

HOPE AND UTOPIA IN POST-TRUTH TIMES: A FREIREAN APPROACH

ESPERANÇA E UTOPIA EM TEMPOS DE PÓS-VERDADE: UMA ABORDAGEM FREIREANA

Bernadette Farrell

*University of Canterbury, New Zealand.
berfarrell@gmail.com*

María Carolina Nieto Ángel

*University of Canterbury, New Zealand
nietomariacarolina@gmail.com*

Mônica Maciel Vahl

*University of Canterbury, New Zealand
monicamvahl@gmail.com*

Abstract

This article discusses the concept of post-truth based on the work and ideas of Paulo Freire. After 20 years, Freire's legacy continues to urge us to become aware of the ethical, political and educational implications of subtle forms of oppression that have contempt for the truth. Considering the current post-truth context, this text grapples with the following questions: How is it that society gets to the point of "normalising wilful disregard" for facts and evidence? What is the role of education? Is it still possible, given the increasing amounts of intolerance around the world, to dream of a fairer and more humane society? This article explores these questions in the form of a dialogue, where the voices of the three researchers engage from multicultural and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Keywords: Paulo Freire. Post-truth. Dialogue. Conscientisation. Utopia.

Resumo

Este artigo discute o conceito de pós-verdade baseado no trabalho e nas ideias de Paulo Freire. Depois de 20 anos, o legado de Freire ainda nos convida para pensar criticamente sobre as implicações éticas, políticas e educacionais das formas sutis de opressão que possuem um despreço pela verdade. Considerando o contexto atual da pós-verdade, o texto lida com as seguintes questões: Como a sociedade chega ao ponto de "normalizar o desrespeito intencional" por fatos e evidências? Qual é o papel da educação? Ainda é possível, considerando o crescimento global da intolerância, sonhar com uma sociedade mais justa e mais humana? Este artigo explora essas questões no formato de diálogo, em que as vozes dos três pesquisadores se engajam em uma perspectiva multicultural e interdisciplinar.

Palavras-chave: Paulo Freire. Pós-verdade. Diálogo. Conscientização. Utopia.

Introduction

The misrepresentation of facts is not a new phenomenon in the media, as evidenced, for example, by the longstanding tradition of infamous headlines characterising tabloids in the UK (Bowell, 2017). However, its intensity today is without precedent. This increasing tendency to overlook facts in favour of emotional appeals to the public was recognised by Oxford Dictionaries when it selected the term *post-truth* as the Word of the Year in 2016 and by Collins Dictionary in 2017. The term was first used in the early 1990s and yet is only now in common usage. One of the pernicious consequences of the post-truth phenomenon is that of “normalising wilful disregard” for facts and evidence (Bowell, 2017). The connotation, therefore, is a negative one: *post-*, rather than suggesting a state of progressive advancement, declares instead that the concept of truth is out-dated and can be selectively, and at worst unscrupulously, dismissed (Bowell, 2017).

The post-truth context has become characterised by the decline of traditional media, especially print media, which have suffered a substantial reduction of funds and personnel. It has become everyday more common to have questionable information replicated by underpaid journalists who lack the necessary time to thoroughly check their facts and have even less time to develop a detailed and critical investigation. Comedian Stephen Colbert noted one manifestation of the relativism of the truth in politics when making an ironic twist on the notion of ‘truthiness’ about the growing use of arguments that feel truthful but are not in fact based on convincing evidence (Payette & Barnes, 2017). In its current form, the post-truth scenario also involves an ethos where the established practice is not advancing different interpretations of the same fact, or even misrepresenting a piece of information, but holding a posture of complete disregard for the need to support public statements in the media with credible evidence.

