

PAULO FREIRE IN THE NORTH: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES
TO EMPOWERMENT EDUCATION

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Bom dia. Estou muito feliz por estar aqui de novo no Brasil. Agradeço muito a oportunidade de fazer uma apresentação neste Congresso tão importante. Faz oito anos desde que eu estive aqui. Nessa época eu estava fazendo pesquisas sobre o Mobral, o programa de alfabetização.

I am happy to be here today and have the opportunity of addressing this distinguished gathering. Eight years ago, I lived in Brazil for some time conducting research on MOBRAL, the national literacy program. I was pleased to find materials that in essence used the generative themes and techniques originally developed by Paulo Freire, though there was no official recognition of his underlying philosophy.

My initial contact with the work of Paulo Freire was in 1973 when I left the University to work on a California adult education grant to "reach the unreachable." The program was situated in East Side San Jose, one hour south of San Francisco, a Hispanic, working poor and unemployed community, which was largely unserved by any adult education programs. Our first step as a group of outside educators was to make contacts with local educators, church and other leaders to form an investigation team in the community. True to Freire's ideas, we started by listening as a team in the community to identify issues and problems in the community, and develop educational projects. We believed that working with residents would promote a more effective educational program than if we had decided courses beforehand. As we walked door to door and talked with people in shopping markets, welfare and employment offices, we uncovered almost immediately the overriding felt need for English as a Second Language classes. People expressed over and over again their feelings of frustration of not being able to make it in America, and believing that they were at fault for not speaking English.

Our primary offering therefore became ESL classes. Yet, we felt we could not use any existing curriculum. The texts that were available either used inappropriate content and didn't relate to our students' experiences or unwittingly

seemed to convey discriminatory messages. We chose to develop our own curriculum using the dialogue problem-posing approach espoused by Paulo Freire and based on the problematic reality of our students' lives.

My own path from then on led to further teaching, refining and adapting Freire's ideas to ESL curriculum in a North American context. I've had the opportunity of teaching a wide variety of immigrants and refugees from all over the world, of providing consultation at one of the Indochinese refugee camps in the Philippines, of consulting with ESL and literacy classes in Kenya, and of exchanging ideas during my teacher training sessions in Canada and throughout the U.S.

I propose today to provide a rationale for using Freire's philosophy and methodology, to critique ESL curriculum that avoids students' social reality, and to elaborate on how to develop curriculum using these ideas alternatively called problem-posing, dialogue literacy, popular education, education for empowerment or for critical consciousness. I am honored to be talking about Freire's work in his homeland and hope that after this conference many of you will find opportunity to pursue these ideas directly with Paulo Freire.

Before I examine curriculum, it is important to look at our students, their backgrounds, expectations, and socio-economic status. I am aware that I am presenting my knowledge from teaching immigrants and refugees to the United States. Some of what I say will be applicable to your students in English as a Second or Foreign Language, other parts of this discussion will apply to first language literacy students.

Let me start by talking about some of my students--their feelings, perceptions, the problems they face in their lives. Here are a few stories. In ESL teaching we typically ask about our students' families. We may ask, "How many children do you have?" and a Southeast Asian refugee student may answer, "Four." But this answer tells little. Is he talking about all of his children or only the four who came to the States? Or for all our students, including Brazilians, does the answer four include all children who were born or only those who are alive. Another typical question, "where do you live", may unwittingly put an illegal refugee from Central American into a panic or cause someone in Brazil to think suddenly about their housing situation, if it's crowded, satisfactory, or unhealthy. With these thoughts, students may stop listening to the lesson.

Finally, let's look at a common situation: last year one of my students returned to class with a cast on her leg after being gone for a week. During this period her learning had continued outside of class. It turned out she had fallen at work and broken her ankle. Her boss had laid her off for a few weeks, though he had told her she could come back. I asked if she had applied for workers compensation. Oh, no, she wouldn't do that. She was scared she wouldn't get her job back. She had just gone to the county hospital. I had to ask myself what had happened to her in that week? How sympathetic or devastating were her encounters with clinic staff, with her boss, with her family in terms of lost income that she wasn't going

to claim. How did these encounters affect her view of English, her view of me as a teacher, and her view of herself in the U.S.--what power did she have to get what she needed, whether or not she spoke English. These examples indicate that English and literacy lessons can have a high social and emotional charge whether or not the teacher realizes it. I call these emotions--the ones students bring with them from their experiences--their hidden voices.

