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Envisioning Critical Pedagogy in Liberian Higher Education *A Conceptual Framework for Civic and Democratic Engagement*

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Abstract

Liberia's higher education system, shaped by colonial legacies, neoliberal reforms, and fragile democratic institutions, functions less as a site of civic empowerment than as a mechanism that reproduces inequality and constrains democratic agency. Rather than operating as a neutral public good, education in this context is embedded within political-economic structures that reinforce rather than challenge elite dominance. Against this backdrop, the paper argues that critical pedagogy, emphasizing dialogic learning, critical thinking, and civic engagement, offers a framework for reimagining higher education as a space of democratic renewal. Adopting a conceptual literature review with an argumentative orientation, the study synthesizes international and African philosophical traditions of critical pedagogy to assess their relevance for post-conflict Liberia. It underscores the risks of uncritical borrowing, which can reinforce epistemic dependency and alienate students from indigenous cultural frameworks. To address these risks, the paper proposes the Liberian Critical Praxis/Dialogic approach, a localized framework built on three interrelated pillars: dialogic instruction rooted in cultural practices such as the palava hut, integration of indigenous knowledge into curricula, and ethical reasoning, including critical media literacy, anchored in communal responsibility. The paper concludes that reform must be gradual, context-sensitive, and culturally grounded. By situating Indigenous perspectives alongside international theory, the Liberian Critical Praxis/Dialogic approach contributes to debates on decolonizing higher education and demonstrates how post-conflict universities can foster democratic participation and civic resilience.



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Introduction

Liberia, a West African nation, emerged from two civil wars between 1989 and 2003, leaving behind a legacy of political instability, economic inequality, and fragile democratic institutions (Hogan, 2021; Kieh et al., 2009). Rooted in the marginalization of Indigenous populations, mismanagement, and ethnic divisions, the conflicts severely eroded trust in governance. In this post-conflict context, national recovery demands more than infrastructure; it requires cultivating a democratic culture grounded in critical, dialogic participation.

Higher education plays a pivotal role in this process. Undergraduate students are uniquely positioned to become agents of societal transformation, yet their potential remains underutilized. While civic education in Liberia has focused on primary and secondary levels, and peacebuilding programs have promoted conflict resolution, university curricula rarely prioritize critical thinking. This represents a missed opportunity to foster the analytical and reflective capacities essential for addressing Liberia's socio-political complexities. Critical thinking, understood as reflective, evidence-based reasoning and the ability to question assumptions (Kgoadi-Molaba, 2023; Wood, 2018), is vital for democratic engagement. Yet, Liberia's higher education curriculum marginalizes critical pedagogy outside of political science programs, thereby excluding the majority of students from transformative learning experiences.

Building on critical education theorists such as Freire, Dewey, hooks, and others, this paper argues that integrating critical pedagogy into Liberia's undergraduate curricula is essential for democratic renewal. In a global climate marked by polarization and rising authoritarianism, scholars argue that education must equip students to interrogate power, resist misinformation and disinformation, and contribute to inclusive governance (Karlidag, 2017; Kleinfeld, 2023). Building deliberative capacities is also vital, as structured dialogue has been shown to mitigate polarization (Caluwaerts et al., 2023). At the same time, reform initiatives face systemic obstacles: Giroux (2020) critiques the neoliberal commodification of education, while Brookfield (2017) underscores the challenges of shifting political priorities and entrenched assumptions, and Tett (2019) highlights institutional resistance and chronic under-resourcing that constrain transformative change.

Despite these barriers, the literature suggests that deliberate, context-sensitive reforms that embed critical thinking across disciplines can help shape an engaged, critically literate citizenry. As a conceptual literature review, this study does not present original empirical data but critically engages theoretical frameworks to explore how critical pedagogy can inform higher education reform and democratic resilience in Liberia. It asks: How can Liberia's higher education system adopt critical pedagogy to foster democratic participation and transformative leadership?

Scope and Approach

This study adopts a conceptual literature review with an argumentative orientation to examine how critical pedagogy, through its emphasis on dialogic learning, critical thinking, and civic agency, can inform higher education reform in Liberia. Rather than presenting new empirical data, it synthesizes existing theoretical and contextual scholarship to critique dominant educational paradigms and proposes a localized framework for democratic renewal. The review is intentionally selective rather than systematic, focusing on influential contributions that explain the intersection of critical pedagogy, post-conflict education, and democratic participation. This approach is

particularly suited to contexts such as Liberia, where empirical research is limited but conceptual clarity is essential for guiding reform and future inquiry.

