

Critical Education

Volume 17 Number 2

May 18, 2026

ISSN 1920-4175

The Role of Education in Humanization

Paulo Freire

Freire, P. (2026). The role of education in humanization (F. C. Aguiar, E. Lyle, J. D. P. Moura, Trans.). *Critical Education*, 17(2), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v17i2.187452>
(Original work published 1996)

Abstract

This text is a summary of lectures given by Paulo Freire at a conference held in Santiago in May 1967, under the sponsorship of the Organization of American States, the government of Chile, and the University of Chile. Translated from the version published in the FAEEBA Journal – Education and Contemporary Studies, n°. 7, January/July 1997, this paper condenses the ontological and epistemological foundations of the Brazilian educator, as well as demonstrating his more direct relationship with phenomenology and existentialism through direct appropriation of Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Karl Jaspers, and a vast phenomenological vocabulary.

Editorial Note

This article is republished in English with permission from *Journal FAEEBA - Educação e Contemporaneidade*. The authors are grateful for all the support from the *Journal FAEEBA - Educação e Contemporaneidade* and for their kindness in allowing us to carry out this translation that was originally published as: Freire, P. (1996). O papel da educação na humanização. *Revista Da FAEEBA - Educação E Contemporaneidade*, 6(7), 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.21879/faceba2358-0194.v6.n7>



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and **Critical Education**. More details of this Creative Commons license are available from <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. **Critical Education** is published by the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia.

2 Critical Education

Education cannot be seen as anything other than a human praxis¹ (*quefazer*), a praxis (*quefazer*) that occurs in time and space, between man [sic]² and one another.

It follows that the consideration of education as a human phenomenon leads us to an analysis, albeit a summary one, of man.

What man is—what his position in the world is—these are questions that we must ask ourselves at the very moment that we are concerned with education. If this concern, in itself, implies the aforementioned questions (which are also concerns, in essence), the answer we give to them will direct education toward a humanistic purpose or not.

There cannot be a pedagogical theory, which implies the ends and means of educational action, that is free from a concept of man and the world. In this sense, there is no neutral education. If, for some, man is a being who adapts to the world (taking the world not only in a natural sense, but also in a structural, historical-cultural sense), their educational actions, their methods, and their objectives will be adapted to this conception. If, for others, man is a being who transforms the world, their educational work follows another path. If we view man as a “thing,”³ our educational action takes place in mechanistic terms, resulting in an ever-greater domestication of man. If we view him as a person, our work will be increasingly liberating.

For all these reasons, in these exhibitions, so that the educational position we defend becomes clear, we address – albeit briefly – this basic point: man is a being in the world with the world.

Man himself, his “fundamental position,” as Marcel says, is that of a being in a situation – “situated and enclosed.” Man is a being articulated in time and space, which his intentional consciousness captures and transcends.

Only man, in fact, among incomplete beings, experiencing a time that is his own, a time of praxis, is capable of admiring the world. He is capable of objectifying the world, of having in it a “not I” that constitutes his self, which, in turn, constitutes him as the world of his consciousness.

The possibility of admiring the world implies being not only in it, but with it; it consists of being open to the world, capturing it, and understanding it; it is acting in accordance with one's purposes in order to transform it. It is not simply responding to impulses, but something more: it is responding to challenges. Man's responses to the challenges of the world, through

¹ In the original text, in Portuguese, there are moments when the author mentions “*quefazer*” a fusion of two words in Portuguese that, through a linguistic play, refers us to the dimension of praxis, but without a translation into English that conveys the same meaning. Nita Freire, in an interview given to Carmel Borg and Peter Mayo in 2000, mentioned that this is one of the meanings of Freirean poetics that we lose when we translate his writings. The most similar English term would be what-to-do, but even so it is not the same. She emphasized: “I want to say that to respect another person and other cultures requires many other qualities and not just knowing the author's language. Here's another example: “What is to be done”? Paulo would say: “what-to-do”! How interesting, isn't it? It is a rich, deep political category that indicates action with commitment. Now, how can a translator, who knows the language but not Paulo's tongue - i.e. his way of speaking, understand this subtlety of expression?” (Freire; Borg; Mayo, 2000, p. 113). To make the text fluid, we chose to keep the word praxis, writing *quefazer* in parentheses to better guide the English-speaking reader about the word used in the original and our adaptation.