These hidden voices are essential for the educator to uncover because they have the power to block learning. The blocks can be emotional (a sadness from the past, or shame at not speaking English or knowing how to read). They can be educational (fear of asking questions). They can be structural (a lack of contact between foreign and English speakers). They can be social or economic, such as prejudice and job instability. Or they can be cultural, with students caught between two cultures as they learn the English language and expectations coming from the United States.

Yet, and this is my central argument today, the emotional power behind these hidden voices, if tapped in the classroom can drive and inspire learning. By helping students articulate their concerns in the classrooms, teachers can help students understand their blocks and move beyond them. These hidden voices can uncover what Freire calls generative themes--themes that have emotional or social meaning for students--that can be used as the basis for learning and curriculum development.

With an approach based on generative themes, the class curriculum is based on students' needs, problems, social context and their current strengths to meet these needs. Everyone in the community--not just the teacher--is assumed to be both instructor and learner. Through dialogue and the sharing of life experiences, students develop self-confidence.

By making the private public, people begin to see that it is not their individual fault for not making it in society. In the support structure of a group, they are able to construct new knowledge about their experiences and develop critical awareness of the social and historical contexts of their lives. The goal of critical thinking is to empower students to change their lives and discover new ways to address their problems.

I will discuss this education in depth in the second half of this paper. First I'd like to return to the students for a few minutes to present who they are and what dilemmas they face in statistical terms. This type of analysis is an important step in developing appropriate curriculum. I would suggest that in Brazil you start this research to uncover who your students are.

In the U.S., we have 23 million functional illiterates with another 40 million designated marginally functional. We have 60 million high school dropouts, 80% of whom are Black or Hispanic. Another one-million drop out each year.

ESL statistics are more problematic. In 1977, we had documented over 30 million U.S. residents from non-English speaking backgrounds. Since then, another

3 1/2 million new immigrants have entered, with figures between 5 - 10 million undocumented residents. One-fifth of language minority students, and consequently their parents, live in neighborhoods where English is the minority language.

The majority of our students come from low socio-economic status. Of the 60 million adults without high school diplomas, 75% earn less than \$ 5000/annually. Close to 90% of Hispanics work in low-paying, unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Unemployment for Blacks is double the white average. Despite current emphasis on vocational ESL and job performance, the realistic economic prospects for many students are grim. According to industry representatives at the National Literacy Conference in 1983, which I presented at, jobs are increasing in low-paying, low-skilled retail and service sectors. There will be little or no room for advancement, despite knowledge of English.

With this situation, I am left with many unanswered questions: why are tens of millions not reached by current adult education/ESL enrollment of a few million adults. I assume this is similar in Brazil for adults and in public schools. Most importantly, why don't our current educational approaches confront the implicit message-that illiteracy and inability to communicate in English is not purely an educational issue. It is a social problem that cannot be separated from linguistic, cultural, racial and economic barriers.

For many students, classroom learning can begin the process of gaining ability to make changes in their lives. Yet, this learning can also create conflicts. As students learn English in Brazil, they come into conflicts between pressures to adopt expectations and values from the U.S. and their desires to preserve Brazilian cultural integrity. For public school students, learning to read and write does not eliminate difficulties in finding work or achieving job advancement.

Classes and curriculum materials therefore can symbolize entrance into world culture or dominant society that students may desire, fear, or find difficult to achieve. Implicitly, the classroom becomes a focus of cultural and social conflict.

How do traditional ESL teaching materials relate to this classroom conflict or the problems in students' lives? Unfortunately, many of the books in use today don't recognize these issues. Although many competency-based curricula are excellent for teaching language skills, these same materials may reinforce learning conflicts and increase students' frustrations.

Today let's look at one example of a dialogue in a doctor's office--this could be in a competency unit on health.

MRS. GARCIA: IS DOCTOR SMITH IN?

NURSE: WHAT IS YOUR NAME? DO YOU HAVE AN APPOINTMENT?

MRS. GARCIA: NO, BUT I'M VERY SICK. MY NAME IS MRS. GARCIA.
MY FRIEND TOLD ME TO SEE DR. SMITH.

NURSE: LET ME SPEAK TO THE DOCTOR. DR. SMITH WILL SEE

YOU AFTER THE NEXT PATIENT.