The analysis engages with debates on neoliberal governance, colonial legacies, and Indigenous epistemologies to show how education functions as both an ideological apparatus and a potential site of transformation. By highlighting these tensions, the study positions critical pedagogy as a lens for reimagining higher education not simply as knowledge transmission but as a practice of civic engagement, social justice, and epistemological decolonization. While it does not claim empirical generalizability, the review aims to generate theoretically informed, context-responsive directions that can guide pilot programs, curriculum reform, and future research rooted in Liberia's lived realities.

Contextual Overview of Higher Education in Liberia

Liberia's higher education system emerged from 19th-century missionary efforts, with Liberia College (1862) and Cuttington College (1889) modeled closely on U.S. liberal arts traditions and serving primarily the Americo-Liberian elite (Livingston, 1976; Lulat, 2005; Manyango, 2012). These institutions entrenched Euro-American curricular models that excluded Indigenous epistemologies and languages, creating a lasting educational divide.

Indigenous systems of knowledge, such as the Poro and Sande schools, oral traditions, and apprenticeship learning, historically transmitted ethical reasoning, law, and communal values (Somah, 2019). Their marginalization fostered an epistemic disconnect between formal schooling and local cultural frameworks. This divide deepened during the civil wars (1989-2003), which decimated infrastructure, accelerated the outmigration of skilled professionals ('brain drain'), and left an entire generation with disrupted education (Bøås, 2005).

Post-war rebuilding has focused largely on access and infrastructure, but curricular content remains heavily Western-oriented. Programs in African or Liberian studies remain rare, and integration of indigenous knowledge is still marginal. As Hountondji (2009) and Wiredu (1995, 1998) argue, conceptual decolonization requires critically reassessing colonial intellectual legacies and reclaiming African epistemologies as relevant, autonomous frameworks for higher education. Liberia's challenge, then, is to craft an educational model that draws from local traditions of communal dialogue, such as the palava hut, while adapting international pedagogical insights. This provides the foundation for developing a *Liberian Critical Praxis/Dialogic approach*, one that bridges imported models with culturally grounded practices and strengthens higher education's role in democratic renewal.

While these dynamics underscore the fragility of Liberia's democratic and educational institutions, they cannot be understood apart from the broader political economy that has historically shaped education as an ideological project. Liberia's social hierarchy has historically been structured by the divide between Americo-Liberians and the Indigenous majority, a distinction reinforced by the notion of *civilized* or *kwi* status that emerged through missionary schooling and coastal labor migration. *Kwi* identity, marked by English literacy, Christian affiliation, Western dress, and participation in the cash economy, operated as both a marker of prestige and a mechanism of exclusion, restricting access to higher education, such as the University of Liberia, largely to elites until the 1960s, when many sought studies abroad. More broadly, education in Liberia has been deeply embedded in its political economy, rather than functioning as a neutral public good. Schooling historically served as a system of social stratification, reproducing elite identities while

marginalizing Indigenous epistemologies (Breitborde, 1998; Dillon, 2007; Lulat, 2005; Moran, 1990).

Such dynamics exemplify Gramsci's (1971) argument that education sustains cultural hegemony by normalizing the worldview of dominant groups. This is consistent with Althusser's (1971) claim that education operates as a primary ideological state apparatus, embedding hierarchy and deference into everyday practice. In Liberia, imported curricula and hierarchical pedagogies did not arbitrarily undermine democracy; they were bound up with the broader colonial-capitalist order that tied education to elite reproduction and state control.

In the contemporary period, neoliberal reforms have further embedded market logics into African education systems. Across the continent, donor-driven policies promote privatization, cost-sharing, and standardized measures of efficiency that recast education as a commodity rather than a democratic right (Hahn, 2008; Murphy, 2018; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). In Liberia, these pressures intersect with a fragile post-conflict environment, reinforcing dependency on external models while neglecting Indigenous values and civic priorities. As a result, higher education remains tethered to global capitalist structures that privilege credentialism and narrow vocationalism over critical reflection and civic engagement. Situating Liberian education within this ideological terrain clarifies that reform must not only address pedagogy but also confront the structural role of education in reproducing inequality and limiting democratic agency.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the preceding discussion of education's entanglement with Liberia's political economy, this study turns to critical education theory as a lens for imagining alternatives. Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural hegemony and Althusser's (1971) concept of ideological state apparatuses remind us that education often functions to reproduce and legitimize dominant ideologies, thereby sustaining hierarchies and shaping civic consciousness. Recognizing this structural role underscores the stakes of reform: without critical intervention, higher education risks reinforcing inequality rather than challenging it.