Our article addresses this contemporary issue from a Freirean perspective (Freire, 1996, 1997, 2004, 2013, 2014). We argue that the post-truth ethos embodies the ‘divide and rule’ dimension of oppression while fostering arrogant and individualistic behaviours. These attitudes lead to the dehumanisation of those involved, with emotions being played to advance and disseminate uncritical thinking. There is also an epistemological confusion between the terms information and knowledge, one that might be even purposeful created. To create a more dialogical option, we encourage open and honest positions that acknowledge our uncertainties and incompleteness. We further argue that coherence between what educators, and anyone exercising leadership, say and what they do – which according to Freire (1998, p. 55) is tantamount to testimony – is necessary to claim the validity of what is proposed as valuable in a democratic society. The necessity of conscientisation as a form of critical

thinking that reflects on the world is advanced as a possible remedy to the emotionally charged and unreflective post-truth regime. Finally, Freire's (2001) concept of unfinishedness helps us to remain hopeful as nothing is genuinely absolute, there is always space for improvement and development, especially when we are willing to learn from others and with others.

This text is the result of an on-going dialogue between the authors for the past year and a half. The three of us have met periodically at University of Canterbury (Christchurch, New Zealand) while developing our Doctoral theses. Following Freire's idea that we can only extend ourselves to the world from a rooted position (Freire, 1997), we would like to present some of our tapestries. Mônica is a Brazilian living in New Zealand since 2015. Her research analyses the conceptions of literacy and illiteracy in Brazil between the years of 1971 and 1989, in an attempt to understand their 'reason of being' and how they are connected to broader aspects of Brazil's economy, political system, and culture¹. María Carolina is Colombian, of mestizo ancestry. Her research examines the ways secondary schools in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Peru promote and sustain caring environments where students, teachers, leaders and parents learn to care for self and others and restore relationships in conflict². Bernadette is Irish and more recently also a New Zealander. Her research explores the idea of the contemporary student as found in tertiary education policy and the Deweyan and Freirean educational ideas that underpin an alternate understanding³.

The first meeting of this group occurred on June 8, 2016, at a university coffee shop. Since that time the group has met every three weeks to discuss one of Freire's books. The group enabled us to develop a language of critique, of ourselves and the world. It has also taught us when to speak and when to listen. Although the group do not always agree, we work towards a shared understanding. Freirean concepts such as praxis, social justice, love, and hope are continually discussed and reinvented allowing for a theoretical depth and academic rigour that we could not reach alone. One of the most significant contributions of our meetings has been accepting, although not without struggle, our uncertainties. During these group sessions, we invariably interweave experiences of personal history, contemporary events in our countries of origin and concepts proposed by Freire. Freire (1996, 1997) discusses within the context of his own experience the implications of assuming a radical progressive approach to education. He utilised his personal life and educational experiences to build a theory of education where ethics and politics converge. Following this

¹ Research supervisory team: Professor Peter Roberts and Senior Lecturer Trish McMenamin.

² Research supervisory team: Dr. Letitia Fickel Hochstrasser, Dr. Sonja Macfarlane, and Professor Angus Macfarlane.

³ Research supervisory team: Professor Peter Roberts and Associate Professor John Freeman-Moir.

model, our group gathered around contemporary issues such as the Brexit vote, the US presidential elections, the Colombian peace process and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil.

The post-truth ethos

Mônica: News cycles now are not only faster than ever before, but the fragmented pieces reported in the media are increasingly fraught with distortions of reality on multiple levels. In the last months of the US election in 2016, for example, fake news on Facebook generated a more substantial number of responses from users than the more reasonable content proffered by the major news organisations (Silverman, 2016). Accused of helping to propagate misleading information, giants in the information technology sector such as Google and Facebook are taking steps to control the spread of false information, including cutting the advertising money paid to websites involved in the propagation of inaccurate content, launching programmes aimed at educating their users in spotting fake news, and even tagging stories with ‘fact-check’ stamps (Wakabayashi & Isaac, 2017; Thomas, 2017; Gibbs, 2017).

The ‘murky middle ground’ between truth and falsehood inherent in the post-truth ethos can be seen as a sign of change in society’s attitude towards politics and may lead to an erosion of the mutual trust necessary for holding democratic dialogue (Rider, 2017). In this context, it is relevant to raise several important questions. How is it that society gets to the point of “normalising wilful disregard” for facts and evidence? How can we account for our emotions when analysing contradictory facts and shreds of evidence? What is the role of education? What is the role of researchers? Is it still possible, given the increasing amounts of intolerance around the world, to dream of a more fair and humane society? I believe that Freire can help us address these questions.