DR. SMITH: WHAT IS YOUR TROUBLE, MRS. GARCIA?

MRS. GARCIA: I HAVE A BAD PAIN IN MY CHEST. I COUGH ALL THE TIME.

DR. SMITH: YOUR LUNGS SEEM CLEAR. I'LL GIVE YOU A PRESCRIPTION.
HAVE IT FILLED AT THE DRUG STORE. YOU NEED TO KEEP
QUIET AND GET SOME REST.

What are the competency or functional issues in this lesson: how to make a doctor's appointment and talk about one's symptoms. Although these language skills are extremely important, let's examine the manner in which they are presented--what are the underlying cultural and social assumptions and how may they affect our students? First the lesson assumes a situation familiar to students, that they have their own doctor and can be squeezed into a busy schedule without an appointment. Yet, our students more often go to clinics, wait in lines, and rarely can take rests from their jobs. Many do not have paid sick days.

Equally important, the dialogue doesn't explore the feelings non-literate and non-English speaking patients may have when seeing a doctor. They may be hesitant about signing papers, feel embarrassed when talking to the doctor, or believe they are not getting proper care. Although this lesson presents a target vocabulary, it misreads our students' life situations and in so doing blocks learning or at least fails to facilitate it.

The functional and competency-based curricula in use today often fail to recognize students' real life situations. The term, functional curricula, itself is misleading in that the majority of our students function quite well enough to survive; in fact they may have much to teach us about survival. Functional definitions and evaluations of students' progress also fail to take into account student's self images, their low self-esteem acquired from adversarial social conditions, or conversely their pride in the skills they have outside of class. Finally, competency approaches assume learning is an individual skill acquired through step-by-step sequences. Yet education involves active learning using critical thinking and questioning skills. And teaching of critical thinking requires an interaction between the individual and the group, and between the learner and his or her social context.

PROBLEM-POSING: COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING

I want to propose an alternative approach of community problem-posing. Simply stated, problem-posing is an educational process which takes curriculum issues from the community and from students' needs, and through dialogue and co-learning, activates changes back in the community.

Problem-posing, inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, has been practiced successfully in the last two decades in literacy and community development programs throughout the third world, and in the U.S. and Canada. Though Freire's phonetic literacy method does not apply directly to teaching ESL, his basic premises hold true. Education should challenge students to think critically about their lives and help them seek changes they want for themselves and for their communities.

In Freire's terms, the purpose of education should be human liberation, which "takes place to the extent that people reflect upon...the relationship to the world in which they live. And...in conscientizing themselves, they insert themselves in history as a subject." This goal of education is based on his view of the learner and of knowledge: the learner is not an empty vessel to be filled by the teacher, nor an object of education. "Studying is a form of reinventing, recreating, rewriting, and this is a subject's not an object's task." Learners enter into this process of education, by constructing their reality in social exchange with others. With this approach, students are respected and their lives are given value.

To achieve this education, Freire proposes a dialogical approach called problem-posing in which everyone--teacher/student, administrator/teacher, professional/community member--participates as co-learners. The goal of dialogue is critical thinking (or conscientização) and action. Problem-posing begins when people analyze connections between their individual lives and social conditions, and challenge their images of self-blame. But problem-posing continues beyond perception--towards the actions and decisions people make to gain control over their lives. True knowledge evolves from the interaction of reflection and action (or praxis) and occurs when "human beings participate in a transforming act." The group process is important for people to develop mutual connections and responsibility for community responses to problems.

The idea of problem-posing dialogue or education for empowerment is not unique to Freire. Native Americans in the Southwest where I come from have passed on traditions for centuries with every elder or teacher, regardless of formal credentials. Other educators and centers have developed popular education approaches, including Myles Horton from Highlander Center in Tennessee, Jack London, Ira Shor, Ontario's Institute for Studies in Education. Yet, Freire offers an approach originally developed through first language teaching that can be adapted to English language teaching.

To translate the philosophy into actual classroom practice, problem-posing becomes a three-step process: listening (or learning our students' concerns); dialogue (or codifying these concerns into lessons for languages learning); and action (or promoting visions and strategies of change).

