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# Expanding Freire's Notion of Holistic Conversion for Applied Theatre Practitioners

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**Abstract.** Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed has had a telling impact on critical discourse over time. The influence of this pedagogy is so gripping that it has extended beyond its domiciled field of education. One of such fields is theatre in its applied form which is the focus of this research. This paper investigates the process of conversion of the applied theatre practitioner as it proposes a discourse that describes a critical process designed to help man arrive at an optimal state of humanization. A major problem encountered in Freire's critical pedagogy is the application of its knotty tenets to real life situations. Observations have revealed that the treatment of critical pedagogy has been largely theoretical within educational institutions and also in theatre for development practice and scholarship. This work narrows the problem down to Freire's notion of holistic conversion of the development agent (or the applied theatre practitioner) as a necessary transformation that needs to take place before social efficacy can be attained. The non-attainment of holistic conversion on the part of the practitioner therefore creates a gap between the theory and its praxis. It is on this premise that this paper reviews Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed with the searchlight focused on the pertinent issues that impinge on the holistic conversion of practitioners. The approach is descriptive as it provides insight on the need, requirements and evidence of wholesale transformation of the practitioner. At the end, the paper proposes extended homestead approach as a major step towards to achieving a holistic conversion of the practitioner thereby bridging the gap between the discourse and its praxis.

## 1. Introduction: An Overview of Freire's Pedagogy

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire's seminal work, champions several levels of critical discourse on the need for man to attain full humanity. While explaining man's need to attain full humanity, the pedagogy exposes the twin vocation of humanization and its more evidential reality of dehumanization (Freire, 1996). In plain terms, the work is preoccupied with the issues of social justice, peace, equality and other indications of human civilization. Freire's passion for the vocation of humanisation espoused through a radical alternative method of education has turned his critical theory into a quintessential intellectual hub that interfaces with many other disciplines. Theatre, in its applied form, is one of such disciplines, and it is the primary concern of this paper.

In spite of the above, it is quite possible to discuss Freire's critical pedagogy without mentioning theatre just as it is equally very possible to discuss theatre without having to allude to critical consciousness. Where then lies the all-important nexus between these two ancient disciplines? Having closely observed the conventional system of education over time, and with himself as an unwilling guinea-pig, Freire (1996) then concludes that it is the conventional "banking" system of education that has kept people repressed through a systemic

perpetuation of oppression, ignorance and poverty. The outcome of his long years of research turns out to propose an alternative radical approach to education, which is to be found outside the conventional school system.

## 2. The Nexus between the Pedagogy and Theatre

The Peruvian revolutionary government, in 1973, initiated a nation-wide literacy programme which was popularly referred to as Operación Alfabetización Integral (ALFIN). It had a goal of dislodging illiteracy within a spate of four years in Peru. To achieve this goal, the campaign relied on Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed through which two main objectives were formulated:

- To teach literacy in both the first language and in Spanish without forcing the abandonment of the former in favour of the latter;
- To teach literacy in all possible languages, especially the artistic ones, such as theater, photography, puppetry, films, journalism, etc. (Boal, p. 121)

It was in the second aim that theatre emerged as a major language to be deployed in combating illiteracy in Peru. For Freire, whose pedagogy was being put to use for the Peruvian populace, education was not the ultimate goal. Education in the Freirean parlance is only a crucial means to an end. Education is a means through which humanity can be optimized. The parallel of Freire's pedagogy as a tool for attaining fuller humanity is therefore to be found in applied theatre as a tool also for attaining optimum human development. This underscores the essence of drama/theatre in education and other cultural activities which predate the Peruvian/Freirean experience.