Maria: Certainly Monica, these are relevant questions. In regards to the first couple of questions, I would suggest differentiating three related dimensions. The first theme is the ‘truth imposed’ that is the fallacy of a single truth that authoritarian regimes, authoritarian families and authoritarian teachers want to impose. A second theme is the ‘ignored truth’ that is apparent in the post-truth era. It is the contempt or ignorance of facts that leads us to an authentic understanding of our context. A third theme is ‘truth co-constructed’ or dialogued which is seeking truths collectively and with broad participation; it is the Freirean Utopian ideal. It is the recognition of the plurality of voices that can be included to arrive at an authentic and shared understanding of our context

For Freire, in the process of humanisation – becoming more human – we must reach a true understanding of our own life. Freire (1996) recounts the origins of his search for a true understanding of the world. As a child, he began

innocent critical reflections about his particular context transforming the room of his childhood in a “unique theoretical context” where he could search for “a *raison d’être*”, for “profound meanings” (Freire, 1996, p. 27). He was in need of comfort as a child in the midst of family economic crises. In a constant search for understanding, Freire found security and freedom.

Bernadette: I would also like to add another dimension to the post-truth idea, and that is the concept of *bullshit* as outlined by Harry Frankfurt (2005) in *On Bullshit*. Frankfurt argues that a statement “grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in the belief that is not true” is *bullshit*. He then further argues that “it is just this lack of connection to a concern with the truth -this indifference to how things really are – that I regard as of the essence of bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005, p.33-34). I believe that this concept can fit comfortably into this consideration of post-truth in our time.

How can we respond to these dimensions of the post-truth era? I think Freire has a number of ideas that can help us think about this. For example, what is the antidote to this kind of thinking? Freire’s concept of conscientisation (*conscientização*) is relevant here. The term *conscientisation* has been widely debated, but it can be summarised as “the process of deepening one’s understanding of the social world” (Roberts, 2008a, p. 100). For Freire, the purpose of education is liberation, achieved through dialogue and the realisation of *conscientização*. In this way, “conscientização represents the development of the awakening of critical awareness” (Freire, 2013, p. 15). It is the social process by which we become aware of the world and the conditions and sources of oppression. This is in contrast to the conception of critical thinking as an individual acquisition that does not require any particular engagement with the world.

Critical consciousness means critically reflecting on one’s self and reality and the way these have been created, and then using this understanding to take transformative action to make a change. As Roberts (1996) argues, critical consciousness is the reflective component of praxis. It is an integral part of thinking, making meaning and coming to understand the world. To be able to detect what is true from what is not, requires an ability to step back from the world. Put another way; to be *with the world*, rather than just *in the world* (Benade; 2014; Freire, 1985).

Truth and uncertainty

Mônica: Freire held the belief that the “world is not made up of certainties” but rather out of the “tension between the certain and uncertain” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 58). In his view, all knowledge is historical and, therefore, provisional. What is considered a common-sense truth today may not be regarded in the same way in a couple of years. His constant recommendations

against being too certain of our certainties, however, were counterbalanced by a cautious rejection of any relativistic perspective where all the interpretations of the truth hold the same value. Additionally, he urged us to pay attention to the fact that neutrality is an impossibility and that in the act of choosing or even in not choosing we are inevitably aligning ourselves with something or someone and against something or someone else (2001, 2014).

Dubious online articles and images are continuously being crafted, sometimes using the profitable strategy known as ‘clickbait’, to generate emotional responses from the public. In the accelerated time of the Internet, this low-quality content is frequently shared based only on the headlines and without the user even troubling to read the entire text. This is particularly damaging when it reduces political discussions to oversimplified caricatures of meaningful dialogue and polarises society into ill-informed factions that merely react rather than thinking critically.

Maria: I believe that polarisation in society is a significant concern that we should address. Individualistic interests, such as profit or political power, lead some social sectors to promote polarisation, which is a manifestation of the Freirian concept of “oppression” (Freire, 2005). Freire warned indeed about the “divide and rule” dimension of oppression where oppressors halt any initial effort that could “awaken the oppressed to the need for unity” (p. 141). Moreover, Freire presaged that more sophisticated forms of domination would no longer necessitate physical oppression since they occurred by “technological instruments” (p. 180). I think that your previous analysis of dubious online articles and images resonates with Freire’s idea about the potential abuse of information and communication technologies.

