

# 6 From Freire to Foucault

## Designing a Critical Prison Pedagogy

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University education can only be truly transformative when it respects the problems that learners bring into the classroom. Educators who work with marginalized, traumatized, and non-traditional communities have the responsibility of translating general education into skills that address real-world problems. A transformative university education in prisons, for example, must center the everyday problems of incarceration as a source of knowledge creation.

This chapter describes how a general education curriculum based around the work of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) can address the everyday problems of incarcerated learners. Through a process of "getting to Foucault," I describe my classroom goal of teaching incarcerated learners to see the anthropological problem of a prison. The chapter first discusses how the problem-posing education outlined by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be used as a model to help incarcerated learners. The chapter then describes the design of student self-reflections housed across eight prisons and enrolled in an online "Introduction to Anthropology" course for the Milwaukee Area Technical College. The final section of this chapter offers examples of how incarcerated learners relate Foucault's description of the carceral state to their everyday lives. I find that the writing of incarcerated learners can illuminate how we communicate scholarly knowledge to introductory learners. The below case study and analysis can also be useful in understanding the effects of applied anthropological education on a highly marginalized physical, legal, and social space.

### Developing a Critical Pedagogy in Prisons

In basic terms, general education courses must prepare students for success in future university coursework. Part of this preparation includes presenting introductory learners to some of the great works from a given field. Alongside Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, and Clifford Geertz, Freire and Foucault are two of the 25 most cited theorists of the last 100 years (Green 2016) and their work can be essential in preparing new students for the critical scholarly conversations cultivated through a university education.

However, while these theorists are useful to introduce new learners to a broader field of study, general education curriculum can often be in conflict and rarely represents the diversity of knowledge created in everyday life. Educators must be cautious not to simply replace the cultural and social knowledge our students bring into the classroom with a body of literature composed mainly by white male scholars who have long passed on. When completing general education courses, learners must be prepared to question, problematize, and reject the general university curriculum in an informed manner.

How can an educator simultaneously embrace and reject a dominant body of scholarship in the classroom? Rather than beginning with outright rejection of traditional scholarship, educators should ask learners to see themselves as inheritors of scholarly critique. For example, while there are noteworthy differences in tone between the Brazilian liberation ideology of Freire and the French postmodern deconstruction of Foucault, both scholars share a critique of how power and authority are created at the moment of knowing (Lotier 2017). An analysis of Freire's and Foucault's work suggests a social scientific tradition to education research that analyzes not just *what* information is being taught but, also, *how* and *why* a social fact is learned (Thomas 2008).

When applying Freire and Foucault to teaching general education in a prison or other non-traditional classrooms, the *what*, the *how*, and the *why* of learning are often one and the same. For the incarcerated, the prison is both an object of analysis and the institution that dictates modes of learning. While incarcerated learners should be encouraged to critique ideas of the prison written decades earlier, they should also be shown the methods that allowed their scholarly predecessors to reach their conclusions.

Both Foucault and Freire provide a critique of learning and incarceration. Freire rose to notoriety as an education policy savant, building reading programs for illiterate sugar cane workers in Brazil's Northeast during a time when literacy was required to vote. In his lifetime, Freire taught or organized literacy programs—also called “culture circles”—for millions of illiterate adults (Gadotti 2010). “Culture circles” taught people to read in less than 40 hours, often over the course of a single week. Following a 1964 Coup d'état that toppled the democratic socialist president João Goulart, a military dictatorship declared Freire's work a form of subversive communism and imprisoned him for 70 days. In his eventual exile, Freire published *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967) and his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) with both titles alluding to his experience in prison and the anti-authoritarian beliefs that forced him into exile.

