

A NEIGHBORHOOD WITHOUT HISTORY

by Judith Mikesch McKenzie

For most of the 1990s, I taught in a small community college in a small town in Washington State. It was not a high-powered school. A decade or so ago, the school had moved away from providing only technical programs to become a full junior college, incorporating humanities and social science programs into the curriculum. I worked there for several years, and loved everything about the school. It felt like home. Wandering the hallways was like wandering the streets of my neighborhood. That is, until our dean of instruction got me thinking and forced my hand. You see, he didn't like messes. He had been roaming the campus, demanding that faculty take notices and postings off their doors, that secretaries clean up their bulletin boards, that maintenance men take down student postings more quickly.

At our school—as at any—learning is a messy business. Students squat in the hallways to study, leaving behind them the litter of their learning. Crumpled papers collect; algebraic formulas get scribbled on the wall next to the math labs; books forgotten or mislaid clutter up the lounges and study carrels. We grumbled about the good dean's fussiness, but complied. If a certain sterility of the walls and hallways was what administra-

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tion wanted, so be it: they could not stop the fecundity, messiness, and growth of ideas inside of student minds—or ours.

But some things go too far. One week, the dean was visiting the back offices of our division, where the secretaries and staff had always kept a refrigerator. That refrigerator was old, it was clunky, but it worked. Over the years, the staff and faculty who used the old monster had decorated it. Every square inch of its exterior surface was plastered with pictures, cartoons, and postcards. It looked wonderful. But, according to the dean, it looked “unprofessional,” so, he ordered, within the next two weeks, it must go.

I heard this news just after arriving on campus one morning and did my share of grumbling. As I opened the old beast to put in my lunch, I couldn't help but give its rounded old surface a little pat, and let my eyes wander over the various pictures and drawings decorating it. It was in that moment that I sealed my fate.

You see, I've known this refrigerator all my life. It is the same one my grandmother had in her pantry, the same one that tilted dangerously on the porch of the abandoned house the gypsies inhabited every summer, the same one that pressed down on the sagging boards of a thousand back—and front—porches of all the neighborhoods of my working-class life. Each one of those refrigerators has a thousand stories to tell, each one has as its legacy the lives and trials and history of its neighborhood.

I knew that, by the time I got to work the next day, that old refrigerator would have been hauled away. I had no illusions of stopping the process, no idea that a Save-the-Beast campaign would work. I would walk down those halls and see ... nothing. Clean clear paint, shining chrome handrails, carefully framed prints. Nothing else. No notices, announcements, flyers, posters, banners, or bulletins. Just wall. And perhaps—but not likely—the administration would buy us a new refrigerator with polished handles and plastic bins and appropriately squared corners, and, if they did, I was certain that they'd find some acceptable and inaccessible place to hide it away. And of course we would not be allowed to paste things on it.

After all, there are rules. The school was not ours. We were merely caretakers, the students merely transients through its halls. The school belongs to all the students through time, who *may* not want the posters and graffiti and messiness of others' learning getting in their way. Those

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students of the future will be transients, too, and will need a clean, clear pathway to tread through.

I know about transients, and I know about their effect on a community. “Community” is currently a very popular term in education, with “learning communities” the dominant model for structuring classrooms and campuses. I met transients clustered around that old refrigerator on the porch of the gypsy house. The gypsies themselves were, of course, transients. My mother met them too, as did the other neighbors. Those transients were neighbors, and were part of the community. They’d scribble notes for each other on that fridge, and on the clapboards of the old house. Mom and other neighbors would leave gifts for them there, and sometimes, years later, some of those gifts would still be there, part of the history of the neighborhood. All real neighborhoods, all real communities, have their history, without which the culture of that neighborhood does not survive, without which no real growth takes place.

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I was amused one day shortly after the Great Refrigerator Incident, when one of our school’s staff remarked, on hearing of the ban-the-refrigerator ruling, that the administration plan was to turn the school into a bank. He was referring to sterility of atmosphere and, as he put it, “the profit factor.” I am not sure he’d ever read Paulo Freire, or heard of the notion of “banking education.” Freire has said that the modern popular conception of institutions of education as “banks of learning” where the minds of the students are the banks, and teachers deposit knowledge into them, is inappropriate to the real cognitive processes of learning.¹ Minds are not repositories into which our riches can simply be transferred through careful entries in the ledgers. We cannot hand ideas, concepts, *knowledge* across a clean counter, make debit/credit notations, and consider the transfer done.