A useful example of polarisation in favour of an oppressive minority was evidenced in Colombia by a recent experiment carried out between supporters of two extremist populist leaders on the Colombian right and left. The experiment consisted in presenting 32 people with four statements spoken by Alvaro Uribe Velez, former President of Colombia (2002-2010) and four phrases spoken by Gustavo Petro, former Mayor of Bogotá (Colombia Capital City, 2014-2015). Uribe and Petro represented the extreme right and left in the last two decades in Colombian politics. In the experiment, participants were required to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements presented to them.

The result could not have been more disconcerting: most of the *Uribistas* stated that they agreed with all the statements that they believed were Uribe’s statements, despite the fact that they were actually Petro’s statements, and vice-versa. According to a media analyst, “The surprise of the participants was such that one of them confessed that he felt ashamed and another said he was “very afraid” for the country, because “we are blindly believing in figures and we are not looking at what we need” (Salive, 2017, p. 6).

Bernadette: Indeed, uncertainty in our times as a response to the increasing rate of change in society has undoubtedly caused some disquiet. Freire (2001) argues that when we acknowledge our uncertainty and therefore incompleteness, we are open to questioning. He explains that uncertainty is the beginning of the process of inquiry. When we can question ourselves and our current social situations and structures, we are open to conscientisation. Uncertainty is undoubtedly of critical importance for the educational project but how do we learn to live with uncertainty? Drawing from this notion of Freire, Roberts (2005) “We need uncertainty to know, but we cannot allow the feeling of uncertainty to become so overwhelming that it distorts or destroys our capacity to ask questions, makes decisions, and move on” (p. 129). We can learn to ease our uncertainty and doubt by acknowledging our unfinishedness and the hope and possibility for transformation that this unfinishedness implies. If we also come to understand that uncertainty and doubt are at the beginning of the process inquiry, we come to know that they are a part of the necessary struggle to educate ourselves toward liberation.

Respect, Openness and Dialogue

Monica: We are seeing a rise of intolerance over the past years. In Brazil, for example, we have been experiencing for the past five years a battle on the Internet between the “little thighs” (*coxinhas*) and the “bread with mortadella” (*pão com mortadela*). On the one hand, the “little thighs”, a heterogeneous group, supported the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in the name of the fight against corruption. On the other hand, the “bread with mortadella”, an equally broad group, saw in the selective persecution of the Workers’ Party by the judiciary and the media an excuse for the opposition to implement a neoliberal approach that would de-prioritise social services. In this emotionally charged quarrel, more often than not, members of both sides seem eager to jump to conclusions and spread information that is unverified only to prove that their point is right and that anybody who thinks differently is wrong.

Arguably, Freire would have criticised this attitude. He believed that emotions are inherent constituents of the self and are essential to the way we see and interpret the world (Freire, 1997). However, he also argued that we must avoid being blinded by irrational sentiments and that we should always cultivate a respectful and open posture towards others. Roberts, for example, suggests that Freire’s project, especially in his later books, was to “develop a critical ideal in which reason, emotion and political commitment would be dynamically intertwined” (Roberts, 2008b, p. 102). If this attitude was adopted by politicians in Brazil, it may help us to have a more open, honest and productive dialogue about the country’s pressing issues.

Bernadette: In the current era the truth is often considered, less important, less admired and much less pursued than appeals to emotion. Freire argues that to speak truthfully, there must be “coherence between what we say and do” (Freire, 1997, p. 51). Appeals to emotion have always played a large part in elections. In recent years, politicians across the political spectrum and, subsequently, the media, have advocated that economic globalisation is better for the national economy, yet social inequality has increased in Ireland and New Zealand for example (Hearne & McMahon, 2016; Rashbrooke, 2013). So, when people’s lived experience does not reconcile with government statements made via the media, people recognise that this incoherence signifies a lack of truthfulness. They may not know who the perpetrators of the deception are — whether it is the experts advising governments, the state (including politicians and bureaucrats) or the media — or they might not understand the nuanced interaction of interests in the administration of the state. However, they know that what they hear is untrue, or at the very least, not wholly true, because it is incoherent.