² Man is used in the original and reflective of the period in which it was written; it is not indicative of reification of man as superior thinker nor intended to promote historic gender binaries.

³ In this translation, we keep some words in quotation marks, as in the original.

which he changes this world, impregnating it with his “spirit”, are more than a mere doing; they are acts that inseparably contain action and reflection.

Because he admires the world and therefore objectifies it, because he captures and understands reality and transforms it with his action-reflection, man is a being of praxis. Furthermore, man is praxis and, because he is so, he cannot be reduced to a mere spectator of reality, nor to a mere incidence of the guiding action of other men who will transform him into a “thing”. His ontological vocation, which he must give rise to, is that of the subject who operates and transforms the world. Subjected to concrete conditions that transform him into an object, man will be sacrificed in his fundamental vocation. But, as everything has its opposite, the concrete situation in which men-objects are born also generates men-subjects. The question we now face consists in knowing, in the concrete situation in which thousands of men are in the condition of objects, whether *those*⁴ who transform them in this way are truly subjects. To the extent that those who are prohibited from being are “beings for others”, those who prohibit it in this way are false “beings for themselves”. Therefore, they cannot be authentic subjects. No one is, if he prohibits others from being.

This is a radical requirement of man as an incomplete being: he cannot be if others are not also. As an incomplete being and conscious of his incompleteness (which does not occur with “beings in themselves”, which, also incomplete, like animals and trees, do not know themselves to be incomplete), man is a being of permanent search. There could be no man without the search, just as there would be no search without the world. Man and world—world and man—a “conscious body” in constant interaction informing each other. Only in this way can one see both, can one understand man and the world without distorting them.

Well, if man is this being of permanent searching, due to the awareness he has of his incompleteness, this search implies:

- a) a subject
- b) a starting point
- c) an object

The subject of the search is the man himself who carries it out. This means, for example, that it is not possible for me, from a humanist perspective, to “enter” into a relationship with a woman and carry out the movement that is hers to do. I cannot prescribe my opinions to her. I cannot impede her right to act. I cannot manipulate her. I married her; I did not buy her in a haberdashery as if she were an object of adornment. I cannot make her be what I think she should be. I love her as she is, in her incompleteness, in her search, in her vocation to be, or else I do not love her. If I dominate her and if I enjoy dominating her, if she is dominated and if she enjoys being dominated, then in our relations there is no love, but rather pathology of love: sadism in me, and masochism in her.

In the same way and for the same reasons, I cannot crush my children, considering them as things from which I take whatever I see fit. My children, like me, are *becoming*. They are, like me, searching. They have concerns about being, just like me.

I cannot objectify my students, objectify people, or manipulate them in the name of nothing. Sometimes, or almost always, to justify such indisputably disrespectful acts of the person try to disguise their true objectives with messianic explanations. It is necessary, they

⁴ In this translation we keep some words in italics, as in the original.

say, to save these poor blind masses from unhealthy influences. And, with this salvation, what those who act in this way intend is to save themselves, denying the people the fundamental right to speak their truth.

Let us emphasize, however, a point that should not be forgotten: no one can search alone. Every search in isolation, every search driven by personal and group interests, is necessarily a search against others. Consequently, it is a false search. Only in communion is the search authentic. This communion, however, cannot occur if some, in searching, become antagonistic to those who forbid them to search. Dialogue between the two becomes impossible, and the solutions that the former seek to lessen the distance in which they find themselves in relation to the latter do not go beyond—and never could go beyond—the sphere of welfare. The moment they go beyond this sphere and *decide* to search in communion, they are no longer antagonistic and, therefore, no longer forbid from searching. They would have renounced the dehumanization of both the latter and themselves (given that no one can humanize themselves by dehumanizing others) and would embrace humanization.