There are several practical components to Freire's critical pedagogy that can apply to the general education classroom. Freire critiques a hierarchical “teacher and student” relationship and instead promotes a more egalitarian “educator and the learner” dichotomy. Where a “banking knowledge” simply asks students to repeat information, data, or theories verbatim from

a teacher, a problem-posing method has educators guide learners to *name* a social problem, to *reflect* upon the problem by using newly acquired literacy, and to *act* in an informed way that leads to the resolution of the problem. Freire's 'culture circle'<sup>2</sup> reflects the process of naming, reflecting, and acting. Learners would spell out words (to name), break down the route phonetical and grammatical components of those words (to reflect), apply those words to everyday social problems, and then explore other words that could be used to better understand those problems (to act). Freire believed that this critical pedagogy is effective in addressing the most marginalized and to promote *liberação* (liberation). In terms of general education, the 'culture circle'<sup>2</sup> model can transform a technical vocabulary required for understanding a broader field of study into a historical, epistemological, and practical analysis of how those terms apply to problems in everyday life.

The goal of education as liberation has been most prominently advanced in the United States by bell hooks (1994, 2004) who promotes education as a means to transgress *race, gender,* and classed ways of knowing the world. Particularly for incarcerated learners, liberation can take many forms and education sometimes operates on the continuum of abolitionism (Ronda and Ragnhild 2020). Both prisons and classrooms are gendered places and university education has the potential disrupt hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Zampini 2019). Furthermore, prison education can be liberating in far more practical terms. Education programs can show a form of rehabilitation *which* is appealing for judges granting release. A degree can provide an avenue for the formally incarcerated to overcome systematic inequalities that lead people to be labeled criminals and deviants. By naming, reflecting, and acting, incarcerated learners may also become more proficient at humanizing their errors for unsympathetic ears.

Unlike Freire, Foucault's scholarly contributions have not had a widely acknowledged influence on general education and classroom pedagogy. Rather, Foucault's approach appeared more radical and theoretical than applied. Foucault did have a direct intervention into prisons with *Le Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (the Prison Information Group). Cofounded by Foucault and other French intellectuals in 1971, the group developed programs that created an interface between the inside and outside by sharing the words of prisoners with a broader world and by bringing books and *newsprint* into the prison. However, the Prison Information Group collapsed after a year and Foucault appeared to abandon an applied approach to carceral critique.

Four years after the end of the Prison Information Group, Foucault published his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Foucault argues that knowledge is tied to modern technologies of power and control. Individuals internalize institutionalized definitions—technologies of the self—and struggle to create meaning outside of these dominant forms of knowledge. Foucault highlights how the education system helps to normalize power through the authoritative relationship of a teacher over a student and the

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defining of subjects. According to Foucault (1984, 47), “we have to give up hope of ever acceding to a point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits.” Foucault looks to the prison and argues that institutionalized definitions prevent individuals to consider their own relationship to knowledge (Biesta 1998).

Applied pedagogists are particularly disoriented when discussing the inescapability of power that plagues *Discipline and Punish*. Whereas Freire believes there is space for establishing an educator-learner dynamic, Foucault’s relationship between the teacher and the student is rigid and only seems to advance systems of authoritarianism (Marshall 1989). Rather, Foucault’s work is mainly appreciated for describing how power constitutes itself in all facets of life. Schools are similar to prisons in that both instill moral and social logics and rely on complex technologies of disciplinary control. Educational institutions deny rights to individuals such as the freedom of movement during class time or the freedom to express certain unacceptable ideas (Ball 2013).

The field of anthropology has theoretically, if not practically, embraced Foucault in part because of a shared iconoclastic desire to criticize oppressive social categories through research and teaching (Goldstein 2013; Sahlins 2002). According to Matti Bunzl (2014, 425), those who embrace both the Boasian tradition and Foucauldian tradition, view “anthropology as a history of the present, a mode of knowledge production that represents a genuine alternative to ... an entrenched design of fieldwork as an encounter between ethnographic Self and native Other.” In other words, anthropological teaching can be iconoclastic, non-dogmatic, and oriented towards understanding, to paraphrase Foucault, a cultural “history of present.” For incarcerated learners, Foucault’s history of the prison is also a critique of their daily lives and a history of their present reality.