If we take the example of tertiary education, the university is incoherent when statements by management — such as stating a desire to listen to students and actively include students and staff in decision-making — are in practice reduced to a consultancy in the form of information sharing by management. Coherence is necessary to build the trust needed for society to work. The spread of ‘post-truth’ as an idea signifies another significant decrease of public confidence in democratic institutions such as the university.

Tertiary education has been offered as one solution to tackle society’s ailments. While it is easier than ever to get into tertiary education, there is less chance of the prestige that previous generations obtained from a university education. There appears to be less social and economic benefit to tertiary education as it has become more open to the general public to attend. Now that the ivory towers are in a somewhat ruinous state, it is much easier to attend them. Simultaneously, there has also been an increase in the level of qualification required for many jobs, so that a tertiary qualification is increasingly perceived as a minimum qualification for many positions. Moreover, the debt burden assumed by predominantly young people to fund their tertiary education ensures their future compliance with the demands of the economy. People’s experience of tertiary education and what happens to them during and after their education is often at odds with the public perception and the political rhetoric. Educationists understand that education solely for employment does not satisfy the task of educating the student, while students increasingly believe that anything outside of an education solely for employment constitutes a waste of time and the potential indoctrination of a political position. Educating for more than employment has become a political stance and not just an educational one.

These conflicting understandings and experiences are often at odds with ‘official speak’. When political leadership fails to find a way to speak to the complexities of the world and to show an understanding of the varied lived experience of people, then a society where people prefer to trust instinct rather than reason is perhaps inevitable.

Maria: I am very pleased that we are having this conversation. Our dialogue appears to be inspired by Freire and Antonio Faundez “spoken” book *Learning to Question* (Freire & Faundez, 1989). Faundez asserted that throughout their “spoken” book their conversation “does not only have an intellectual content: it also has an emotional real-life content” (p. 14), and I can see how much that feeling resonates with our experience. I agree with you about the need to cultivate a respectful and open posture towards others. This aspiration is particularly urgent in Colombia where learning to dialogue among differences is central to achieve a sustainable peace after the signing of the Peace Treaty in 2017.

After 60 years of armed conflict, a Peace Treaty was signed between the guerilla FARC (Colombian Armed Revolutionary Forces, once the largest and wealthiest guerilla group in South America) and the National Government, with the United Nations (ONU) overseeing a four-year dialogue process between them which happened in La Habana (Cuba). It is essential that Colombian society learn respect, reciprocity, restoration and dialogue if the Peace Treaty is to contribute to a sustainable peace with social justice. De Roux (2016, p. 6) argued that overcoming our “inability to come together about meaningful issues” is paramount. Similarly, if peaceful coexistence with dignity is to be possible for everyone, it is fundamental to learn to listen and understand one another, and reconcile with those who think differently for social, political, institutional and ethical reasons.

