, make new friends, and practice their English.

Another factor was that the lists were sponsored by a university and thus had to conform to some levels of academic discourse and purpose. This same university had shut down previous lists in the past when they had become filled with obscene language, sexual innuendo, and flaming.

The role of teachers then was thus not only to help contribute ideas and move the discussion along, it was also a disciplinary role of keeping discussions under control so that the lists could continue to operate in a safe and effective manner. This included sending warning to students who broke the Learner List rules (e.g., by using obscene language or flaming) or expelling students who repeatedly misbehaved.

The very structure that emerged to fulfill this role bore eerie resemblance to the panopticon. At the bottom level were the students. At the next level were all the teachers, who could observe discussions as they wished, jump in and speak with authority, or comment behind students' backs on the teachers' list, INSTRUCTOR-L. At the next level up were the teacher monitors for the individual lists, who had specific authority to help control discourse on those lists. One level up were the four co-owners, who controlled the entire project. And at the next level was the sponsoring university, whose policies and reputation were always present in the background. Indeed, at many times, when monitors or owners took action to discipline students, it was often unclear whether they did so based on their own real opinions of what was right or wrong, or based on the need to look responsible in the eyes of those above. Just as Foucault (1979) describes, everyone was caught up in the disciplinary gaze of the institution.

At another, more subtle level, was the rhetorical flare and ability of teachers. Even if teachers were not trying to discipline students, but were only attempting to contribute their opinions, there was always the danger that their superior knowledge of English rhetoric, together with their expert status as native speakers and as

teachers, could be used to drown out the voices of students. This of course occurs in the classroom all the time, yet there are similarities and differences between how this occurs in a classroom and on an electronic discussion forum. In teacher-student dialogue, e-mail appears to lend advantage to students, who can speak up freely without asking anyone's permission and more easily choose their own topics. Yet since e-mail is a written form of communication, it can also lend more power and control to those who have mastered that rhetorical form, which will almost always be teachers.

Of course this is not always the case. There have been a small handful of students on the lists with brilliant rhetorical skills, and a few of these students have emerged as true list leaders, helping lead and shape discussions and manage communication and social dynamics. In this case though, these few exceptions have served to reinforce the rule that students and teachers are on quite unequal terms in expressing arguments.

Heated Discussions

The complex dynamics between teachers and students are well-illustrated by two rather heated discussions which took place on the lists, one related to capital punishment and one related to World War II.

The first discussion was initiated when a teacher ("Joy") raised a question about the death penalty. She briefly explained the legal status and uses of the death penalty in the United States, indicated her personal opposition, and asked students for their opinions.

A student ("Paul") wrote back indicating that when he was a teenager he was very afraid of dying, and he was at that time opposed to the death penalty because it reminded him of his own mortality. Paul wrote that when he became an adult, he started to deal with his own mortality better and thus was no longer opposed to the death penalty.

Joy wrote back

In reply to the message written by Paul, I want to respond by letting everyone on the group know that I have not been a teenager for many years, and that my reasons for disagreeing with the death penalty have nothing to do with my own fear of death. I simply disagree with a system that has been proven to be inconsistent, institutionally racist, inefficient, costly, not to mention that there is no proof that it deters anyone from committing murder . I have read up on this subject, and actually have changed my stance from once agreeing with this form of punishment. It is not the panacea many supporters wish to think it is. Though this of course is just my humble opinion.
Sincerely yours, Joy Harris
Midtown University"

Paul became quite upset and wrote back a sharp reply questioning who Joy was and by what authority she was making her statements.

....I feel that my position on this subject is not important anymore; it's just an opinion of an ESL student that was given an opportunity to improve his English by using TALK-L....Are you an ESL student? If so, what country are you from? I hope you are not an ESL teacher....It would take a doctoral thesis on decadent America in the former Soviet Union to prove what you're assuming 'has been proven'...I am one of the millions (political refugees), who found his second home in America, and sometimes I become irritated, when critics use stereotypes, sometimes even without understanding the meaning of what they say....Joy, please excuse my English. I know it's terrible--probably I will never be able to express myself in such a nice way as you. Your English is fantastic, I admire it. If I may, once suggestion: when it comes to stating opinions on matters of importance, like the death penalty for instance, first think--then write; considering your writing ability, the results should be amazing. Though, this of course is just my humble opinion
The Most Sincerely Yours, Paul,
Western University

Paul's repetitive mocking of Joy's language--"just my humble opinion", "Most Sincerely Yours"--plus his pointed questions about who Joy was makes it clear that it was not just Joy's political point that he was responding to. Rather it was the way she skillfully exploited academic discourse to place herself--unfairly, in Paul's view--on a superior rhetorical level. Here Paul was making one of his first attempts to seriously express himself in the English language on what had been advertised as a discussion list for learners of English, and he was challenged by a teacher who used sophisticated lexical, rhetorical, and syntactical devices ("in reply", "has been proven", "the panacea many supporters wish to think it is") and then listed her university in her salutation.

Joy and Paul went on to patch up their differences, but in the meantime another teacher wrote to Paul privately, criticizing his tone and his poor public treatment of Joy. This reinforced Paul's view that he was being ganged up on by teachers. He protested that he felt some teachers were destroying the purpose of the list, by using the lists to promote their views rather than to promote English teaching. Amidst much discussion among the teachers, the second teacher publicly admitted that he had been out of line to jump in so strongly. The teachers collectively reaffirmed that they should participate on the lists primarily to assist students.