## Course Design

In 2018, I began to design and implement an online university-level “Introduction to Anthropology” course for incarcerated learners—approximately 20 per class—housed across eight Wisconsin prisons. The program was organized by the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) and funded by the federal Second Chance Pell Grant (SCPG), a source that is specifically directed to fund education in prison settings. Course participants were within two years of release—having committed a variety of offenses from repeated drug possession to manslaughter—and they hoped to continue their university education once outside. The program at MATC offered more than 20 courses across MATC’s general education curriculum and was designed specifically to prepare participants for long-term success when they were released. Most participants intended to earn an associate degree if not a four-year degree once released.

Course readings and lectures are almost identical to courses that I teach both in-person and online at a public four-year university. The course uses *Perspectives: An Open Invitation to Anthropology* (Brown et al. 2017),<sup>1</sup> a text that is organized and published by the American Anthropological Association and is geared towards community college students and general education. I also assigned notable anthropological peer-reviewed articles. In subsequent weeks, I lectured on how anthropological concepts of culture contrast with the variety of the non-anthropological culture concepts that learners bring into the classroom.

I discuss the intricacies of Edward Tylor's noted description of a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits" (1871). Learners also read excerpts from a variety of ethnographies including Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), Franz Boas (1940), Laura Bohannan (1966), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Emily Martin (1991), Lila Abu-Lughod (2008), and Laura Nadar (2017), and Audra Simpson (2007). We also watch documentary films that are often staples in ethnographic courses: "The Ax Fight" (1975), "The God's Must Be Crazy" (1989), "A Kalahari Family" (2002), and "Paris is Burning" (1990). My goal is to illustrate the transformation of anthropology from a colonial project to an intimate and culturally relativistic field of knowing.

This more traditional anthropological curriculum was supplemented by a Milwaukee-based set of materials collected from newspaper articles, professional documentaries, and amateur videos of encounters between police and civilians. Much of the lecture is structured around applying anthropological vocabulary to the more familiar socio-cultural and political economic context of Milwaukee.

While this curriculum is often insufficient in addressing the diversity of identities and theoretical approaches that make up contemporary anthropology, I encourage learners to question the authority of this material and judge it based on racial, gendered, and classed perspectives. This critique is similar to the critique I level against the popular works of Marx, Freire, and Foucault—among others—who center a white male perspective. Similarly, in video lectures, I critically discuss the problematic nature of my own perspective as a white, middle-class, American man who is teaching about non-white and LGBTQIA+ communities living on the social periphery in the global south. I hope that students recognize not just what general education entails but also how educators themselves can reproduce many of the same problematic socio-economic dynamics that they critique in the classroom. I also asked students to interpret anthropological ideas through their own experiences with race, gender, and class.

When designing my courses, I introduce learners to Freire's "cultural circle" model and thoroughly explain benchmarks for the course in Freirean terms. Students are also expected to repeat the process of naming, reflecting, and acting for every written assignment. I found that the critical

process of naming, reflecting, and acting helped to transform Foucault's deconstructionist theories into an applicable and practicable educational model. Freire's problem-posing model can critically communicate anthropology's technical vocabularies while also encouraging application of these ideas to contemporary cultural and political debates.

I could not directly communicate with learners in-person or in real time but rather entirely through written evaluations, emails sent via on-site coordinators, and other tools found on the online "Moodle" educational platform. The course utilized a virtual private network that was capable of being monitored by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. Most learners only had access to a "closed" intranet and a computer lab during business hours. In several prisons, learners had the opportunity to use mobile *Android* tablet devices to complete work in their cells. In the day-to-day administration of coursework, these conditions created a learning environment similar to a correspondence course.

### Methods of Analysis

I found that my culture circle model had the secondary effect of producing excellent writing that could present a wealth of knowledge if shared with a broader world. However, teaching and research with incarcerated learners are ethically problematic endeavors. Course activities that investigate lifetime traumatic events or legal histories ~~risk~~ can further harm a vulnerable population. Prisoners lack civil rights and liberties under the U.S. Constitution. They are a population with a limited ability to consent and there is a history of exploiting the incarcerated for dubious science. Addressing these concerns, I received institutional review board approval to develop a collaborative writing project with incarcerated learners. MATC and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections gave me permission to record anonymized and confidential versions of student writings in the course. Students received extra credit by accepting, declining, or selecting "I prefer not to answer" on an informed consent form. For those who consented, I removed identifying markers (i.e., names, hometowns, specifics about crime) and kept notes of my teaching process and interruptions such as prison-wide lockdowns that prevented course completion.