If Gramsci and Althusser explain how education reproduces domination, Freire and Dewey chart pathways for how it might resist such forces. Freire (1970, 1998) critiques the 'banking model' of education, in which teachers deposit information into passive students, and instead advocates dialogic, participatory practices that nurture *conscientização*, critical consciousness. Dewey (1916, 1938), similarly, insists that education should be experiential, problem-based, and oriented toward preparing students for participatory democracy. Though emerging from different contexts, both converge on the principle that education must cultivate reflection, dialogue, and agency in order to sustain democratic life. Their visions remain highly relevant to Liberia, where repetition-based instruction continues to dominate, and where universities too often reproduce hierarchical rather than participatory forms of learning.

Building on these foundations, critical pedagogy has been expanded by scholars who emphasize identity, culture, and the politics of knowledge. bell hooks (2013) extends Freire's ideas by centering lived experience and cultural identity, arguing for an emancipatory pedagogy that validates marginalized voices and fosters inclusive classrooms. Apple (2004) adds a structural critique, showing how curricula often function to reproduce dominant ideologies and social hierarchies, thereby constraining democratic engagement. These interventions highlight that

critical pedagogy is not only about classroom techniques but also about power, inclusion, and ideology.

At the same time, critical pedagogy has drawn criticism. Searle (1990) warns that it can collapse into ideological indoctrination, while Bowers (2004) argues that uncritical reliance on Western frameworks risks erasing indigenous knowledge systems. These critiques are particularly salient in Liberia, where unexamined borrowing from Euro-American models has long shaped higher education. They underscore the importance of contextualizing critical pedagogy, ensuring it does not reproduce the very exclusions it seeks to overcome.

African scholars have advanced frameworks that localize and decolonize critical pedagogy, offering insights highly relevant to Liberia. Wiredu (1998, 2007) calls for "*conceptual decolonization*," urging African education to ground itself in communal rationality and consensus-based reasoning rooted in Indigenous traditions. Similarly, Abdi (2022) critiques the lingering colonial structures embedded in African education systems and advances an anticolonial reconstructionist approach, emphasizing that decolonization must involve both dismantling Eurocentric epistemologies and reconstructing education based on African philosophies and lived realities. Waghid (2014) advances an Ubuntu-based pedagogy centered on compassion, collective responsibility, and civic agency. Assié-Lumumba (2017) similarly emphasizes that African higher education must integrate Indigenous epistemologies to resist Eurocentric dominance and affirm cultural identity. These contributions align with hooks's call to honor lived experience but extend it through African philosophical traditions that foreground community, relationality, and ethical reasoning.

Tierney (2018) adds a dimension by describing education as a process of "*worldly reading*," in which students co-construct meaning across diverse epistemologies. His framework reinforces the need to situate Liberian education within both local traditions and broader global dialogues. Santos (2014) advances an "*ecology of knowledge*" in which Western and non-Western epistemologies coexist in non-hierarchical dialogue, a principle especially vital in postcolonial contexts dominated by imported curricula. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that critical pedagogy in Africa must be both decolonial and dialogic, simultaneously affirming local knowledge and engaging with global democratic ideals.

This synthesis clarifies the stakes for Liberia: education is not neutral but embedded in structures of power, ideology, and political economy. The challenge is to shift higher education away from reproducing elite dominance and toward cultivating democratic capacity. From this foundation emerges the Liberian Critical *Praxis/Dialogic approach*, a localized framework that is elaborated in the subsequent sections.

Critical Pedagogy for Democratic Renewal

Realizing the democratic promise of higher education in Liberia requires pedagogical approaches that cultivate inquiry, deliberation, and civic responsibility rather than passive knowledge absorption. Building on Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education and Dewey's emphasis on experiential learning, this framework envisions classrooms as dialogic spaces where students co-construct knowledge and develop the capacity to challenge systemic injustice. Gramsci's analysis of cultural hegemony reinforces this view, showing how curricula often reproduce dominant ideologies that suppress critical inquiry, a challenge still evident in Liberia's inherited colonial and exam-driven system.

Pedagogical strategies aligned with this vision emphasize student agency and civic engagement. Methods such as Socratic questioning, participatory dialogue, and case-based learning encourage students to interrogate assumptions and connect theory to lived realities (Copeland, 2005; Brookfield & Preskill, 2012; Schaffar & Wolff, 2024). Collaborative learning approaches strengthen analytical skills and foster habits of deliberation and collective problem-solving (Barr & Tagg, 1995), while critical literacy pedagogies build students' capacity to interrogate power and ideology in texts (Janks, 2010; Luke, 2012), all situated within a broader critical pedagogy framework (McLaren, 2016). Comparative discussions from South Africa and Finland highlight both the obstacles and design features of democratic education, critiques of inequitable curriculum reforms in South Africa alongside Finnish approaches (e.g., phenomenon-based learning, research-informed teacher education) that aim to foster creativity, problem-solving, and civic responsibility (Chung, 2023; Ngoben, Shoba, & Makgato, 2023; Schaffar & Wolff, 2024). For Liberia, such practices can ground pedagogy in local culture and communal traditions while linking technical knowledge with ethical and democratic purposes.