Freire's socio-economic prognosis of society therefore subsumes and transcends the prevalent problem of illiteracy in Brazil, Peru and other developing nations. The pedagogy adopts an ontological approach in its pursuit of robust humanity. Based on Freire's traumatic encounter with extreme poverty early in life, he was able to perceive the "culture of silence" of the oppressed and come to the conclusion that the ignorance and lethargy of the downtrodden were:

*the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social and political domination – and of paternalism – of which they were victims … And it became clear to him that the whole educational system was one of the major instrument for the maintenance of this culture of silence.* (Freire, 1996, p.12)

As a response to the dominant educational system which he dubs "Narrative Sickness", Freire proposes his "Problem-Posing education" otherwise known as "Critical Consciousness". The underlisted points roughly summarise the thrust of Freire's critical intervention:

*"This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from this reflection will come the necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation."* (Freire, 1996, p. 30)

The responsibility of undertaking this struggle rests solely on the oppressed.

To change the objective reality, the perception of reality must be backed up by critical intervention.

Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. (Freire, 1996, p. 43).

For the liberation to be complete, the conversion of the agent must be correspondingly holistic.

In spite of Freire's eloquent pedagogy, there still appears to be a gap as far as praxis is concerned even in his primary discipline of education. Scholars seem to be constantly overwhelmed by a perennial avalanche of state-orchestrated policies of standardization.

This environment is (or at least feels) inhospitable to critical pedagogies. We empathize with our students because we know what it is like to feel marginalized within our professional environments, and we understand our students' hesitation to change their pedagogy or teach against the grain … (Kress, DeGennaro, & Paugh, 2013, p. 7)

The above quotation expresses the challenges of applying the tenets of critical pedagogy to real life situations. The fact is that the treatment of critical pedagogy has been largely theoretical

(Scorza, Mirra, & Morrell, 2013), even outside educational institutions in theatre for development where Freire's pedagogy has gained currency substantially.

The pedagogic issue, as it relates to theatre for development, borders on the commitment of practitioners to liberationist tasks. Commitment to the cause of the people is another way of explaining Freire's notion of holistic conversion. To be converted to the cause of the people is to be committed to the praxis of Freire's pedagogy where verbalism is balanced with activism. This is usually the point where the mythical chasm between theory and practice gets either widened or obviated. The choice to be holistically converted or to remain an outsider-practitioner resides largely in the community research method to be adopted at the inception of the project. In most African countries, the two available methods are the migrant approach and the homestead approach.

Earlier research and workshop endeavours demonstrates that the homestead method is effective while the migrant method is weak (Kafewo, 2004). The effectiveness of the homestead approach as indicated by Kafewo does not however suggest any degree of conversion of the practitioners who are students. Again, the homestead approach of Chuck Mike's Performance Studio Workshop's courageous initiative in Olosunde, Igboelerin East, Oyo State did not produce its desired result (Mike, et al., 1999). Hence the prospect or idea of converting practitioners (most of whom are students and freelance artistes) to the cause of the uncooperative and highly suspicious people of Olosunde never came up. Consequently, there is need to source for an alternative method that can guaranty the required conversion of practitioners and other development agents.

This aim of this paper is to review Freire's concept of holistic conversion for the applied theatre practitioner. In doing this, it discusses the need, requirements and evidence of holistic conversion of Applied Theatre practitioners. The paper, in addition, proposes a model of community theatre research method to further ensure a holistic conversion of practitioners.

With this aim in mind, it is imperative to understand that Freire's philosophy transcends the purview of adult literacy where it was originally birthed. In concrete terms, Freire's thoughts and ideas are revolutionary in character and are primarily concerned with the vocation of humanization. Being very circumspect, Freire pays attention to a situation in which:

*… certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, thus moving from one pole of the contradiction to the other. Theirs is a fundamental role, and has been so throughout the history of this struggle … they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want and to know.* (Freire, p. 42)

This is where applied theatre practitioners and scholars who usually come in as facilitators/development agents fit into Freire's description of outsiders who want to align themselves with the liberation struggle of the downtrodden. The unconverted applied theatre practitioner is essentially a middle class agent of the oppressor working, albeit consciously or unconsciously, to maintain the status quo by using his skills to create a façade of social stability through paternalistic generosity to the oppressed. The reality in developing countries is that the initiative of such struggle usually emanate from these "outsiders". Genuine converts are therefore required by Freire to regularly reassess themselves as the radical nature of the conversion does not give any allowance for ambiguous demeanors. Freire argues that conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth in order to assume a new form of existence. Freire's (1996) argument continues further that:

*Only through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure of domination. One of these characteristics is the previously mentioned existential duality of the oppressed, who are at the same time themselves and the oppressors whose image they have internalized.* (P. 43)

To achieve complete liberation, Freire recommends a profound rebirth of the development agent. By profound rebirth, Freire refers to the holistic concept of conversion of whoever is standing in solidarity with the oppressed to midwife the delivery of liberation through critical pedagogy.
By implication, the task of dialoguing with the people or explaining the consequence of taking critical action suggests the presence of a third party beside the oppressed and oppressor. The third party in the Applied Theatre context is any of the middle-class practitioners who must have been converted to the cause of the oppressed wholesale. (Adegbamigbe, p. 50)

For the liberation to be complete, the conversion of the agent must be correspondingly holistic. We interpret this position to mean that the agent has to be transformed to an insider through inner conviction for him to function effectively. However, considering existing scholarly works on the issue of conversion, James Thompson, and some other scholars have come out boldly against the idea of conversion of the development agents. James Thompson argues against Freire's idea of conversion or comradeship with the oppressed by averring that applied theatre practitioners are guests within the given context. He defines his status as that of an outsider as he asserts that, "One of Applied Theatre's strength is in its status as the outsider, the visitor and the guest" (Thompson, 2008, p. 20).

If the "outsider" theory of Thompson works in prison theatre where he is very vast, it certainly has not worked in rural African community theatre which has all along relied largely on migrant and partial homestead methodologies of practitioners. It follows logically then to explore the need for a holistic conversion of the practitioners.

### 3. The Need for Holistic Conversion of Applied Theatre Practitioners

The Freirean premise should first be agreed upon that comradeship and solidarity with the target community is the sin qua non for any applied theatre practitioner to attain liberationist goals. Comradeship means identifying closely with the target community unconditionally in their struggles. This automatically translates to solidarizing with the people through thick and thin. Solidarity would therefore mean the practitioner should be absorbed into the life style of the community enough to understand their idiosyncrasies. He must also demonstrate an understanding of the nitty gritty of their daily routine. The ensuing camaraderie is necessary to elicit mutual trust between the practitioner and the community. More importantly, it is through a genuine display of altruistic concern for the plight of the people that the practitioner can earn the trust of the people. It is also pertinent to note that he can only attain social efficacy in an atmosphere of mutual trust and conviviality which only comradeship and solidarity can guarantee.

Social Efficacy defines the whole essence of the practitioner's engagement with people, so converting to the struggle of the people serves as an energizer. If the desire to attain social efficacy is good enough a reason to necessitate an occasion of holistic conversion, then social efficacy, when attained, is simultaneously a reward both to the target community and the converted practitioner. In that instance, it becomes a palpable evidence of the need for the committed practitioner to undergo a holistic process of conversion.

From another perspective, the idea of holistic conversion suggests a notion of continuous engagement with the community. In other words, once a practitioner is converted in the complete sense of the word, he should never see any need to disengage with the people. After the initial engagement with the people, it becomes necessary to put in place machinery that is self-sustained. His conversion is such that should ensure the continuity and sustainability of both the theatrical machinery and multiplying developmental projects designed to positively transform the community.

A genuine conversion to the cause of the people will again ensure access to vital information in the community. The process will in turn facilitate a free flow of information from the

community to the practitioner and vice versa. In consonance with Freire's pedagogy, it has to be a horizontal flow of information. A vertical flow of information is a manifestation of the banking system of education. It is oppressive and it is unidirectional, coming only from the middle-class practitioner to the hapless community dwellers. It is oppressive because it is a one-way movement of knowledge that does not give any allowance for the creative imagination of the people. Conversely, the horizontal flow of information encourages beneficial exposure to and exchange of ideas between the practitioner and the community. Such unencumbered access to information comes naturally in a situation where the practitioner has been wholly converted and is considered a bona fide member of the community by the original residents of the community.

