

## Paulo Freire's dialogic pedagogy and the democratization of pedagogy in Taiwan's higher education: Challenges and possibilities

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**Abstract:** This paper advocates for the application of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's theory of dialogic education as a critical and transformative framework for reimagining the possibilities of democratic pedagogy within higher education. Freire emphasized that education should be rooted in dialogue, conscientização (critical consciousness), and participatory learning, rejecting the passive conception of learners as mere recipients of knowledge. The integration of Freire's theory into Taiwan's higher education context presents an opportunity for academic communities to critically examine prevailing power structures and respond to diverse social voices, thereby fostering democratic pedagogy that is inclusive, civic-minded, and dedicated to the public good. In order to advance the realization of Freire's vision for democratic pedagogy, structural transformations must be pursued across three pivotal domains: curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and institutional culture. This paper seeks to expand the horizon of democratic pedagogy within Taiwan's higher education through Paulo Freire's dialogic pedagogy. Interactions between teachers and students should be grounded in love, humility, critical thinking, and faith. Such an approach fosters a hopeful educational environment and contributes to the realization of a more humane and transformative model of higher education pedagogy. Furthermore, within the context of dialogic pedagogy in higher education, the reciprocal exchange and mutual understanding between teachers and students serve as a pathway toward a more holistic and humanized mode of existence.

**Keywords:** *Conscientização, Democratic pedagogy, Dialogic pedagogy, Higher education, Paulo freire.*

### 1. Introduction

Higher education is inextricably linked to political, economic, and cultural systems, functioning as a pivotal driver of social transformation. The global expansion of access to higher education has generated a growing demand—both nationally and internationally—for reliable consumer information regarding academic quality. Participation in international university ranking systems enables institutions to demonstrate their academic standards to diverse global audiences. In Taiwan, since the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwan's higher education system has undergone significant transformations in its pursuit of democratic education. Nonetheless, the realization of these democratic ideals remains constrained by persistent structural, cultural, and political challenges. Structurally, governance within higher education continues to adhere largely to a top-down decision-making model,

thereby limiting the meaningful participation of both students and faculty members. Although participatory mechanisms—such as student councils—have been formally established, their roles are frequently symbolic, offering minimal influence on substantive policy deliberations. Moreover, under the influence of neoliberal ideologies, the prioritization of global university rankings and performance-based evaluation frameworks has driven institutions to focus disproportionately on quantifiable output indicators, often at the expense of participatory learning practices and the consolidation of institutional democracy. Culturally, the enduring legacy of Confucian values, particularly the emphasis on deference to authority, continues to shape hierarchical patterns of interaction within the classroom. Teacher-centered pedagogies remain predominant, constraining the development of critical dialogue and limiting opportunities for student agency. Furthermore, the continued reliance on rote memorization as a core instructional strategy hampers the creation of dialogic learning environments essential for the cultivation of democratic dispositions and competencies. Politically, despite constitutional protections of academic freedom, its practical implementation remains precarious. This vulnerability is particularly evident in the context of politically sensitive topics—such as cross-strait relations—where instances of governmental interference in university affairs periodically arise. In addition, Taiwan's highly polarized political climate often discourages open engagement with controversial issues, reinforcing tendencies toward self-censorship among both academics and students [1-11].

Beyond the aforementioned challenges, structural inequalities in educational participation and resource allocation continue to hinder the realization of democratic education. Indigenous students, along with those from rural or socioeconomically marginalized communities, are frequently excluded from university governance structures and curriculum development processes. The dominance of Mandarin (Huayu) and Han-centric narratives further marginalizes Taiwan's multilingual and multicultural realities. Simultaneously, the increasing marketization of higher education—manifested through managerialism and the commodification of learning—has progressively undermined the university's function as a site for civic engagement and democratic formation. The prevailing emphasis on institutional efficiency, graduate employability, and student satisfaction has significantly curtailed the space for collective deliberation and critical inquiry. In light of these multifaceted challenges, structural reforms are urgently required. These reforms should prioritize the democratization of institutional governance, the promotion of dialogic pedagogical practices, the protection of academic freedom, the implementation of inclusive and equitable policies, and the resistance to neoliberal commodification within educational settings. Through such transformative efforts, the public character of higher education may be revitalized, and its democratic mission reaffirmed. In summary, although Taiwan's higher education system has made considerable institutional progress following its democratization, structural, cultural, and political barriers continue to hinder the deepening and realization of democratic education. Research indicates that current higher education governance largely relies on top-down policy approaches, and curricula have long been dominated by Mandarin language and Han-centric cultural perspectives, lacking inclusivity toward diverse ethnic groups and local knowledge. Moreover, the neoliberal market logic has reinforced tendencies toward university performativity and commodification, thereby constraining academic freedom and shrinking the space for public discourse. In light of these challenges, this paper proposes using Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's theory of dialogic pedagogy as a critical and transformative framework for rethinking the possibilities of democratic practice in higher education. Freire emphasized that education should be grounded in dialogue, conscientização (critical consciousness), and participatory learning, rejecting the notion of learners as passive recipients of knowledge. Applying this theory to Taiwan's higher education context could encourage academic communities to critically reflect on power structures and respond to diverse social voices, thereby promoting educational practices that are inclusive, civic-minded, and oriented toward the public good [4, 6, 12-21].