However, the implementation of critical pedagogy must be both context-sensitive and balanced. Wudu (2020) shows that while civics courses in Ethiopia have improved knowledge, they have not translated into responsible civic behavior due to weak institutional support and limited educator commitment. A similar risk exists in Liberia, where civic learning often remains abstract and disconnected from students' lived realities. Without institutional reinforcement, it can leave young people open to politicization, a pattern evident in Liberia's recent history, where youth have frequently been mobilized as political instruments, fueling cycles of instability (Harris, 2012; Sawyer, 2005). Woods (2023) cautions that excessive critique without grounding in practical competencies risks disengagement and distrust. Effective critical pedagogy in Liberia must therefore do more than encourage critique: it must integrate reflective inquiry with experiential learning and civic skill-building, so that students are equipped to resist partisan exploitation and instead channel their agency toward constructive democratic alternatives. A critical dimension of this renewal is media literacy.

In Liberia's fragile information environment, marked by low literacy, politicized media institutions, and widespread disinformation, students are especially at risk. Critical media literacy builds on traditions of critical pedagogy to equip students with tools for analyzing media texts, exposing ideological bias, and fostering democratic participation. In their theoretical reconstruction, Kellner and Share (2007a, 2007b) remind us that media literacy is not simply about acquiring functional skills but about confronting the cultural and political conditions that shape knowledge, making its institutionalization a decisive democratic choice. Carr (2011) extends this argument by insisting that such literacy is a prerequisite for democratic agency, while Karaduman (2015) demonstrates its practical role in cultivating citizenship consciousness. Yet, as Reynolds and Porfilio (2019) warn, these normative commitments take on heightened urgency in a "*post-digital*" era characterized by systemic deception, where algorithmic amplification corrodes trust (Tufekci, 2017) and disinformation preys upon fragile institutions (Turčilo & Obrenović, 2020). The convergence of these insights reveals not only the pedagogical promise of critical media literacy but also its political fragility: without structural support, it risks being marginalized precisely when democratic life depends upon it. Embedding media literacy into higher education is, therefore, essential to cultivating informed citizens capable of navigating complex information environments and sustaining inclusive public discourse.

Ultimately, critical pedagogy for democratic renewal in Liberia must integrate dialogic teaching, civic inquiry, and media literacy into a coherent pedagogical strategy. Such an approach responds to the nation's urgent democratic challenges by equipping students with the intellectual and civic capacities to engage in reasoned debate, participate in governance, and advance reconciliation. By linking critical inquiry with practical competencies and cultural relevance, higher education can nurture a critically literate citizenry prepared to envision and enact democratic futures.

Challenges and Constraints

The implementation of critical pedagogy in Liberia's higher education system is constrained by a set of structural, governance, and cultural barriers that reinforce one another. Structural and material constraints are the most immediate. Chronic underfunding, overcrowded classrooms, and limited digital infrastructure restrict the adoption of participatory, inquiry-based teaching. Recent studies highlight how these deficits institutionalize mediocrity and intensify inequality, particularly in public schools and universities (Kennedy, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b). Teacher training remains a critical weakness. Research on Liberia's rural teacher training institutes shows that poorly aligned curricula, limited practicum opportunities, and minimal faculty development perpetuate a gap between pedagogical theory and classroom practice (Kennedy, 2025c).

Governance challenges further inhibit reform. Appointment and promotion processes shaped by political patronage rather than merit undermine institutional leadership and accountability. Karngebea and Kennedy (2022) argue that decentralization and community-based accountability mechanisms could counter these tendencies, but such practices are not yet widespread. In their absence, reform-minded educators often lack the institutional support needed to implement dialogic or critical pedagogies.

Cultural and epistemic barriers are equally significant. The dominance of Western curricular frameworks and foreign languages marginalizes African epistemologies and limits the relevance of higher education to students' lived realities. Fayemi (2013) warns that this reliance on external models alienates students and weakens the applicability of critical pedagogy to local contexts. Addressing these gaps requires not only institutional reform but also deliberate integration of indigenous knowledge, local languages, and communal traditions into curriculum design.