The process of learning is much too complex, much too messy, for that. Learners cannot just passively take in information, but must instead know how to fit that information into their conceptions of life, of truth, of the world in which they live. This fits well with cognitive stage theories, most of which are extensions of Jean Piaget’s work with children.

In Piaget’s concept, children establish *schema*—models for understanding the world around them (crying brings food—therefore cry when

you're hungry). Each new piece of information is *assimilated* by the child, who *accommodates* by either fitting that information into his/her existing schema, or by adjusting those schema to fit the new information. But this process is always, always, initiated when the child experiences *disequilibrium*—discomfort, disorientation, pain. And the process always proceeds by building on existing knowledge. It *connects* for the child the new information to the world he/she knows, and it is from things that *directly affect the child* that the child learns most readily. Piaget's ideas have been consistently shown to be valid across cultures, and through time.²

Freire's ideas echo these concepts, though his work has often been discounted as inapplicable to students in the United States. His original pedagogical ideas, developed from his work with illiterate peasants in Brazil, were seen as untransferable to modern literate western minds. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, his most famous work, was hailed as groundbreaking for the education of the underclass, but seen as irrelevant for higher education in the United States, in general. The Western mind, thinking as it does in neat logical progression, can make neat entries in its knowledge ledgers, and move on very nicely, thank you.³

Except that it doesn't. Education in the U.S. has been failing, and we all know it. Declining scores on standardized tests, rising functional illiteracy, grade inflation, and ongoing debates over content versus form of curriculum are evidence of the rising awareness of problems in our schools.



Current struggles to correct the problems build on the notion of learning communities—students working with each other and their teacher in a community that explores concepts and materials in order to discover their meaning. But these communities have a problem. If learning evolves from the experience of disequilibrium, and if that disequilibrium—that challenge to accepted patterns of thinking—must, to work, connect with the students’ experience and to their lives and realities, then the school must not *offer* a community, but must *become* a part of the students’ community—their neighborhood.

We cannot simply welcome transients as valid members of our neighborhoods, but must become the transient in the *students’ neighborhood*—acknowledging that it is they who will create learning, and we who will only offer the refrigerator on which their gifts to subsequent generations of learners, future occupants of the neighborhood, can be posted.

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Freirian pedagogy would have us do: *enter* into the lives of our students, using their “cultural capital”⁴ as the stuff of learning. This is a popular idea given current notions of postmodern culture and education. But the notion of “history” is not a popular idea, and without it our learning communities, unless dramatically altered, are doomed. In *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences*, Pauline Marie Rosenau discusses the problematic aspects of current academic notions of “history.”⁵ Those she terms the “skeptical postmodernists” and the “affirmative postmodernists”⁶ both see history as without relevance to thinking, cognition, or reality. They reject the linearity of time and the notion of history as a thing concrete or knowable. Out of this belief, such postmodern scholars seek community in “local space,”⁷ adopting a profoundly Freirian notion of “going among the people.”

Such ideas could be seen as a case of “cultural borrowing.” Western education (the United States) borrows cultural and philosophical ideas from Freire’s culture, with the objective of perceiving these borrowed ideas from a meta-perspective that allows the (presumably wiser) postmodern scholar to adapt them to our own educational purposes and to deliver these ideas, out of true benevolent liberalism, back to the people from whom they were borrowed: the oppressed, the underclass—the student. Ironically, we take a loan from the culture of the oppressed in order to deliver back to them our earned interest. But it is an impoverished

borrowing, for significant reasons.

When one borrows the notion of community from cultures where community is perceived as primary (Freire's culture among them) and makes "the community" separate and separable from the whole culture, one misses vital aspects of what "community" means to that culture and to those people. Community is, in the cultures to which I refer, not an entity that moves through time in a series of discrete moments, but is instead *embedded in time*—all the history, ideas, people, and events that

have formed the culture contributing *in the now* to how those living in that culture proceed about their daily business. The gypsy refrigerator of my youth is long gone in linear time, but it is clearly a part of my conceptual process—how I understand and think about the world around me. It is *here*.