The teachers thus took seriously Paul's concerns that they were playing too strong a role on the lists, and they tried to adjust their behavior by decreasing teacher participation to avoid future conflicts. However, it is possible that this policy decision reinforced the problem.

The panoptic structure of the lists was playing a role in this conflict from the very start. Paul was angry with the discourse used by Joy which put her in a higher position, a sort of tower. His anger was then amplified by the intervention of another teacher, who had, by sending his private message to Paul, isolated him and punished him with his reprimand. By retreating and becoming silent observers, did the teachers trap themselves in the tower of the panopticon, making it more difficult for them to "enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary" (Freire 1993:31)?

But this leads us back to the original puzzle: how, given the obvious difference linguistic power between a native speaking teacher and a non-native speaking student, does a teacher achieve the goal of leaving the tower?

Nanjing Massacre

A second crisis occurred when a Japanese student posted a short letter asking what people thought about Japanese culture. A Chinese student responded with an extremely lengthy message (including a reposting of a long article) which recounted in great detail the crimes of Japanese soldiers during the Nanjing massacre and attacking all present-day Japanese for their failure to accept responsibility. Though the list owners were concerned about the tone of the response, they decided not to intervene.

What then ensued was probably the most fascinating discussion in the history of the learner list project. Students from China, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Korea, Hungary, Poland, and many other countries actively debated issues such as what is the responsibility of the individual soldier in war?; what is the responsibility of citizens today to account for what their nation has done in the past?; and what is the relationship of evil behavior to human nature or to particular political-economic systems? A better example of students coming to grips with real-world issues to suggest solutions for actual problems (e.g., the current relationship between Japan and Asian countries) could hardly be found.

Yet, at some point, this profoundly successful discussion started to turn into its opposite. These students weren't just talking about the real world, but rather they *were* the real world: they were debating serious issues of international relations based on their own personal experiences with war and oppression. Recent U.S. immigrants from Eastern Europe defended the Japanese and critiqued Chinese writers for overreacting and falling for communist propaganda. Chinese writers' responses were heated with emotion and tended to repeat the same themes over and over, creating an the impression that some were members of nationalist organizations who had joined the list principally to propagate their views. A handful of Chinese students bombarded the list with dozens of messages a day--sometimes 10 or more by a single writer--spilling out racist messages about the Japanese being inherently evil. These messages naturally brought equally vivid responses. One Northern European violently objected with accusations that such attitudes were the same that

allowed Hitler to destroy so many Jews in World War II. (Jewish students on the list had already used their families' experiences in World War II and their current attitudes towards Germans as arguments for forgiveness and healing between the Japanese and the Chinese.) When the majority of students were ready to seek closure and move on to another discussion, they were unable to do so because of the large volume of mail that continued on the topic.

This caused a crisis not only for the discussion, but for the very operation of the list, because on at least one occasion the large number of lengthy messages caused the computer system to crash and all the lists were shut down for several days.

Throughout this crisis, all levels of the control systems were in full operation, with monitors consulting with each other and with students, teachers discussing the issue and how to handle it on INSTRUCTOR-L, and the owners debating back and forth when to intervene and how.

The owners and monitors were at a loss though to find a way to encourage positive discussion without allowing the entire system to be shut down (either by a computer system that couldn't handle the volume, or a university which would refuse to sponsor a list filled with racist messages, or a clientele of classroom teachers who would pull out their students rather than have them subjected to 70+ messages a day.) The owners were also hampered by a primitive software system which didn't allow individual offenders to be easily excluded; anyone removed from the list could simply re-subscribe a moment later, and even those who were not subscribed could post messages if they chose.

In the end, the owners decided to implement new policies which set strict limits on how often students could post (2 messages per person per day) on the length of postings (two screenfuls). In order to bring the situation under control as quickly as possible, the new policies were implemented in a strict and somewhat heavy-handed way, impacting many students whose only crime had been enthusiastic participation in the discussions. As a result, one student attempted to organize a boycott of the lists and another student decided to start his own list and invite people to join him.

What this series of events illustrates is an ironic tension between Foucauldian workings of power and Freirian liberation. On the one hand, the Foucauldian panopticon model applies: the prison guards (teachers and students) monitored the behavior of the prisoners (students) and attempted to keep it under control. But actually, the example illustrates the weakness of the panopticon metaphor, at least in terms of this example. The nature of the Internet, and of how these particular lists were set up, created a situation where disciplinary monitoring was not achievable. Students could write whatever they pleased, come and go as they pleased, and even leave and start their own lists if they preferred. The panopticon had no walls. By watching their own war of words break down the disciplining mechanisms of the Learner Lists, students came to understand an important Freirian concept: that the perpetuation of structures of authority and power depends to a certain extent on their own participation, and that they have the power as individual (and collective) agents to resist.

Conclusion

The project described here is quite particular in nature and what can be generalized to other Internet discourse might be very limited. Nevertheless, what can be summarized from this experience is that both Freire's and Foucault's models of interpersonal relations can help us as educators think about issues which may arise in electronic communication. In this instance, the disruption caused by students using this medium to find their own ways of communicating, both with teachers and with each other, increased their understanding (as well as teachers' understanding) of how power is exerted and resisted in student/teacher relationships. This experiential knowledge can be tapped into and actively explored by both teachers and students. The particular model of communication is less important. With new teachers and students meeting in each virtual encounter, different communication forms than that anticipated by any model of a structured community, whether of a Freirian community of co-investigators or a Foucauldian model of panopticon control, will develop. Tapping into the learning possible in this creative language environment is the next task for those interested in Internet-based education.

Notes

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