The starting point of this search is within man himself. But since there is no man without a world, the starting point of the search is found in man-world—that is, in man in his relations with the world and with others. In man in his here and now. The search cannot be understood outside of this man-world exchange. No one goes further except by starting from here. The very “transcendental intentionality,” which implies the awareness of the beyond-limit, can only be explained to the extent that, for man, his context, his here and now, are not closed circles in which he finds himself. But in order to overcome them, he must be in them and be aware of them. He could not transcend his here and now if they did not constitute the starting point of this overcoming.

In this sense, the more one critically knows the concrete, objective conditions of one's here and now, of one's reality, the more one will be able to carry out the search through the transformation of reality. Precisely because one's fundamental position is, repeating Marcel, that of “being in a situation”, by reflectively considering the “situationality”, knowing it critically, one inserts oneself into it. The more one is inserted, and not merely adapted to concrete reality, the more one will become subject to modifications and the more one will affirm oneself as a being of choices.

In this way, the basic objective of his quest, which is to be more, to become human, presents itself to him as an imperative that must be existentialized. To existentialize is to fulfill the vocation to which we referred at the beginning of this exposition.

Well, if we speak of humanization, of man being more—the basic objective of his permanent search—we recognize its opposite: dehumanization, being less. Both, humanization and dehumanization, are historical possibilities of man as an incomplete being and conscious of his incompleteness. Only the first, however, constitutes his true vocation. The second, to the contrary, is the distortion of the vocation. If we were to admit that dehumanization, as something probable and proven in history, would establish a new vocation for man, there would be nothing left to do but assume a cynical and desperate position. This double possibility—that of humanization and that of dehumanization—is one of the aspects that explain existence as a permanent risk. A risk that the animal does not run because it is not conscious of its incompleteness, on the one hand, and because it cannot animalize the world and cannot deanimalize itself, on the other. An animal, in any situation it finds itself, whether in the forest or in a zoo, continues to be a “being in itself”. Even when it suffers from moving from one place to another, its suffering does not affect its animality. It is not capable of perceiving itself

as “deanimalized”. Man, in turn, as a “being for itself”, becomes dehumanized when he is subjected to concrete conditions that transform him into a “being for another”.

Now, an education is only truly humanistic if, instead of reinforcing the myths intended to keep man dehumanized, it strives to uncover reality. This is an uncovering in which man exists in his real vocation: that of transforming reality. If, on the contrary, education emphasizes myths and leads to the path of man's adaptation to reality, its dehumanizing character cannot be hidden.

Let us analyze, albeit briefly, these two educational positions: one, which respects man as a person; the other, which transforms him into a “thing”.

Let us begin by presenting and criticizing the second conception and some of its assumptions.

From now on, we will call this vision the “banking” conception of education, as it makes the educational process a permanent act of *depositing* contents. This is an act in which the depositor is the “educator” and the depositary is the “student”⁵.

The banking concept, by not overcoming the educator-student contradiction, but, on the contrary, by emphasizing it, can only serve the “domestication” of man.

Failure to overcome this contradiction results in:

- a) the educator always being the one who educates, and the student always being the one who is educated;
- b) the educator always being the one who disciplines, and the student always being the one who is disciplined;
- c) the educator being the one who prescribes, and the student being the one who follows the prescription;
- d) the educator being the one who chooses the content of the programs, and the student being the one who receives it in the form of a “deposit”;
- e) the educator being the one who knows, and the student being the one who does not know; and
- f) the educator being the subject of the process, and the student being the one who is its object.