## 2. Paulo Freire's Dialogic Pedagogy

### 2.1. *The Interplay of Theory and Practice within a Dialogic Framework*

An inauthentic word—one incapable of effecting transformation in reality—emerges when a dichotomy is imposed upon its essential components. When the word is stripped of its actionable dimension, reflection is likewise diminished, resulting in its degeneration into mere idle speech, empty verbalism, or an alienated and alienating form of discourse—what Freire refers to as a meaningless “blah.” Such a word becomes hollow, incapable of denouncing injustice or confronting the world, for genuine denunciation presupposes a commitment to transformation, and transformation is inconceivable without action. Conversely, when action is privileged to the exclusion of reflection, the word is reduced to mere activism. This form of action—undertaken for its own sake—undermines authentic praxis and renders true dialogue unattainable. In either case, the dichotomy engenders inauthentic modes of existence, which, in turn, produce distorted forms of thought that perpetuate the original division. Therefore, authentic dialogue must integrate both reflection and action; it is not solely a theoretical exercise, but a form of engaged practice rooted in transformative intent. Within a dialogic framework, theory and practice are not separate or hierarchical domains but are mutually constitutive and dynamically interrelated. Rather than treating theory as abstract knowledge and practice as mere application, dialogic pedagogy emphasizes their dialectical integration. Theory emerges from lived experience and social reality, while practice is informed and transformed through critical reflection. In this sense, dialogue serves as the mediating process through which theoretical insights are tested, contested, and reconfigured in concrete action, and practical experiences give rise to new conceptual understandings. This reciprocal movement aligns with Freire's notion of *praxis*—the unity of reflection and action aimed at transformation. Through authentic dialogue, learners and educators co-construct knowledge, resist authoritarian modes of transmission, and foster a more critical, participatory engagement with the world [4, 14, 22]. Thus, the dialogic interplay of theory and practice not only deepens comprehension but also empowers transformative agency. Critical pedagogy is a state of becoming, a way of being in the world and with the world [23].

### 2.2. *Language as the Essence of Human Existence: A Freirean Perspective*

According to Freire [24] human beings are fundamentally linguistic beings. He emphasized that individuals are capable of using their creative language to capture and express the world in which they live [24]. Language, in this view, is not merely a tool for communication, but a profound expression of one's inner consciousness. Without the capacity for language—without the ability to speak about things, in diverse ways, at any time and place—individuals would be unable to engage in creative communication with external reality. In such a condition, the human being would lose a vital aspect of their humanity. From the perspective of Paulo Freire, human beings are fundamentally beings of language. Language, in Freire's pedagogy, is not a neutral medium for communication, but rather a means through which individuals engage with the world, interpret reality, and participate in its transformation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that through dialogue—authentic, reciprocal, and rooted in lived experience—individuals develop critical consciousness (*conscientização*), which enables them to move from passive recipients of knowledge to active subjects in the process of learning and social change. Language thus becomes a vehicle for both self-expression and collective emancipation. By naming the world, we do not merely describe it; we re-create it. In this sense, to exist humanly is to exist dialogically, and to speak is to act. Freire's conception of language underscores its ontological and political significance, emphasizing that through words we not only communicate but also affirm our agency, resist oppression, and envision a more just and equitable society. However, the ability to develop and use thought-language depends on an individual's level of critical consciousness. If a person has not awakened to the awareness that they are the subject of their own existence, they are unable to possess a truly reflective thought-language. Consequently, they lack the ability to critically reflect on themselves and their actions. It is only through the awakening of consciousness—

conscientization—that one becomes fully aware of themselves as a linguistic being capable of reflection, thought, and transformation [4, 25, 26].