When discussing anthropological concepts, I encouraged learners to discuss events and phenomenon that they had seen "with their own eyes" either inside or outside of prison. I also directed learners to focus on course concepts, present and summarize course material, and structure their essays around key "signposts" such as an introduction, thesis, and conclusion. After the first weeks of writing and evaluation, most learners can produce detailed and well-organized responses that blend anthropological concepts with details about their observations both inside and outside of prison.

For example, in the first lesson of any class I teach, I assign Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and I ask learners about their educational history,

the most important learning moments in their lives, and how education plays a role in their social environment. Feedback from these questions elicits responses that show not only the diversity of people found in prison but also the diversity of educational backgrounds that are housed within. Through this writing, I learned that many of my learners had thrived in educational settings before prison with many having been honor roll learners, Eagle Scouts, and active college students before incarceration. Some students already had an associate's degree and were simply renewing their credentials. Others, in contrast, had only earned their GED well into their 30s and—until they faced imminent release from a long prison sentence—had never considered higher education as an option.

Regardless of these formal markers of education, most learners mentioned their incarceration as the most important learning moment. For example, one learner—20-something woman who had been a “straight-A student” at a suburban High School—wrote in response to Freire's work:

The most important learning moment in my life is currently taking place. Sitting in prison, it is very easy to fall into the trap of feeling and thinking that your life is meaningless. Through this anthropology class and other classes that I am taking, I have learned that life is never meaningless, because becoming educated is one of the greatest purposes one can have.

I encouraged similar expressions of optimism throughout the course. For this reason, much of the writing I received was highly critical of systems of power and authority but often indulged in the potentials for liberation that our educator-learner relationship could produce.

Although I only assigned the introduction to *Discipline and Punish*, learners often read the entire book and they reflected on concepts that were not discussed in detail during lecture. I noted every time a participant mentioned their incarceration, their possible liberation, the act of naming reflecting and acting, and the nature of the institutions around them. I also made notes when students reflected on their race, ethnicity, gender, and class.<sup>2</sup> I was also particularly interested in how learners critiqued the pessimism of Foucault and offered alternative interpretations of incarceration.

### Prisoners React to Foucault

One student—a 40-year-old African American man who had already served 12 years by the start of the course—summarized Foucault's archeology of power and the effect of being labeled as abnormal:

For the most part, the average prisoner believes they are also less and stay in their perspective (racial or class) groups even when they get out of prison. This leads to a high rate of recidivism because the ex-convict

almost never strays out of the prisoner's social group... They end up "stuck" in the way of life that they have created for themselves or had created for them before they were a prisoner. How are we being controlled? "What is normal?" and who decided the answer to that question? These are the types of endeavors Foucault seemed to feel were vital in helping him interpret life.

The learner expressed important elements of a problem-posing general education. Specifically, he dissected the nature of control, power, and normativity in Foucault's work and presented their own set of questions that could help build a conversation in and beyond the class.

All of the learners were asked to explain Foucault's description of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon critically and in their own words. One student explained,

The panopticon was a tower located in the center of a circular prison from which guards could see all the cells. Foucault states, "We induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power..." Do I agree with Foucault's description? Being that I'm a 44-year-old man doing time on my second incarceration, I wouldn't have a problem doing my time in a panopticon prison. I committed a crime and I knew right from wrong. I believe in consequences for my actions. Some prisons can be violent... It would make me feel safer around other inmates (if the C.O.s (correctional officers) have more power. As long as they are not abusing that power or abusing the inmates? I'm fine because I know I perform better under strict structure.