According to this conception, the student is like a “box” in which the educator makes his “deposits”—a “box” that is gradually filled with “knowledge”, as if knowledge were the result of a passive act of receiving donations from others.

This false conception of education, which takes the student as passive and adapts him, is based on an equally false conception of man—on a distorted conception of his consciousness. For the “banking” conception, man’s consciousness is something spatialized, empty, which is gradually filled with pieces of the world that are transformed into contents of consciousness.

⁵ It is important to remember that in the original the term used is “*educando*”, which refers to a person who is in the process of learning, that is, who is receiving education everywhere, not just in schools. However, as can be seen in the translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2005), the term generally chosen in English translations is student, which in Portuguese means “*estudante*”, which is only the person in school education. Therefore, the Brazilian term opens up countless possibilities for readings and student restricts us to school spaces.

This mechanistic conception of consciousness necessarily implies that it is constantly receiving pieces of reality that penetrate it. Therefore, it does not distinguish between entering consciousness and becoming present to consciousness. Consciousness is only empty, Sartre warns us, to the extent that it is not filled with the world.

But, for the “banking” conception, consciousness is this box that must be filled. It is this empty space waiting for the world, and education is the act of depositing facts, semi-dead information, in students.

All that remains for them is to patiently receive the deposits, file them, memorize them, and then repeat them. In fact, the banking concept ends up archiving man himself, both the one who makes the deposit and the one who receives it, because there is no man outside of restless searching—outside of creation, of recreation—outside of the risk of the adventure of creating.

The fundamental concern of this false conception is to avoid concern. It is to curb impatience. It is to mystify reality. It is to avoid revealing the world, and all this in order to adapt man.

The clarification (un-veiling) of reality, its critical understanding, the insertion of man into it—all this is a demonic, absurd task, which the banking concept cannot support.

This results in restless, creative students who are resistant to objectification, whether they are seen by this dehumanizing conception as unadapted, maladjusted, or rebellious.

The banking concept, finally, denies the reality of *becoming*. It denies man as a being in constant search. It denies his ontological vocation to be more. It denies the man-world relations, outside of which neither man nor the world can be understood. It denies man's creativity, subjecting him to rigid schemes of thought. It denies his power to admire the world, to objectify it, from which his transformative act results. It denies man as a being of praxis. It immobilizes the dynamic. It transforms what is being into what is and, thus, kills life. In this way, it cannot hide its blatant necrophiliac mark.

The humanist and liberating conception of education, on the other hand, never dichotomizes man from the world. Instead of denying it, it affirms and bases itself on the permanently changing reality. It not only respects man's ontological vocation to be more, but it also moves towards this goal. It stimulates human creativity. It has a critical view of knowledge; it knows that all knowledge is subject to historical and sociological conditioning. It knows that there is no knowledge without restless searching, without the adventure of taking the risk of creating. It recognizes that man becomes man to the extent that, in the process of his hominization towards his humanization, he is capable of admiring the world. He is capable of detaching himself from it, remaining in it and with it, and, by objectifying it, transforming it. He knows that it is precisely because he can transform the world that man is the being of praxis or a being that is praxis. It recognizes man as a historical being. It demystifies reality, which is why it does not fear its un-veiling. Instead of the adaptable man-thing, fight for the world transforming man-person. Love life in its *becoming*. Be biophilic and not necrophiliac.

The humanist conception, which rejects deposits as the mere dissertation or narration of isolated fragments of reality, is realized through a constant problematization of the man-world. Its praxis is problematizing, never dissertating or depositing.

Just as the recently criticized conception, from some of its angles, cannot overcome the contradiction between educator-student, the humanist conception starts from the need to do so. This need is imposed on it to the extent that it views man as a being with choices—a being

whose decision-making point is or should be within him and in his relationships with the world and with others.