Education and research

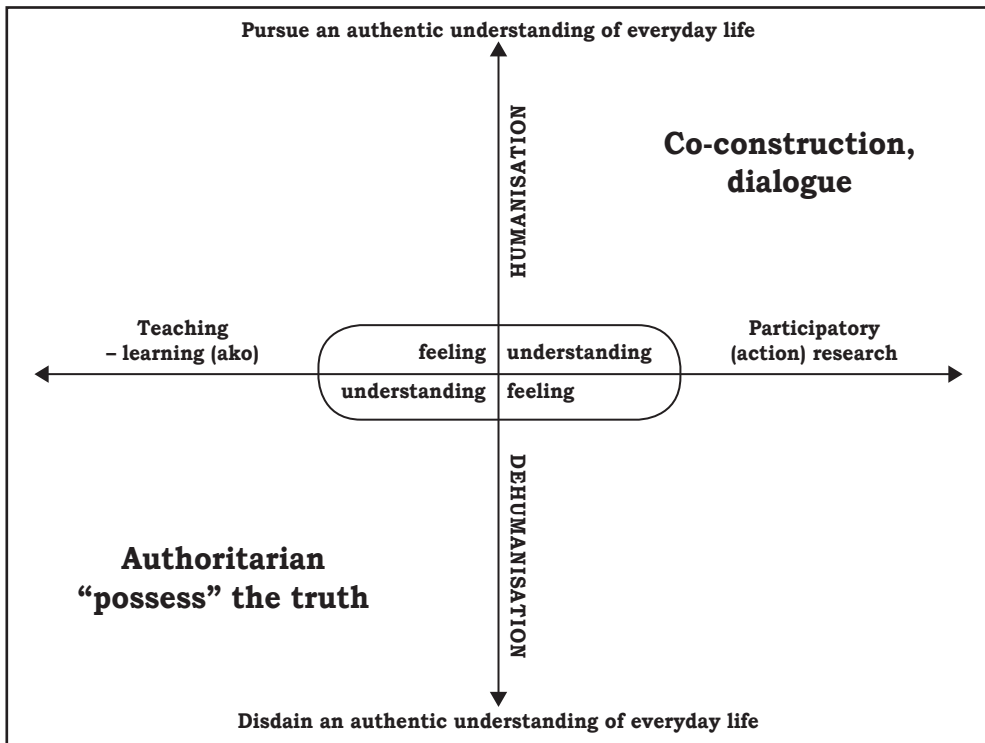
Mônica: With the popularisation of social media, it has become possible for a more substantial number of voices to join the narrative construction of a fact. In Brazil, for example, traditional news coverage of demonstrations usually focuses on the resulting public inconvenience such as traffic jams and property damage (e.g. broken windows) as a result of the demonstrations. Now, through Facebook and other social media, the demonstrators themselves can create a broader awareness of their demands and post images and videos of the police repression that they face. The plurality of voices in these media, however, does not necessarily equate to higher engagement in a dialogue. There are two main reasons for this. The first has to do with the fact that many information technology companies employ Internet algorithms that continuously reinforce a similar content to that which users have previously accessed. The second

is related to users’ behaviour itself in social media, where people choose to ‘unfollow’ those who have a different opinion, and consequently enclose themselves in artificial bubbles, reducing their ability to perceive and think critically about other points of view.

When reflecting about communication and the media in *Pedagogy of Indignation*, Freire called for “a critical and alert posture” to avoid either adopting a merely passive attitude regarding the content in question or falling unwittingly into ideological traps (2004, p. 95). If he were able, he would encourage us to reflect on the role of education and educators in nurturing such postures in social media. He would probably also argue in favour of the importance of establishing bridges for dialogue between those who hold different points of view. Finally, perhaps, he would remind us that as significant as is the discussion about truthfulness and post-truth in the media today, we need to balance its relevance with the fact that billions still do not have access to reliable sanitation and power supplies, much less to an Internet connection.

Maria: In regards to how social research and education can play a prominent role in our pursuit of a shared understanding, I would like to share an image that has been helpful when reflecting about these ideas.

Figure 1 – The pursuit of an authentic understanding of everyday life.



Source: Elaborated by the authors

In the above figure, we can think of the pursuit of an authentic understanding of everyday life as an expression of what it means to 'become more fully human'. In contrast, a disregard of the impetus for knowing and understanding can be seen as a sign of de-humanisation. Indeed, as mentioned before, the process of becoming more human, is fundamentally a social process. Freire argued the social nature of learning in a number of his writings (2001, 2004, 2005). Now, how does research and pedagogy support that aspiration?

In dialogue with Antonio Faundez, Freire discussed the role of intellectuals and the sciences in regard to more holistic and advanced research (Freire & Faundez, 1989). Faundez affirmed that researchers contribution occurs as long as they engage with people's reflections, trying to reach an understanding of "their and our everyday life" (p. 28). Further, Faundez affirmed that such an engagement needs to acknowledge the intellectual and the sensitive aspects of understanding that "what we [as scientists] must do is bring together feeling and understanding in order to arrive at the truth" (p. 28). Freire, in agreement with those ideas, stated that serious researchers who seek to play a complementary role to people's search for truth, "need to bring together 'feeling' and 'understanding' of the world" (p. 29). Such a holistic approach to social sciences accords with a participatory, and dialogical approach.