Listening involves investigating students' concerns or generative themes, the issues that can generate lively discussion because they have social and emotional meaning to the students. To listen, teachers can use systematic techniques,

similar to anthropological fieldwork. Teachers don't have to conduct this field work alone, but can expect students to work with them to identify their concerns for curriculum development.

After identifying the issues, teachers can codify them into class materials, custom-made for that group, preparing what I call "codes" (codificações in Portuguese). A code is a physical representation of an issue in any format: a picture, story, role-play. Because it is one step removed from actual experience, students can project their emotional and social responses into the code-making for lively discussion and writing. An effective code will present a daily problem easily recognized by students i.e. be based on generative themes, contain many sides of the problem, and be open-ended, leaving the students to reflect on possible actions for change. Codes are more than visual aides, for they inspire critical thinking about issues in students' and teachers' lives. As I present some of my codes, I suggest that you think how you can develop some here in Brazil. Here's one from my first book; at the clinic.

(SEE BOTTOM OF PAGE) (Code 1)

How do we use this code to generate dialogue, the second stage of a problem-posing approach? The teacher adopts the role of a questioner, asking critical questions and bringing up potential conflicts. I have developed a five-step inductive questioning strategy to help teachers with their own questioning skills. First, teachers can ask specific questions about the picture and dialogue. (What is happening here? How many people are there? What are they doing?) The second step defines the problem. (Are there lines? Does anyone speak Spanish at the clinic? Is that a problem?) The third step is very important because students share their experiences in comparison with the one represented. (How does the picture make you feel? Is this similar to your situation? Different? Has this happened to you before? To a friend?) The fourth step is to ask why there is a problem. (Why are there lines? Why are there no people who speak Spanish? Why is health care often difficult to obtain? Step five is the final action stage. (What can you do about this situation?) Should clinic staff speak Spanish? What can people in the neighborhood expect? What can they do?).

1. Calling the Clinic



RECEPTIONIST: COUNTRY CLINIC. MAY I HELP YOU?
 FELICIA: MY SON IS VERY SICK. HIS IS HOT.
 RECEPTIONIST: WHAT? YOU MEAN HE HAS A FEVER. WHAT'S HIS NAME?
 FELICIA: HIS NAME IS PABLO RAMIREZ, R-A-M-I-R-E-Z.
 RECEPTIONIST: WE DON'T HAVE A RECORD FOR HIM. HE NEEDS TO COME IN TO THE CLINIC.
 FELICIA: CAN YOU REPEAT THAT PLEASE?
 RECEPTIONIST: HE NEEDS TO COME IN.
 FELICIA: CAN HE SEE THE DOCTOR?
 RECEPTIONIST: YES, BRING HIM AFTER ONE O'CLOCK. THE CLINIC OPENS AT ONE.
 FELICIA: CAN YOU SPEAK SLOWER PLEASE?
 RECEPTIONIST: (LOUDLY) AFTER ONE O'CLOCK TOMORROW.
 FELICIA: OH, ONE. DOES ANYONE SPEAK SPANISH THERE?
 RECEPTIONIST: NO, I'M SORRY.

FROM: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN
 CONFLICT: PROBLEM-POSING IN
 THE ESL CLASSROOM, P. 144.

This final questioning stage takes students into positive action, though solutions may take years (even a lifetime). This process is therefore called "problem-posing" (not "problem-solving") recognizing the complexity of solutions for individuals and communities. The action step is the most important for students to learn they can express ideas and develop strategies for change.

After each lesson, teachers evaluate whether this issue was important and should be pursued. The curriculum is in constant evolution as teachers fashion lessons by listening to students. Through this approach, lessons gain motivational force; the attrition caused by social and emotional conflicts is diminished, and value is given to students' lives.

Let me present a few other examples of codes that represent other issues in students' lives. Here is one from my new forthcoming book with co-author Elsa Auerbach. This book called ESL For Action: Problem-Posing at Work addresses true problematic situations faced by immigrant and American workers. The contents include units on health and safety, pay issues, stress, rights under the law, unions, communication between immigrants and Americans, and others.

Here is one code from the unit on health and safety. It addresses questions of rights to know about chemicals and hazards, yet reflect the anxieties of people who are afraid to speak out (Code 2). The discussion will allow people to share their fears and possible mechanisms for finding support so they can act for their own protection. After each code and discussion in the units, a progression of language exercises, called thinking and action activities, gives students tools for learning how to assert themselves in situations where they in fact have less power

A SAFE WORKPLACE

CODE

Supervisor: What happened?