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Piaget said that the infant and the child need their history in order to accommodate new learning—they need the foundations and

schema that come from the previous experience of their lives in order to learn what is new to them, to understand it. Freire sees that the learner is embedded in the history of his/her culture, and needs that history to create a foundation for new ideas, and new ways of thinking. In order to truly educate, we must use not just the cultural capital that *we choose* from the lives of our students, but their cultural capital in its entirety, which includes *their* history.

We cannot ignore the experience of education in the K-12 systems, which brings students to our doors. We cannot ignore the programmed curriculum, the standardized texts, the tests without relevance to their lives which have become the measure of their learning. We cannot ignore the ways they have been taught to define learning, or the idea in their minds that learning is not theirs, but is something bestowed upon them. And we cannot ignore the realities of their lives—the messages from the media, their neighborhoods, their past teachers—all of which shape how they think. We cannot ignore, either, the history of ideas, cultural influences, cultural practices, and daily realities that make them members of their culture, their neighborhood. We must know, honor, and work with their history. And how can we hope to do that, if we have no history of our own?

In Freirian pedagogy, a teacher cannot teach without examining the history and the current realities of students' lives. Failure to connect with

students' lives, in Freire's belief, is to go down the path of education that he terms "Education for Domination." There is in his philosophy a distinct choice: a system can be designed to "educate for liberation" or to "educate for domination."

In other words, we can choose to educate to produce free, active, participating members of a free society, or we can choose to educate to produce malleable followers. This choice hinges on our acceptance or rejection of history, and how we choose to position ourselves relative to our students.

We can choose to position ourselves above our students, or we can choose, as Freire does, to position ourselves "face to face"⁸ with our students, as knowers facing other knowers. How we do so, in Freirian pedagogy, depends upon our relationship to history.

In *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Freire examines the relationship of man⁹ to history:

"The reflectiveness and finality of men's relationship with the world would not be possible if these relationships did not occur in a historical as well as physical context. Without critical reflection there is no finality, nor does finality have meaning outside a . . . temporal series of events. For men there is no *here* relative to a *there* which is not connected to a *now*, a *before*, and an *after*. Thus men's relationships with the world are *per se* historical, as are men themselves."¹⁰

Our relationships to our students, our success in dealing with them, depend not only on recognizing, acknowledging, and honoring their "now, before, and after," but on recognizing and acknowledging our own. The questions for educators then become: What is our true history, and where do we find it?

Several years after I had moved into my neighborhood, our dean of instruction—he of the Unprofessional Refrigerator—moved there. When I had first moved into this older, formerly working-class neighborhood, there were very few people there my own age. I was a 30-something mom, and the neighborhood was filled with older retired folks. One by one, those old folks began to tell me things about my home. Leaning over a back fence, or meeting at the mailboxes, one or the other gray head would lean confidentially my way and say, "You know, that old carpenter who had your house put in that bay window in the '50s. He was outta work and just needed something to do. Sure looks nice, tho, don't it?"

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As these confidences filtered in, one by one, I began to see I had not just bought a house, I had become a neighbor. Like it or not, like them or not, these people and their history constituted, from that day forward, my neighborhood.

And to be a part of the neighborhood, I needed—my elder neighbors thought—to know its history. I needed to know—when I dug the cobblestone walk from under six inches of sod and grass in my back yard—that the wife of the old doctor who first built this house had put in the walk-

way to lead out to the playhouse—now gone—they'd built when their first grandchild was born.

That walk later led to my garden, which my sister and I put in the summer she came to live with me in order to get clean and sober. When I tore down a sheetrock wall in my basement, I didn't know who had done the incredible nature artwork I found behind it, spreading in glorious colors across the cement walls. My neighbors

told me. The doctor of the late thirties, the '50s carpenter, the '60s artist, my alcoholic sister and I—all were part of the history of not just that house, but that neighborhood.

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Most of the old neighbors moved away, and younger families moved in. With the exception of two older women, my husband and I became the longest standing residents. And still the neighborhood endured. The history endured. If my husband and I, or Mrs. Blair, or Mrs. Dumontier neglected to tell the stories to the newer residents, they would ask. They could feel the history in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood's history insisted on being noticed.