To achieve such overcoming, an existence that is the phenomenal essence of education, which is its dialogicity, education then becomes dialogue and communication. And, if it is dialogue, the relations between its poles can no longer be those of antagonistic opposites, but of poles that reconcile.

If, in the banking conception, the educator is always the one who educates, and the student is the one who is educated, the achievement of overcoming, in the humanist conception, gives rise to:

- a) no longer an educator of the student;
- b) no longer a student of the educator;
- c) but an educator-student with a student-educator.

This means:

- 1) that no one educates anyone;
- 2) that no one can educate themselves alone;
- 3) that men educate each other, mediated by the world.

This problematizing conception of education eliminates any possibility of manipulating the student or adapting him. The result is that, for those who are truly capable of loving man and life, for biophiles, the absurdity lies not in the problematization of reality that minimizes and crushes man, but in the masking of this reality that dehumanizes.

While the banking conception implies that distorted understanding of consciousness and positions it as something spatialized in man, as something empty that must be filled, the problematizing conception sees man as a conscious body. Instead of a “thing” consciousness, the humanist conception understands, with the phenomenologists, consciousness as an opening of man to the world. It is not a container that is filled; it is a going out to the world to capture it. The very nature of consciousness is to be directed towards something. The essence of its being is its intentionality (*intentio, intendere*); that is why all consciousness is always consciousness of. Even when consciousness returns to itself, “*something as evident and surprising as intentionality*” (Jaspers) continues to be consciousness of—in this case, consciousness of consciousness, consciousness of itself. In “retro-reflection”, in which consciousness intends itself, the self “is one and is double”. It does not cease to be a self to become a thing for which its consciousness intends itself. It continues to be a self that intentionally turns in on itself, a self that does not split.

While the previously criticized conception, which treats consciousness in a naturalistic way, establishes an absurd separation between consciousness and the world, for the view now discussed consciousness and the world occur simultaneously. Intended for the world, the world becomes the world of consciousness.

The “banking” conception, while not being able to truly erase the intentionality of consciousness, nevertheless succeeds, to a large extent, in “domesticating” its reflexivity. As a result, the practice of this conception constitutes a painful paradox when it is experienced by people who call themselves humanists.

The problematizing conception of education, on the contrary, by placing the human-world as a problem, demands a permanently reflective position from the student. The student

is no longer a passive box that is gradually filled, but a conscious body, challenged and responding to the challenge. Faced with each problematic situation that he encounters, his intentional consciousness gradually captures the particularities of the total problem, which are perceived as units in interaction through the reflective act of his consciousness, which gradually becomes critical.

While for the “banking” conception what matters is to deposit information, without any concern for awakening critical reflection (on the contrary, avoiding it), for the humanist conception the fundamental thing lies in this awakening, which must be increasingly explicit.

The problematizing conception of education knows that, if the essence of the being of consciousness is its intentionality—its opening itself to the world—this, as the world of consciousness, is constituted as “background landscapes” of the consciousness intended for it.

Within the framework of this “background view”, however, not all its elements become present to consciousness as “perceived and highlighted in themselves”. The problematizing conception, by challenging students through concrete existential situations, directs their gaze to them, with what was previously not perceived as highlighted becoming so.

In this way, education is constituted as a true human praxis. Educator-students and student-educators, mediated by the world, exercise an increasingly critical reflection on it, inseparable from an action that is also increasingly critical. Identified in this reflection-action and in this action-reflection on the mediated world, they both become authentic beings of praxis.