### 2.3. Paulo Freire's Five Ideas for Dialogic Pedagogy

Education must be democratic and dialogical. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire outlines five key concepts that he believes are essential for fostering genuine dialogue. These principles are not only fundamental to the interaction between teacher and student but are also vital to learning in its broadest sense. Freire emphasizes the significance of dialogue as a means of mutual exchange between educators and learners. The various dimensions of dialogue, as outlined by Freire, are as follows: (1) Love: Entering into dialogue requires equality among participants. Each individual must place trust in others, fostering an environment of mutual respect and love. Love, in this context, is defined as care and commitment. It is an act of courage, not fear, and involves a deep commitment to others. (2) Humility: Dialogue cannot thrive without humility. The act of "naming the world," through which individuals continuously reconstruct their understanding of the world, must be undertaken with humility, not arrogance. The process of engaging with others requires openness to learning and growth. (3) Hope: Dialogue is likewise dependent on hope. In the context of the human condition, hope is an essential and intrinsic element, rather than an external add-on. Hope is not merely a passive expectation but is expressed through action, forming the foundation of dialogue. (4) Critical thinking: Dialogue fosters critical thinking. True dialogue cannot exist unless the participants engage in thoughtful reflection and critique. It is through critical thinking that individuals come to understand their realities and challenge the status quo. (5) Faith: Dialogue is sustained by faith. Faith in the capacity of others to "name the world" and an enduring trust between participants are crucial. Furthermore, dialogue is imbued with a hope that dehumanization can be overcome, creating space for humanization and transformative change [4, 13, 26–32].

### 2.4. Dialogue Functions as a Consciousness-Raising Activity, and Authentic Dialogue Must Be Grounded in Love

Freire [26] emphasizes that teaching is inherently a relational activity involving both the teacher and the learner; there exists no educational process that includes only one or the other. According to Freire, all pedagogical practice is fundamentally dialogical in nature, encompassing interactions between teachers and students. This notion of "dialogue" is a central theme in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wherein Freire argues that authentic dialogue between educators and learners cultivates the development of a critical consciousness in both parties [13]. Indeed, such dialogical processes pave the way for what Jürgen Habermas conceptualizes as emancipatory communication, enabling learners to critically interrogate forms of false consciousness that they may have previously accepted without question. This, in turn, fosters the emergence of critical consciousness and equips learners with the capacity to rationally critique ideologies sustained by dehumanizing structures. Freire underscores that through dialogue, individuals come to understand not only what they know and why they know it, but also what they do not know and the reasons for such gaps in knowledge. This reflective process empowers individuals to engage in transformative action aimed at reshaping external realities [24, 33, 34]. In this context, dialogue functions as a consciousness-raising activity—an intersubjective encounter in which individuals name and make sense of their lived world. It constitutes a foundational condition for humanization [4, 24]. Furthermore, Freire asserts that authentic dialogue must be grounded in love; individuals must actively develop their capacity to love others. This capacity is strengthened through the act of loving and, conversely, diminishes when love is withheld [35]. In essence, Freire maintains that love is the ethical foundation of dialogical pedagogy.

## 3. Paulo Freire's Dialogic Pedagogy and Democratizing Pedagogy: Challenges and Possibilities

In the ongoing process of democratization within Taiwan's higher education system, surface-level structural reforms have not yet yielded a corresponding transformation in pedagogical practice. Efforts

to cultivate critical consciousness (conscientização) and foster genuine civic participation are still constrained by longstanding socio-cultural and institutional barriers. Paulo Freire's dialogic pedagogy provides a compelling theoretical framework through which educators may resist epistemic domination and reclaim the university as a space for democratic engagement and social transformation. According to Freire, education should be conceived not as a neutral process of knowledge transmission but as a dialogic encounter in which teachers and students co-construct meaning and critically engage with the world. This dialogic relationship is essential to the development of critical awareness, which empowers learners to recognize oppressive structures and act upon them. In contrast, the "banking model" of education—wherein students are treated as passive receptacles of information—perpetuates cultural reproduction and obedience, thereby diminishing students' capacity for critical inquiry and social agency [4, 25, 36]. Despite the growing emphasis on student-centered learning and critical thinking in Taiwan's curricular discourse [37] implementation in practice remains hindered by entrenched Confucian pedagogical traditions, exam-oriented culture, and hierarchical institutional governance [3, 38]. For instance, empirical research by Huang [39] found that although instructors in Taiwanese universities expressed support for dialogic pedagogy in principle, classroom dynamics remained teacher-centered, with limited student participation in knowledge construction or decision-making. To move toward the realization of Freire's democratic educational vision, structural transformation is required at three key levels:

### 3.1. Curriculum Design

Curriculum mapping has been emphasized in recent curriculum innovations in higher education in the drive for global competitiveness. However, educational programs must recognize students' lived experiences as valid and valuable sources of knowledge. Rather than treating learners as passive recipients of predetermined curricula, educators should actively incorporate the cultural, historical, and social realities that shape students' everyday lives. By integrating issues that reflect their socio-political contexts—such as inequality, discrimination, and community struggles—education becomes more relevant, empowering, and transformative. This approach not only affirms students' identities and backgrounds but also cultivates their ability to question dominant narratives and power structures. In doing so, it nurtures critical consciousness, a concept central to the work of Paulo Freire (1997, 2000) and echoed by scholars like Apple [40] who emphasize the role of education in promoting social justice and democratic engagement [4, 7, 13, 40–44]. Moreover, when educational practices center the lived realities of learners, they pave the way for more inclusive and equitable learning environments. This demands a shift in the roles of both teachers and students: educators must become facilitators and co-learners who listen deeply, reflect critically, and respond with humility and care, while students are encouraged to become active participants in shaping their educational journey. Such a reimagining of education aligns with Bell Hooks [45] notion of "engaged pedagogy," which calls for teaching that is rooted in love, dialogue, and the holistic well-being of the learner. It also resonates with the idea of curriculum as a space for meaning-making, where students learn not only to interpret the world, but also to act upon it. In this way, education transcends its conventional role and becomes a powerful tool for individual and collective liberation—empowering learners to transform their own lives and the communities to which they belong. After all, educational practices are never neutral [4, 25, 40, 45–47].

### 3.2. Pedagogical Practice

UNESCO [53] report, *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*, underscores an urgent need to reframe education as a global common good, grounded in equity, solidarity, and participatory democracy. This vision departs from technocratic paradigms that privilege efficiency and standardization, advocating instead for relational, ethical, and dialogical models of learning. Central to this transformation is the Freirean emphasis on dialogical engagement and problem-posing education [13, 33] wherein learners and educators co-construct knowledge through critical reflection and praxis. Such a redefinition of pedagogy necessitates a shift in the role of teachers—from transmitters of

knowledge to co-learners and facilitators of critical consciousness. As Sharma and Sayed [48] argue, enabling reciprocal learning spaces in which power is redistributed is essential for nurturing student agency and epistemic justice. In the Taiwanese higher education context, historically shaped by Confucian hierarchies, examination-driven culture, and centralized curriculum mandates [49] the adoption of dialogical pedagogies represents both a cultural challenge and a democratic opportunity. Amid Taiwan's broader sociopolitical shifts—especially its efforts toward cultural recognition of Indigenous peoples, gender equity, and migrant inclusion—higher education institutions are increasingly called to reimagine curriculum design. Embedding Freirean dialogue into curriculum processes can empower marginalized voices, encourage inclusive epistemologies, and strengthen the relevance of higher education to social realities [50–52]. Co-created curricula that engage students, educators, and local communities serve not only to disrupt dominant narratives but also to model participatory democracy in educational practice. This aligns with UNESCO [53] global call for a renewed social contract in education, offering a localized yet internationally resonant vision of dialogical, justice-oriented learning.

### 3.3. Institutional Culture

Education can change the future of individuals and is key to raising the competitiveness of a nation. Education originated as a social activity meant to cultivate individuals capable of productive labour. In education, power asymmetries between faculty and students must be addressed by institutionalizing participatory governance structures, allowing students to meaningfully engage in curriculum development and policy decisions. However, structural reforms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by a pedagogical shift that redefines the faculty-student relationship. Drawing on Paulo Freire's Five Ideas for Dialogical Pedagogy—love, humility, trust, hope, and critical thinking—educators can cultivate a dialogic space where students are not merely passive recipients of knowledge but co-creators of meaning. Love manifests as a deep commitment to the humanity of learners, while humility allows educators to recognize students as valid knowers with unique lived experiences. Trust builds the relational foundation for authentic dialogue, hope sustains the belief in education as a transformative force, and critical thinking empowers students to interrogate dominant narratives and envision alternative futures. Integrating these principles into classroom dialogue not only disrupts hierarchical power structures but also promotes democratic participation, epistemic justice, and the emergence of a more equitable academic culture [4, 13, 14, 48, 54–59].