Alex: Mario burned his arm.

Supervisor: Again? You people have to work more carefully.
You're not paying attention to your jobs.

Alex: It's the fumes. They make us dizzy.

Supervisor: That's no excuse. Mario was probably careless.
There are too many accidents in this department.

Alex: It's not Mario's fault. We can't breathe in here.
There is no air.

Problem-posing questions

1. What do you see? What happened?
2. What's the problem?
3. How does this apply to your situation?
Has this happened to you?
4. What are the causes of the problem?
5. What can be done? What can you do?

Form: ESL For Action: Problem-Posing at Work, by Auerbach and Wallerstein, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1987.

than the other person. Job interview situations are a good example of conversations with unequal relations, yet people can learn how to operate within the constraints to demand equal treatment.

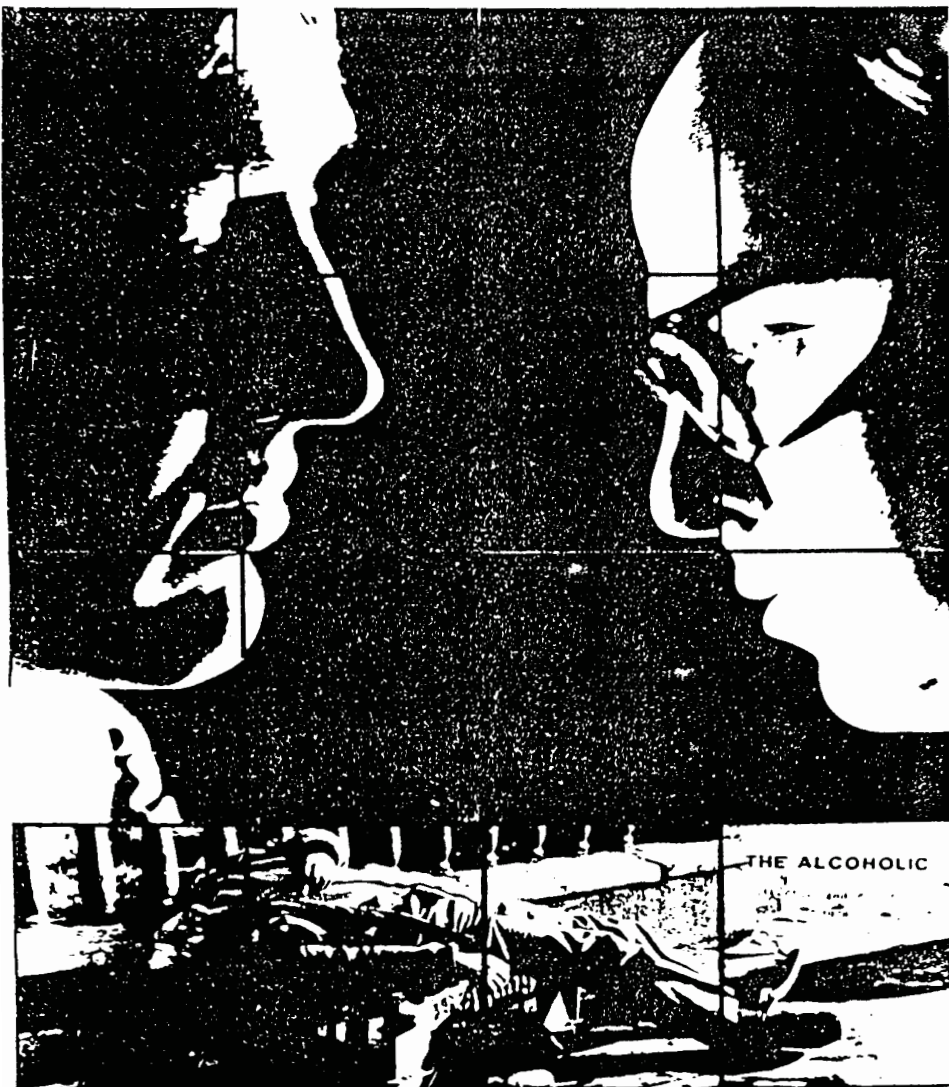
I also wanted to present a code from a health project that I am involved in which seeks to prevent adolescent alcohol abuse. The project serves low-income Hispanic and Native American teenagers who are high risk for accidents and injuries related to alcohol. The goals of the program are to reduce mortality and morbidity related to alcohol; to enhance teenager self-confidence, competence, and assertiveness in positive directions; and to broaden the dialogue into the wider community to promote actions for health.