Taken together, these challenges highlight the gap between pedagogical ideals and institutional realities. If Liberia's universities are to cultivate active and critically engaged citizens, reform must simultaneously address material investment, governance structures, and cultural orientation. Only by aligning resources, leadership, and epistemologies can higher education move beyond its inherited constraints and embed critical pedagogy as a foundation for democratic renewal.

Toward a Context-Specific Critical Pedagogy

Addressing the constraints facing Liberian higher education requires a pedagogical vision that is both context-sensitive and transformative. As noted earlier, uncritical adoption of international models risks reinforcing epistemic dependency. Instead, curriculum reform must be rooted in historical awareness and community engagement, ensuring that pedagogy speaks directly to Liberia's post-conflict realities (Barrios-Tao et al., 2016). In pursuing this vision, curriculum developers must ask themselves key questions: What social, historical, and cultural realities should our curriculum reflect? Which global pedagogical ideas align with Liberia's democratic aspirations

without displacing Indigenous knowledge systems? At what point does pedagogical borrowing compromise local agency? Posing such questions ensures that reform is guided not only by theory but also by reflective, context-responsive inquiry.

These questions point to the need for a structured framework, articulated here as the *Liberian Critical Praxis/Dialogic approach*, which rests on three interconnected pillars. First, dialogic instruction should be localized through culturally familiar practices, such as the palava hut model of communal debate. This extends earlier discussions of Freirean dialogue by situating deliberation within indigenous traditions. Second, integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into curricula can bridge the gap between higher education and community life. Assié-Lumumba (2017) emphasizes ubuntu as an inclusive epistemology, while Fayemi (2015) highlights the importance of African languages and knowledge traditions in resisting alienation and promoting relevance. Third, ethical reasoning and critical media literacy must be embedded as civic competencies, equipping students to resist manipulation, challenge misinformation and disinformation, and engage constructively in democratic governance.

Collectively, these pillars position critical pedagogy as both culturally grounded and future-oriented. Santos' (2014) concept of an "*ecology of knowledge*" reinforces this vision by advocating the coexistence of diverse epistemologies in non-hierarchical dialogue. In Liberia, such an approach reframes higher education as a site of reconstruction, reconciliation, and democratic renewal. The *Liberian Critical Praxis/Dialogic approach* thus provides a pathway for universities to evolve beyond inherited structures, fostering graduates who are reflective, culturally grounded, and democratically engaged.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Liberia's higher education system remains constrained by colonial curricular legacies, hierarchical instruction, and fragile civic infrastructure, all of which limit students' ability to think critically and participate meaningfully in democratic life. This paper has argued that a context-sensitive form of critical pedagogy, rooted in Liberia's cultural traditions, post-conflict realities, and democratic aspirations, offers a viable framework for reimagining higher education.

The proposed *Liberian Critical Praxis/Dialogic approach* is not a universal solution but a conceptual contribution that repositions pedagogy as a site of reconstruction, reconciliation, and civic renewal. By emphasizing culturally grounded dialogue, integration of Indigenous knowledge, and ethical civic engagement, the framework highlights how higher education can shift from reproducing inherited hierarchies to cultivating democratic capacity. In fragile democracies such as Liberia, these transformations are not optional but essential for sustaining inclusive and participatory governance.

To translate this vision into practice, reform must proceed through gradual, context-sensitive strategies that respond to Liberia's institutional realities rather than impose wholesale transformations. Three priority areas are outlined:

Curriculum Reform to Prioritize Critical Thinking

General education courses should integrate dialogic and reflective elements that engage students with civic reasoning, ethical reflection, and Indigenous knowledge. Modules drawing on oral traditions, communal decision-making (e.g., the palava hut), and intergenerational storytelling

could serve as culturally resonant avenues for embedding critical inquiry. Pilot programs in teacher training colleges would allow for testing and refinement before broader implementation.

Teacher training and professional development

University instructors, lecturers, and professors require sustained support to adopt participatory and student-centered pedagogies. Locally anchored mentorship models, where experienced faculty serve as peer mentors, may prove more sustainable than externally imposed training. Embedding professional development into existing evaluation systems and recognizing participation formally can help overcome financial and logistical constraints.

Promote media literacy to combat misinformation

Liberia's fragile information environment requires deliberate investment in critical media education. Curricular modules on source evaluation, media framing, and digital citizenship should be adapted to local realities, including the use of mobile-based learning or radio in low-resource settings. Framing media literacy as civic engagement rather than partisan critique may help secure institutional buy-in despite political sensitivities.

Institutional coordination

These efforts could be consolidated through the establishment of a university-based center for critical pedagogy and civic education, serving as a hub for curriculum innovation, faculty development, and applied research. Its sustainability would depend on cross-sector partnerships with regional universities, civil society, and international organizations.

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