

Where's FREIRE?

An interview with
Tom Ciancone about
Literacy in Brazil

When Tom Ciancone told people he was going to Brazil to visit his friend Sydney Pratt, everybody jumped on the band wagon.

Tom is a Toronto-area adult numeracy instructor. He is currently serving as Treasurer for CUPE Local 4400, which represents instructors at the Toronto District School Board.

CUPE National and CUPE Local 4400 asked Tom to attend the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre to network with other unions. The CUPE National Literacy project coordinator asked him to find out about workplace literacy programs in Brazil. And we asked him to look for Paulo Freire, one of the world's most famous adult educators.

At the World Social Forum, Tom attended sessions that dealt with the relationship of labour unions to social movements. He met with the municipal officials responsible for community involvement in the Participatory Budget of the City of Porto Alegre. He was part of the World Choral Forum, a 300-member choir that sang songs from Brazil and around the world.

Tom also visited the city of Recife in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. Recife is the birthplace of Paulo Freire. While in Recife, Tom met with two unions representing workers in public schools and universities and visited three popular education centres.

He also met with João Francisco de Souza, a professor at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. de Souza has just written



an analysis of the work of Paulo Freire called *Atualidade de Paulo Freire: contribuição ao debate sobre a educação na diversidade cultural*.

Free public education is not accessible to all students in Brazil. There is an ongoing national campaign for the right of education. Currently, only 85% of children attend elementary school and 65% attend secondary school. The proportion able to attend university is even lower.

Tracey Mollins spoke to Tom in March

Literacies: When I was getting ready for this conversation I was worried because I thought, "What do I really know about Freire?" I did some reading and I realized that much of my practice is guided by the principles he wrote about – they are part of me somehow. In terms of your practice, do you think that Freire is incorporated into the work that you do?

Tom: Into my theory. I can't say that in practice I do it. I mean, it is part of my formation. Sydney actually worked with Freire in Brazil. When I first started working in adult education, I worked on a project with Sydney. I have never read much Freire – I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* but not much else – but the whole project was based on Freirian principles and I was lucky enough to work with people who used Freirian principles so my introduction to adult education was Freirian.

Literacies: What about in Brazil? Did you find him? Did you see his ideas about literacy practice in action there? Are they still relevant?

Tom: Unfortunately, I was in Brazil in their summer and the education centres were not running classes so I didn't see students at work. I met with some adult educators and popular educators who spoke about their approach to working with groups and that they always start with that group's reality and the issues that are important to that group. There are many aspects to Freirian philosophy, but one clearly is that you start with your own reality.

Where I really saw Freire in action was in Nicaragua during the time of the Sandinista government. The materials were very rudimentary and the curriculum was clearly based on Freire. The topics were always very, very close to their own reality. They were coffee farmers. Each lesson followed the same steps: observe your reality, discuss your reality, read about it, analyse it and finally, transform it. These steps were part of every single lesson and they always ended with transform your reality – they didn't stop with just read or write about it – the last part of every lesson was always action. I have never seen it so clear cut.

Literacies: In Nicaragua, were the teachers trained in this approach, or was it a coincidence that they were using a liberatory approach because they were taking part in a revolution?

Tom: No, I think that people who understood Freire trained them. The Sandinistas brought Freire and Freirian educators in and were well aware of what kind of education they were practising.

Literacies: So, do you think that if the Brazilian government ever had the resources to fund literacy programs, they would use a skills-based, outcomes-based model such as the one used here in Ontario, or do

Who is Paulo Freire?

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which describes how education can help people change social injustice. Freire believed that education allows people to become aware of their oppression, then to transform it. His writing and teachings have influenced the practice of generations of adult educators around the world.

For a biography:

<http://www.nl.edu/ace/Resources/Freire.html>

For a list of links go to:

http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/Research_and_books/casalink.html

For the Paulo Freire Institute: www.paulofreire.org

you think that they would gravitate to a Freirian model? Do you think that he is internalized there the way he is internalized elsewhere?

Tom: In places like Nicaragua and Brazil, they are starting from such a different level. They are almost starting from scratch in a way. We're in a different space - one where we have to satisfy government. If our education was totally learner-centred and we were only answerable to the learners, then I think we would follow Freirian principles. But we have to satisfy government regulations... and also satisfy our students' expectations, because often they themselves want something far more related to the state school system. I think that in places like the parts of Brazil where the poor people are starting without a state structure or an educational system that imposes restrictions on what they have to do [they are more able to take a Freirian approach].

I mean, in my own experience teaching numeracy in the old days, what the

students loved was that we were totally flexible in our approach and what they learned. They liked it that we did not have to follow a set curriculum and they were amazed that they could come to school and actually have this kind of an education.

After this part of our conversation, we looked at a box of materials given to Tom by a Brazilian adult educator. Freire was everywhere!

Most of the materials were from Porto Alegre. It was first city where the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Worker's Party) formed a municipal government and the first city to use a participatory budget process. The *Partido dos Trabalhadores* now also forms the federal government in Brazil. The slogan used by the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* in Porto Alegre is *cidade educadora*, which translates as "the educational city". As we looked through the brochures and flyers explaining their policies and programs, we saw Freire quoted again and again.

As Tom says, "In Canada and Brazil, we have common struggles and challenges. The only difference, perhaps, is that in Pernambuco they are seeking to build and strengthen their public services, while in Ontario we are struggling to retain them." ■

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