In his response, this learner considered both the technical definitions of the panopticon and the more theoretical suggestions of power and control that Foucault inferred. The learner also applied the concept to modern society and then compared the panopticon to his own experience. He suggested that there are possible benefits for both the institution and the prisoner, a connection that is not often inferred from Foucault's writing.

Throughout the course, I asked learners to comment on the authors, scholars, and personalities that we discussed while also making anthropological judgments on their qualifications to speak on cultural phenomenon. One learner—a 20-something Hispanic gay man who was finishing a five-year sentence—discussed how Foucault's personal life was weighed down by the complexities of a marginalized sexual identity:

Foucault would have had a different and open view of society just from the fact that he was a homosexual man, which at the time he was alive was part of a different culture as it was not as easy to be out and open about your sexuality as it is today.



The same writer also discussed his admiration of Foucault's reputation as a radical political thinker,

Foucault was called many things, but did not let himself be defined by a single word, and I look up to this type of character, but he did embrace the meaning that all these words brought on together. He was okay with being a liberal and part of a counterculture, an outside-of-the-conformist type of thinking, as many of the best scholars often are, though they receive a lot of push back on their work because it is against the norm. He looked at individuals and how they interact with societies, and how an individual acts upon himself...he looked at individuals as a complicated complex people, not fit inside one singular box or definition. One thing specifically that really stuck out to me was the idea that there is always a trace of torture in incarceration and in prisons, because it made me reflect on all the horrible things I have endured since being locked up, and though I am aware it could be much worse, sometimes I just live through them without reflecting how truly difficult they are as my only option really is to persevere.

Here, the learner names a specific "problem" confronted by Foucault in his creation of knowledge and reflects on the relevancy, otherness, creates different ways of knowing the world and ultimately suffering from this knowledge. The writer also reflects on the influence of institutional "torture" and trauma that can influence individual's place in the world. The mention of perseverance shows the Freirean potential to 'act' against this trauma and to reject aspects an inescapable power that is often read in Foucault's writing. The writer mixes both scholarly concepts and ways of knowing with a type of hope that is more colloquial and cannot be found in Foucault's text.

Several other learners called into question the validity of Foucault's critique of institutional power. One learner, a Native American who had reflected throughout the course on her isolation from society as an Indigenous person, a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and as a prisoner, challenged the historical relevance of Foucault:

Prisoners are isolated and secluded from society as a whole, but the atmosphere of prison has changed since Foucault wrote his book in 1977. Many of the social and political reforms people are championing on the outside have reached the inside of the prison. We are offered re-entry programs, treatment for mental health needs, educational opportunities, and so much more. The staff seek to help us become productive members of society rather than throw us out to be treated as damaged, spoiled goods. Guards are still here to enforce rules and create a Panopticonic system, but discipline and punishment are a way of the past. This does not seem to fit with Foucault's ideas of the past influencing the future. Prisons were not reformed because of some

historical practice; they were reformed because people saw a need to treat humanity better. . . . As I look around my present environment, with my television, radio, laptop, and all the other comforts which were once denied to prisoners, I have come to believe that Foucault missed something. People do not practice something because it resembles our past, they can come up with unique ideas. Culture can evolve along a line, and the past can influence the future, but this is not the only way to understand our modern world.

The learner offers a critical self-reflection and suggests that Foucault's assumptions about incarceration may themselves conform to the disciplinary nature of incarceration. The learner also recognizes the ability of carceral institutions to become more humane through both physical and mental comfort and describes improved material conditions as a direct example of the institutions' embrace of the individual. Most importantly, *Discipline and Punish* did not "feel" right to the learner because Foucault created a theoretical approach that was too monolithic, inevitable, and normative within itself. In Freirean terms, the learner appears to argue that Foucault failed to understand how problems can be identified, reflected upon, and acted against.