The implementation of education plays a pivotal role in shaping a nation's development and long-term success, functioning not only as a catalyst for individual advancement but also as a transformative force in the global context. Its influence extends beyond the mere cultivation of competencies for economic productivity; education actively contributes to nation-building, fosters social cohesion, and facilitates reconciliation processes. These multifaceted impacts underscore the foundational role of education in both individual lives and collective societal trajectories. In Taiwan, contemporary educational reforms reflect not only commitments to pedagogical justice but also align with the democratic aspirations of its diverse civil society. Informed by Freirean philosophy, higher education is envisioned as transcending the instrumental rationality of the knowledge economy, reclaiming the university as a critical arena for public discourse, democratic participation, and the co-creation of a more equitable and inclusive society [60]. Through dialogic pedagogy, Taiwan's universities can evolve into transformative institutions that contribute substantively to social justice and civic renewal.

## 4. Conclusions

Critical pedagogy uncovers or otherwise identifies the enduring historical forces in educational discourses, practices, and values [61]

Critical pedagogy is fundamentally concerned with unveiling and interrogating the enduring historical forces that shape educational discourses, practices, and values. This approach, grounded in the work of Paulo Freire and later scholars such as Henry Giroux, views education as a political and cultural

act, not just a neutral process of knowledge transmission [4, 14, 24]. Human selfishness often obstructs individuals from perceiving the true essence of life. Examining the human existential condition, it becomes evident that, driven by selfish motives, the ruling class frequently prioritizes the preservation of its own interests in interpersonal interactions. As a result, the ruling class becomes the central logic within the operation of the class system, thereby triggering various inhumane phenomena of oppression that hinder individuals' journey toward the true meaning of life. Consequently, the political activities undertaken by the ruling class in the relationship between the ruling and the oppressed often employ a hoarding mentality, which serves to promote the passive and passive resignation of the oppressed, aligning their actions with a submerged state of consciousness. Additionally, the ruling class capitalizes on the passive characteristics of the oppressed to propagate and internalize slogans, which in turn fills their consciousness. These slogans, however, often deepen the oppressed's fear of freedom. Such inhumane conduct is fundamentally incompatible with the process of true liberation [4, 13, 62, 63]. This is particularly evident in the socio-political context of Brazil during Freire's time. The prevailing social conditions in Brazil have posed significant obstacles to the realization of democratic education. Throughout his life, Freire remained deeply committed to advocating for and advancing the cause of democratic education in his beloved homeland.

Freire is addressed in theory and practice, analyzing his objective idealism and his efforts to build critical consciousness in literacy campaigns. The examination of Freire's theory and practice offers a window into his larger project: pedagogy for liberation [64]. This paper investigates the potential of Paulo Freire's dialogic pedagogy as a transformative framework for fostering democratic pedagogy in Taiwanese universities. Grounded in principles of dialogue, critical consciousness (*conscientização*), and mutual humanization, Freire's philosophy challenges the traditional banking model of education and calls for a participatory, student-centered approach. By analyzing current pedagogical practices and institutional constraints within Taiwan's higher education, this study identifies opportunities to shift toward more inclusive and democratic forms of learning.

In order to advance the realization of Freire's vision for democratic pedagogy, structural transformations must be pursued across three pivotal domains: curriculum design, pedagogical practice, and institutional culture. In summary, it argues that implementing dialogic pedagogy not only cultivates critical thinking and civic engagement among students, but also empowers educators to co-construct knowledge in ways that affirm cultural diversity and social justice. Most importantly, interactions between teachers and students should be grounded in love, humility, critical thinking, and faith. Such an approach fosters a hopeful educational environment and contributes to the realization of a more humane and transformative model of higher education pedagogy. Furthermore, within the context of dialogic pedagogy in higher education, the reciprocal exchange and mutual understanding between teachers and students serve as a pathway toward a more holistic and humanized mode of existence [4].

### Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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