In relation to pedagogy, three points must be made. The first point is the need to understand the educational process as mutual learning. This shared learning involves an epistemological and pedagogical turn which Freire synthesised suggesting as a point of departure the idea that pedagogues must alternate "from talking to learners to talking to them and with them" (Freire, 1998, p. 63). Such understanding of what education is about is aligned with Indigenous thinking as expressed in the social concept of "Ako". For Maori, the Indigenous people of Aotearoa-New Zealand, the social concept of Ako recognises the concurrent and reciprocal nature of teaching and learning (Macfarlane, 2007). The second point is the need to recognise that "education has the potential to be liberating" (Carnoy, 2000). This liberating potential refers to promoting a critical analysis of one's own situation in a global environment. According to Carnoy (2000) critical analysis must be based on principles of solidarity and not individualism, as highlighted earlier by Bernadette. Finally, the third point is a rejection of the idea that teachers possess the single truth. Instead, welcoming the idea that "true is to be found in the 'becoming' of dialogue" (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 32). In the context of my research, I found that students, value teachers who are open to personal conversation, about student's lived experiences, culture, family, and feelings. At the same time, I found that teachers who valued the collective construction of knowledge – what Mônica just referred to as 'advancing different interpretations of the same fact' – and are willing to let go the idea of the 'know -it-all-teacher' who holds to the "ultimate truth, the ultimate word,

build stronger relationships with the students and help them to achieve better academic results. Students, thus, valued teachers who do not judge them based on their own ‘truth’. I found that building trust between teachers and students is fundamental in sound pedagogical relationships.

Bernadette: In a post-truth world, the ability to identify epistemological vices such as closed-mindedness, arrogance and wishful thinking, and to understand their implications for the world is significant and particularly desirable. Students must learn to distinguish between fantasy, fiction and facts, understanding the differences and nuances associated with these different ways of thinking. Students also need to understand that there are many ways of knowing and that these truths are historically grounded, have proofs, and exist within a variety of traditions. This enables us to distinguish them from fictitious accounts of knowing and knowledge. The prioritisation of the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects in many government policies demonstrates to the public that these forms of knowing and knowledge are perceived as more important and possibly even more authentic than other types.

Another important point is that the Internet has made it possible for anyone to share any information they please. Moreover, information is increasingly taken to be the same as knowledge. However, information is separated from the process of knowing. When knowledge is separated from knowing, there is the possibility of packaging knowledge as units of information and selling it on. Schools then become spaces for selling knowledge—they are reduced to delivery systems for dispensing knowledge and producing human capital, and not as spaces where critical thinking is developed. When knowledge is decontextualised, it is shorn of much of its meaning by reducing it to the sum of its parts. Knowing, perceived as the transference of information or existing knowledge, means that teachers become specialists in transferring information in the same way the Internet might, but without reference to the student or their context. The process of coming to know and learning how knowledge is produced teaches us many of education’s most important virtues, including “action, critical reflection, curiosity, demanding inquiry, uneasiness, uncertainty” (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 8). The post-truth era that deals in false information illustrates a lack of understanding about how knowledge is created and why that is important.

When there is a separation of knowledge from its process of production, what Freire termed the gnosiological cycle (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.7-8), students do not get the opportunity to learn first-hand the skills they need to learn in order to know, and then to reflect critically on this process. Technical knowledge alone may prepare a student for a career, but it does not necessarily enable that student to participate in society as a citizen. To be a citizen demands reflection and a struggle for citizenship itself (Freire, 1996). In the liberating classroom, students examine society’s structures and institutions, scrutinise what is said,

what is done, and how people relate to one another. They reflect on how this new knowledge changes them. They come to understand how society works by ‘reading the world’. However, this form of critical thinking and understanding is only significant when accompanied by transformative action. The idea of post-truth is perhaps a warning and an opportunity to once again engage with these ideas.

Hope and Solidarity

Mônica: Considering that for Freire (2001, p. 72), as for myself, history is a possibility in the sense that “the world is not finished” but “always in the process of becoming”, I believe that it is paramount to reaffirm his call for hope and solidarity. Freire (2001) argued that we can be ethical beings only because we have a choice to be unethical. If one decides to assume this ethical responsibility, it is then helpful to foster a critical optimism that reaffirms one’s right to hope and dream about a less cruel and more humane society. This does not mean, however, that by rejecting a fatalistic perception of the future, we can be free from the material constraints of our environment (Freire, 2004, 2016). Liberation for Freire is, as Roberts points out, “a matter both of recognising limits and of understanding possibilities given those limits” (Roberts, 2015, p. 61).