Except for our dean. When I spoke to him about our neighborhood and how much I would miss it after moving to Oregon, he could speak of only one thing—his next door neighbor's loud and messy dogs. I found myself inexplicably frustrated with this man. Not only for removing my old friend the refrigerator, not only for his tidying up of the schools hallways, but for what he would not see or acknowledge. But, more than that, he, too, will be a part of the history of this neighborhood, whether he participates in it or not—the transient who would not leave messages for anyone else to find, taped to the refrigerator, and who would read none of ours. A sad loss for him.

But why was I frustrated, even angry, with him? Though he and I had

significant differences on *how* to educate, I knew this man to be as passionate about education, about student's minds and their rights as I was, as I am. Yet, as he spoke to me of our neighborhood, it was as if I was being trapped, closed in. I reacted in anger. Though it took me some time to realize it, I saw in his reaction to our neighborhood the problem in my all-too-frequent reaction to the classroom, and in what I often saw happening in our schools.

We—the current “tradition” of higher education (perhaps all education)—*are* that unfortunate dean. The true “neighborhood” of education is the minds of our students. We are the transients—the gypsies. Our task, our most critical task, is determining *what kinds* of transients we will be.

People make choices about their neighborhoods. For some, the neighborhood of choice is the neighborhood swept clean of all history: bulldozed, graded, plotted with nice clean borders. New walls, new roofs, refrigerators factory-direct, and tidy landscaping. Not generally welcoming of transients. Those who choose these neighborhoods choose to start clean. Those who choose neighborhoods like my old one choose to embrace the mess, the dirt, the complications of the history that comes with it.

The history of higher education in the United States is not a clean neighborhood, no matter how many bulldozers we bring in. Along with our successes, our history is littered with false starts, failed and failing curricula, and garbled learning. When we enter into the neighborhoods of our students' learning, like any new resident we bring the history of our old neighborhood with us, to stand face to face with their own. If the history we present to them is a false one, they know it, and the chance for mutual learning is damaged.

Mutual learning. To truly stand face-to-face with our students as knowers, we must embrace and know not only their world and what they are, but must equally embrace and know our world and what we are. Knowing is not an easy task. We challenge our students to face and use the difficult realities of their lives for their learning, and we must challenge ourselves to do the same. We cannot present them with a clean, bulldozed neighborhood and expect them to move in. We must move through their neighborhood, seeking their language, their messages.

Freire believes that the language of learning must be the language of

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each student. His model examined the language of his students to seek what he termed “generative words:”¹¹ Words laden with meaning for and to *the students*, which would evoke for the students an understanding of the world, the region in which they lived. With his goal to teach reading and language to illiterate peasants, Freire presented each of these words to his students in the context of “existential situations familiar to the learner.”¹² And his students learned to read and to transform their own relationship to their world.

Each day, in the classroom, I choose to look for that old refrigerator in the back alleys of the students’ neighborhood, hoping that I can find there the messages, the language, that will help me to see their lives—words that will evoke for them their place in this shared history, words that will help me to form “existential situations” in our shared classroom that will help them to see their role as learners. And perhaps help me to see mine. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum Press, 1986.
- ² While it is true that Piaget only worked with children, subsequent stage theories of cognitive development have shown a marked pattern of similar learning behavior in adults.
- ³ In her essay, “Pedagogy and Political Commitment: A Comment,” bell hooks explores Freirian notions of “education for Liberation” vs “education for Domination.” She notes that one of the difficulties for teachers using this method with students in the United States is that such students, made uncomfortable by the challenges of the process, tend to view their teachers negatively. Ms. hooks nevertheless concludes that the method is essential and finds that it is an effective method to create real learning in her students.
- ⁴ Giroux, Henry, “Introduction” in Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. New York: Bergin & Garvey, 1985. xxii.
- ⁵ Rosenau, Pauline Marie, “Humbling History, Transforming Time, and Garbling Geography,” in *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, 62-76.
- ⁶ Ibid, 14-16
- ⁷ Ibid, 69
- ⁸ Freire, Paulo, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1975. In a section titled “The Adult Literacy Process as an Act of Knowing,” 13. Freire explains: “The first type of educator . . . is a knowing subject, face to face with other knowing subjects. He can never be a mere memorizer, but a person constantly readjusting his knowledge, who calls forth knowledge from his students. For him, education is a pedagogy of knowing.”
- ⁹ Throughout his works, Freire uses the word “man” consistently. This writer chooses to accept that as a reference to all persons.
- ¹⁰ Freire, Paulo, *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1975, 31.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 19.
- ¹² Ibid.

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