References

- Borg, C., & Mayo, P. (2000). Reflections from a third age marriage: Paulo Freire pedagogy of reason, hope, and passion: an interview with Ana Maria (Nita) Freire.
- Freire, P. (1996). O papel da educação na humanização. *Revista Da FAEEDBA - Educação E Contemporaneidade*, 6(7), 9–17. <https://doi.org/10.21879/faceba2358-0194.v6.n7>
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Author

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher known for his influential work on critical pedagogy, which emphasizes dialogue and the importance of understanding social context in education. Born on September 19, 1921, in Recife, Brazil, Freire's early experiences of poverty and social inequality deeply impacted his views on education as a tool for liberation rather than mere instruction. His seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1970, critiques traditional education methods, arguing that they often perpetuate oppression and dehumanization. Freire advocated for a participatory approach where teachers and students engage in a co-creative learning process, encouraging critical thinking and social consciousness. Freire's ideas have influenced numerous educational systems worldwide, especially in contexts of social justice and empowerment. His work laid the foundation for many contemporary discussions on education, inequality, and critical reflection. He continued to promote these ideals throughout his life until his death on May 2, 1997, leaving a lasting legacy in the field of education.

Translators

Felipe C. Aguiar, Ph.D., works at the intersection of curriculum, geography, and phenomenology to provoke curriculum through a poetic dwelling. In the last few years, Felipe has been a teacher and researcher who crosses school and academy borders. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6563-4763>

Ellyn Lyle, Ph.D., lives reflexively and relationally to invite dialogue about how our ways of engaging with the world and each can support re/humanizing possibilities. Although Ellyn has spent the last 12 years in academic leadership, she has remained active in both teaching and research. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8523-6914>

Jeani D. P. Moura, Ph.D., studies the relations between phenomenology, geography, and education through multiple experiences and intertextualities. Jeani is a professor in the State University of Londrina (UEL), Paraná, Brazil in the undergraduate and graduate degrees of the Department of Geography. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5603-1074>

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

Editors

Sandra Mathison, *University of British Columbia*

E. Wayne Ross, *University of British Columbia*

Associate Editors

Abraham P. DeLeon, *University of Texas at San Antonio*

Adam Renner, 1970-2010

Co-Founding and Past Editor

Stephen Petrina, *University of British Columbia*

Editorial Collective

Wayne Au, *University of Washington Bothell*

Jessica Bacon, *Montclair State University*

Jeff Bale, *University of Toronto*

Grant Banfield, *Flinders University*

Dennis Beach, *University of Gothenburg*

Kristen Buras, *Georgia State University*

Paul R Carr, *Université du Québec en Outaouais*

Lisa Cary, *Murdoch University*

Antonio J. Castro, *University of Missouri*

Erin L. Castro, *University of Utah*

Alexander Cuenca, *Indiana University*

Noah De Lissovoy, *University of Texas at Austin*

Ardavan Eizadirad, *Wilfred Laurier University*

Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*

Derek R. Ford, *DePauw University*

Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*

David Gabbard, *Boise State University*

Rich Gibson, *San Diego State University*

Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*

Keith Heggart, *University of Technology Sydney*

Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*

Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *Kennesaw State University*

Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*

Gianna Katsiampoura, *University of Athens*

Harper Keenan, *University of British Columbia*

Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*

Ashwani Kumar, *Mount Saint Vincent University*

Ravi Kumar, *South Asian University*

Saville Kushner, *Drew University*

Yulong Li, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*

Kevin R. Magill, *Baylor University*

Alpesh Maisuria, *University of East London*

Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*

Gregory Martin, *University of Technology Sydney*

Cris Mayo, *University of Vermont*

Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*

Peter McLaren, *Chapman University*

Shahrazad Mojab, *University of Toronto*

João Paraskeva, *University of Strathclyde*

Lana Parker, *University of Windsor*

Brad Porfilio, *California State University, Stanislaus*

Marc Pruyn, *University of the Sunshine Coast*

Lotar Rasinski, *University of Lower Silesia*

Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*

Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*

Edda Sant, *University of Manchester*

Doug Selwyn, *SUNY Plattsburgh*

Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*

Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*

Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*

Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*

John Smyth, *Federation Univ. Australia*

Hannah Spector, *Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute*

Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*

Inna Stepaniuk, *Simon Fraser University*

Paolo Vittoria, *University of Naples Federico II*