Consequently, this conversion is required to help the practitioner to be ready to partake in and help assuage the travails of the people. Conversion to the people's cause is therefore an indication of the practitioner's readiness to first partake in the people's suffering before joining hands with them to find solutions to their problems. Therefore, opting to stay within the community longer than other practitioners had done before him is definitely a step towards holistic conversion and sustaining such a relationship indefinitely is a further step towards consolidating the bond.

## 4. Requirements for Holistic Conversion

The basics of this critical discourse on the conversion of the applied theatre practitioner rests primarily on Freire's critical pedagogy. Discussing the criteria to be met by practitioners for full conversion should therefore be seen to derive strength from the precepts laid down in the pedagogy. Most fundamental of all the conversion criteria is the readiness to be fully immersed in Freire's dialogics (love, faith and humility) which itself derives from Christian liberation theology.

Freire's strong inclination towards the Christian liberation theology underscores the need to understand his treatise which draws strength from the theology. The word, according to Freire ((1996), is located at the centre of dialogue and it has two constituents: reflection and action which work in unison. Doing away with one renders the other redundant. The retention of reflection at the expense of action produces only verbalism, while the retention of action at the expense of reflection produces mere activism. Freire argues further that:

*since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanised, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be consumed by the discussants.* (1996, pp. 69-70)

This act of depositing ideas, according to Freire (1996) in others is not a manifestation of the ideals of Freire's dialogics built upon the foundation of love, humility and faith all of which have a very sound footing in Christian liberation theology. Christian liberation theology has impacted more on the pedagogy thereby making it more visible as Freire reveals the requirements of his dialogics.

According to Melkote and Steeves (2001), Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest and theologian, was able to articulate in his book, *A Theology of Liberation*, that:

*liberation theology derives most significantly from unjust sufferings, not from abstract arguments. The struggle for survival of millions of Latin American Christians prompted their religious leaders to rethink Biblical teachings and their priorities in light of those teachings. The overwhelming emphasis of liberation theology is practice, i.e., direct work with the poor and oppressed. It is impossible to understand liberation theology without practicing it.* (p. 277)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (KJV Bible, John 3: 16). The first of these requirements is deep sacrificial love for the people as exemplified in Biblical quote above and the Peruvian priests. Without love, dialogue

cannot exist. Love serves as the root of dialogue and could also be dialogue itself. Being an act of courage, love invests itself in others. Wherever the oppressed are found, the act of love, on the part of practitioners, is committed to their cause of liberation. Freire (1996) believes love can be restored only through the abolition of oppression. Secondly, the pedagogy also states that humility is indispensable to dialogue. Theatre facilitators who do not possess humility as a weapon cannot claim to have been converted to the struggle of the people. Humility therefore is a subtle weapon capable disarming of the people of their recidivistic and claustrophobic inhibition to change. The third requirement of holistic conversion drawn from Christian liberation theology is faith in mankind. Just as faith is the driving force in Christianity, faith is equally required in the joint vocation of humanization of the practitioners and the oppressed. Without faith in people, dialogue disintegrates and degenerates into paternalistic maneuverings (Freire, 1996, pp. 70-73).

The main goal of Freire's poetics is the emancipation of the downtrodden from all shades of political, economic and social oppression. It is also clear that the attainment of this liberation is contingent upon certain understanding of the people's nature. A fore knowledge of the conflicting existential duality of residents of the community is very necessary for the practitioner to have an idea of the obstacles he will face in the people. This knowledge will assist the applied theatre practitioner to avoid getting easily discouraged when he suddenly begins to encounter the predictable attitude of adhesion to the oppressor in the people he intends to work with.