Bernadette: Freire’s (2001) concept of unfinishedness empowers us. For Freire, our incompleteness means that nothing is ever truly final or absolute and this leaves open the possibility for development. Conceptualized this way, we are never without hope. Freire (2013) argues that an unfinished person in an unfinished world is continually transforming the world and undergoing the effects of this transformation in return. We must, however, remain conscious of our incompleteness. As Darder (2015) argues “Freire often called to mind the significance of unfinishedness as a necessary radical variable in diminishing fatalism and inspiring hope in new possibilities for collective change among the oppressed” (p. 40).

Maria: Back to one of our earlier questions in our conversation, where Monica asked about the plausibility of dreaming about a more fair and humane society, I would say that such a dream, such a utopia rests precisely in our learning to co-construct a dialoguing society where we have the will and the skill to dialogue within diversity. Biesta argues, for example, that “the most important question today is how can we respond responsibly to, and how we can live peacefully with what and with whom is the other” (Biesta, 2006, p. 15). Also, thinking of hope in the light of Freire’s conceptual legacy, means aspiring to an education that fosters genuine interest to learn with and from others, and encourages the skills to dialogue among those who are different. Dialogue that by necessity, occurs among difference, and therefore allows for varied interpretations.

Mônica: Dreaming and acting to bring about change is easier if we make it a collective effort rather than an individual one. As Darder states “it is certainly humbling to confront our limitations, but to do this effectively we need others in our world with whom to learn, to grow, and to struggle” (Darder, 2002, p. 85). It is crucial, therefore, to actively encourage virtues such as openness and tolerance.

Bernadette: For Freire, educational virtues are inextricably linked to broader human virtues in the process of educational transformation and liberation, and come from human ideals such as love (Freire, 1997; Roberts, 2008a, 2010). Love underpins all of the educational virtues. Love underpins the curiosity and intellectual humility necessary to learn. Love underpins the openness, tolerance, commitment and respect required for dialogue. Moreover, love underpins the care, collegiality, coherence and authenticity that are necessary to teach.

Monica: Solidarity, in particular, was seen by Freire as an act of love that unites people – people who might not agree on everything but who, despite their differences, can engage collaboratively in the struggle of becoming more fully human (Freire, 2005). Now, when we are constantly overwhelmed by huge quantities of content in the media, and much of it specially designed to foment dissent and intolerance, it is more than ever necessary to accept that as long as we respect the autonomy of others and recognise dialogue as a ‘point of encounter’, we can have, as Freire says, a “different understanding of the profile of the dream” and still work together (Freire, 2014, p. 63).

Final remarks

Through a continuing, contingent, and not too-certain-of-its-certainties dialogue, this article explores the contemporary dilemma of post-truth from a Freirean perspective. There has been a radicalisation of political rhetoric across diverse contexts in recent months, as evidenced by the Brexit vote, the US presidential elections, the Colombian peace process and the unfolding processes around the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in Brazil. Additionally, an epistemological confusion between information and knowledge has undoubtedly played a part in the rise of the post-truth moment where many people are not aware of how the knowledge that they use has been created. However, Freire provides us with some ideas to challenge this regime. His utopian thinking inspires open and honest dialogue as a means for overcoming the ‘divide and rule’ dimension of oppression. He also encourages dispositions such as humility and openness, inviting us to acknowledge our uncertainties and incompleteness to ourselves and others as the beginning of questioning and learning. Acknowledging our unfinishedness allows us to remain hopeful as nothing is ever absolute, and our shared vulnerability in this acknowledgement

has the potential to unite. Finally, the process of coming to know, a reflective process leading to action, is at the heart of a critical education, an education that must oppose mechanistic and fatalistic views of the world. Conscientisation, as a form of critical thinking that reflects on the world, provides an educational template to deepen our understanding of the world and to respond to the threat of an unreflective post-truth regime.

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