Small groups of teenagers are brought into the University emergency room to see the effects of alcohol abuse and to talk with patients and their families. Through the use of the emergency room as a code (which is safer than their own experiences on the reservation), we ask questions to encourage the teenagers to relate the patients' experiences to their own lives, see the social context, and develop actions for change. We also provide leadership training to empower them to act as peer teachers to bring back the experience to other students in their schools, and peer leaders in their communities to broaden participation in the problem and in possible solutions.

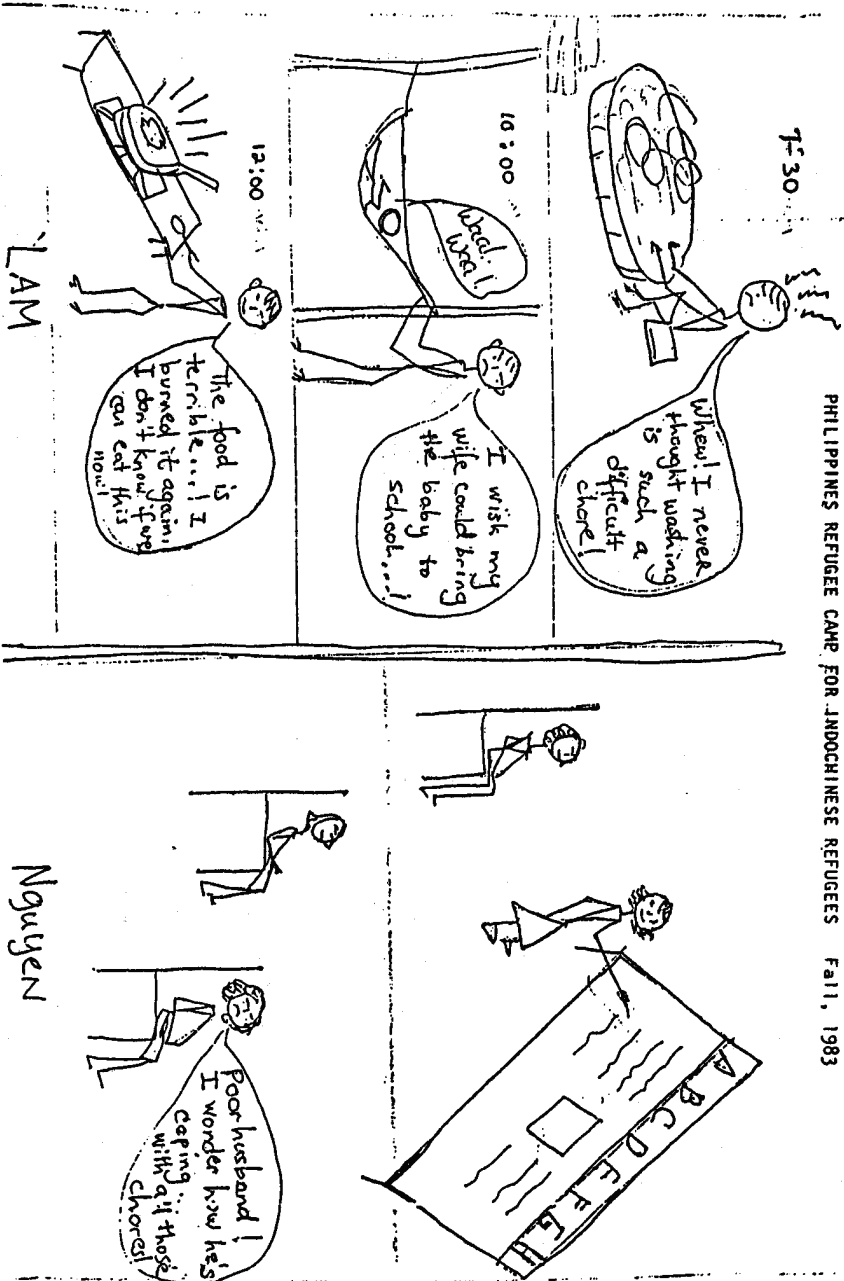
This code is one we use in a training program to encourage students to discuss what an alcoholic is and who in society is potentially an alcoholic (Code 3). Through problem-posing discussion, they begin to see that their view of alcoholics is limited. Even though they see people in their communities, homeless or just sleeping off a drunk on a city bench, they begin to realize that the problem is more widespread. The two men in suits could also be alcoholics; they may just have more money to stay off the streets. Thus begins the process of critical thinking and moving away from accepting the myth that only Indians drink, and they are to blame for all their economic and cultural problems in dominant society. Finally, here is another code from my time consulting in the Philippines refugee camp. At the camp, everyone goes to English class for half a day. Families divide childcare responsibilities, with mothers going to class in the morning and fathers in the afternoon. The camp structure is forcing a change in social relations in the family; for the first time a father has to take care of the children while the mother attends class. This code demonstrates the complex feelings created by the change in social roles and the impact these feelings have on class (Code 4). The mother is unable to think about her lesson because she is worried about her husband and children. I contend that for her to listen to the lesson and learn English, the teacher should discuss this problematic issue as a class lesson. Relations between men and women is an excellent common theme that may be applicable to your students.