Considering how learners sometimes disagreed with the most popular aspects of Foucault, I was also surprised by how much some learners were "thankful" for the modern disciplinary regimes discussed by Foucault. One learner, white male from Wisconsin's rural north, wrote,

The section of reading on torture and punishments in the past make me thankful to be alive in the times that I am, where prison is "intended to correct, reclaim, 'cure' a person" (Foucault 1977, 10). Now, the intent is to deprive the prisoner of all rights, but not inflict any physical pain, and getting inadequate attention for a health concern is grounds for a lawsuit. Not only are we no longer subject to physical torture, we are not forced labor for our executioners either. I find it ironic that today, many individuals are anxious to get a custody reduction and transfer to a work camp. The difference is that today, we earn a real wage. We must pay approximately seven hundred dollars per month for room and board, on top of fifty percent being applied towards any court costs or restitution, but this is a far cry from the slave labor of yore.

The learner points to the inherent benefits to the mechanism of carceral power described by Foucault. They also describe how discipline continues to have the potential to be traumatic in both physical (e.g., work camp) and psychological (anxiety) terms. This learner recognizes that the process of naming, reflecting, and acting is highly subjective and a critique of an institution or a theoretical argument can continue to embrace the normalizing effects of incarceration.

Similarly, many learners said they agreed with the utility of a panoptic nature of prison, not just as a theoretical concept, but as the correct way to influence people seen as deviant. For example, one learner, a 20-something white woman, wrote,

I agree with Bentham's prison panopticon because of the idea that is behind it. Because most institutions have cameras everywhere that watch everyone and everything that is being done. It's not like that in the prison where I am currently at. There are few cameras, not many, which I think is important to have. For the simple fact that when people think they are being watched, they conform. As for me personally living in a prison I do see that every day. Inmates don't fight where cameras can spot them; fights are taken place in the bathrooms. And inmates have other inmates be their lookout to avoid being caught. I think the point of the correctional system is all about doing the right thing when nobody is watching.

This learner suggests that incarceration produces a variety of individual experiences. The panopticon is not just internalized but also allows individuals to feel safe from those who may prevent personal liberation. The 'problem' the learner identifies is not the constant state of surveillance but the lack thereof. Incarcerated individuals, alongside being made aware of Foucault's well circulated critique, have informed perspectives that suggest types of liberation that are aligned with the oppressive panopticon.

### Future Critiques

My discussion above represents the inclusionary possibilities for a critical pedagogy in a marginalized setting. This "Introduction to Anthropology" class is designed not just to prepare learners for further college work but, also, to develop a framework for learners to develop a sense of self, despite an oppressive learning environment. An anthropological education can be used to re-establish a sense of self for individuals removed from society. Ethnographic ideals give continuity and dignity to individuals who want to refuse the stigma of criminality and the threat of continued incarceration.

My work with incarcerated learners takes into consideration this complex relationship between inclusion and exclusion. Teaching, particularly in an incarcerated and online context, can be disruptive of authority but is also defined by the control of communication and the physical confinement of individuals. I see my educator-learner relationship as disruptive of the physical boundaries of the prison and the social hierarchies within it. Applying this tension of oppression and liberation to general education outside of the prison, I see a problem-posing model allowing all learners to question *how* and *why* they are learning, not just *what* information they must regurgitate for a passing grade.

University education is often described in terms of a “rite of passage” (Tinto 1975). This assumes that a college is an institution designed in much the same manner as ritualized institutions in other parts of society. However, as general educators, anthropologists should try to do more than just transfer knowledge and reproduce descriptions of the world. Our pedagogical model seeks to change the world by instilling a sense of self within our learners (Tierney 1992). The reflections of students suggest that Foucault and other classic texts may fall short of fulfilling the self-reflective needs of learners, who often come from a diversity of raced, gendered, and classed perspectives. General education should do more than simply impart technical vocabularies. Rather, when we introduce learners to our fields of study, we must instill a critical skill that allows learners to solve the problems they bring into the classroom and to build their own paths towards liberation.

## Notes

- 1 An organizer of *Perspectives: An Open Invitation to Anthropology*, Nina Brown, is also a contributor to this volume.
- 2 Populations are identified using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) demographic categories of American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black, or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, and Two or more races.

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