From another perspective, if the convert is not ready to continue to service his relationship with the community in perpetuity, then the whole process of his conversion becomes deficient. Continuity of the entire process is what gives an enduring meaning to all the sacrifice of conversion. The relationship between the community and the practitioner is a life-long one which must first be serviced and guarded jealously by the practitioner. Once the people successfully arrive at the point of critical perception of their objective reality and voluntarily enlist themselves in the struggle for their own liberation, the people then take their turn to nourish the relationship in perpetuity. At that point, physical distance between the practitioner and the community will no longer be a barrier to the entire process and relationship.
It is mandatory for the converted applied theatre scholar/practitioner to make disciples of upcoming practitioners to help propagate and entrench the principles of holistic conversion. This condition is necessary because it may not be practicable for the primary convert to be available for the people all the time, hence the need to make sure no vacuum is created.

## 5. Evidence of Holistic Conversion

The proof of holistic conversion should be self-evident in the fact that the converted practitioner is fully immersed in the activities of the community. This is an indication that such theatre worker has been accepted and integrated fully into the community. In such an instance, the converted practitioner does not commit any cultural blunder that is capable of arousing the indignation or suspicion of the people against him. In a way, he is an unofficial custodian of the culture and tradition of the community. His understanding of the people's way of life is not only comprehensive but also scientifically documented.

The depth of mutual trust between converts and the community is such that would lend credence to the fact that the practitioner has undergone a holistic conversion. The process of conversion would therefore enable and engender an atmosphere of mutual trust between the practitioner and the community. One way the converted practitioner could easily earn the trust of the people is through the people's conviction that he is genuinely converted to their cause. Once the people are sure the practitioner has no ulterior motive, investing their trust in him would certainly not pose any challenge. To assume the practitioner's conversion is to presuppose that he too has invested his trust in people's ability to reason, to know and to take decision on their own.

All of the above should naturally lead to unlimited access to information on either side. A situation whereby the practitioner is able to access the most classified piece of information in the community is an indication that a holistic conversion of the development agent has taken place. When the residents of the community hide nothing from the practitioner, it is a most solid proof of his holistic conversion. In other words, it is to be considered that the practitioner is already one of them.

The successful conversion of a scholar/practitioner in a particular community is indicative of a successful research endeavor. This, in itself, will attract other willing theatre workers who should be ready for the rigours of conversion. By extension therefore, where we encounter more cases of conversion in a particular community, it may then mean that initial conversion has been so successful that other potential converts are being attracted to join the squad of applied theatre converts.

The most visible evidence of holistic conversion that should be looked out for are human and infrastructural developments within the community. All the efforts of the applied theatre practitioner should be able to culminate in visible and quantifiable human and infrastructural development in the community. It is in this that all the inputs, sacrifice and creative ingenuity of the convert can be evaluated tangibly.

## 6. Conclusion: Adopting an Extended Community Research Approach

Having defined the need, requirements and probable evidences of holistic conversion of the committed applied theatre practitioner, it then becomes necessary to suggest a suitable community research approach that would help take a smooth delivery of the goal of liberation. This researcher is aware of the existing migrant and homestead methods. Chuck Mike's Performance Studio Workshop community theatre outreach in Igboelerin East for instance adopted the homestead approach which lasted two weeks. From the practitioner's account of their experience, they were far from experiencing any conversion. The honest observation here is that it was never in the consciousness of the visiting practitioners to be converted to the cause of the people.

This paper proposes "extended homestead approach" which serves to prepare the ground for a holistic conversion of the practitioner as it extends beyond two to three week-stay in the community as practised by most practitioners. This research proposes an initial stay of at least three months in the community by the practitioner. The initial stay is to be followed by subsequent regular visits by the practitioner and his team. In order to maintain a regular and sustained contact with the community, students' community theatre workshop should be organized to take place within the community at regular intervals. This is an engagement that would require a well-planned logistics and an institutional backing of a Theatre/Performing Arts Department of a nearby university.

It is therefore imperative for any practitioner desirous of undergoing holistic conversion to observe the need and requirements in order to access the benefits of social efficacy in his chosen community. The endeavor can be taken a step further to evaluate the level of efficacy attained by checking it against the evidences of holistic conversion as explained above.

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