I think that you here in Brazil have a task to research your generative themes for your University students and to teach them that they should undertake the same process and research the generative themes for their students

Code 3



PHILIPPINES REFUGEE CAMP FOR INDOCHINESE REFUGEES Fall, 1983



that they will teach in public and private schools. Some potential themes may be the relationship between men and women, the educational process itself--how students can be more active learners, or the role of learning English in Brazil.

The second task is to introduce the concept of education through dialogue in the classrooms. Your University students will replicate the model that they've had for their own learning when they begin to teach. It's important to actually demonstrate a different model of teaching if we want them to create a participatory dialogue learning atmosphere for their own students.

Sometimes, I have heard questions about this approach, such as "problem-posing is too difficult. It's hard to get discussion going with students." Or, "issues take too much work. I don't have time to track down all the answers." Teachers have also expressed their fears: "this is too dangerous. How can we raise issues when we can't solve the problems?" Or, "how will I know that I'm not imposing my own views of change on students?" Often, teachers ask about their students' expectations: "what do you do with students who expect a more traditional model of instruction?"

The answers to these questions are complex. Each of us finds our own reasons to value social responsibility and a commitment to student issues and visions in learning English. Yet, some of my responses may match yours.

First, regarding difficulty, my books provide demonstrations of problem-posing. It may take practice, but there is a structure to follow. The dialogue process develops from codes (or physical representations of student concerns). A five-step inductive questioning strategy gives students skills to identify common concerns, analyze causes of problems, and strategize alternatives.

Second, to address the question of teacher preparative time, I encourage students to write their own curriculum, based on the issues they uncover. Student-produced materials ensure active learning and unburden the teacher.

Third, in problem posing, the question of "solving" problems does not fall on the teacher alone. Everyone--teacher and student--is jointly responsible for raising issues, conducting research, and finding answers. In treating the socially- and emotionally- laden worlds of our students, we must consider the consequences of actions. Classroom discussions should cover legal, personal, or social implications; and the possible positive, negative, or unexpected consequences.

Fourth, students naturally expect a hierarchical style of education, similar to their previous learning experiences. It is important, therefore, to start with structured activities at the same time that you are creating an environment for student-directed learning. In the beginning, you may need to tread lightly when asking for students to share experiences. As the class develops cohesion, students will be more willing to express their emotions and life stories.

Throughout this paper, I have emphasized the few basic concepts of problem-posing. Need for English is not isolated from students' other life problems; these problems show up in class, if adults come at all, as low self-esteem cultural

conflicts, or as hidden voices that block learning. These same life demands and lack of classroom support services prevent the many other adults from coming to classes.

A problem-posing approach helps students move beyond their individual barriers to learning and involves them actively in a group process to change their lives as learners in the classroom and as actors in their communities. Change--personal, educational, or social--is an ongoing and difficult process that demands time and continuing commitment. We must be "patiently impatient," Paulo Freire tells us, as we painstakingly move towards better societies. Although change comes slowly, problem-posing nurtures the process. Our students have dreams for themselves, their families, and their lives; we can help them explore their visions to develop language skills, self-esteem, and better understandings of their role in changing their worlds.