

**INTERVIEW**

**A FREIRIANIAN GLOBAL LEGACY: A DIALOGUE WITH PETER ROBERTS**

UN LEGADO GLOBAL DEL TRABAJO FREIREAN: UN DIÁLOGO CON PETER  
ROBERTS

UM LEGADO GLOBAL DA OBRA FREIREANA: UM DIÁLOGO COM PETER  
ROBERTS

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**ABSTRACT:** In the phase of the proposed and expected discussions for the debate on Freire's thought on the occasion of the centenary of its birth, this text sought to establish a dialogue with one of the researchers who have, over decades, established a whole scientific, academic and social journey. , having as one of the contributions of reflection the work of the Brazilian teacher Paulo Freire. Thus, an interview was carried out with Professor Peter Roberts, whose production has crossed borders and broadened the discussion with and of Freire's thought. Peter Roberts is a professor at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, in the field of Education. The objective of the interview, therefore, was to highlight the work of Paulo Freire in the focus of academic works carried out by Professor Peter Roberts, either establishing dialogic bridges between Freire and other authors, or looking forward to new paths that update Freire's thought.

**Keywords:** Dialogue. Freire. Freirean legacy.

**RESUMEN:** En la fase de las discusiones propuestas y esperadas para el debate sobre el pensamiento de Freire con motivo del centenario de su nacimiento, este texto buscó entablar un diálogo con uno de los investigadores que, a lo largo de décadas, ha constituido todo un conjunto científico, académico y itinerario social., teniendo como uno de los aportes de reflexión la obra del maestro brasileño Paulo Freire. Así, se realizó una entrevista al profesor Peter Roberts, cuya producción ha traspasado fronteras y ha ampliado la discusión con y del pensamiento de Freire. Peter Roberts es profesor en la Universidad de Canterbury, Christchurch, Nueva Zelanda, en el campo de la educación. El objetivo de la entrevista, por tanto, era destacar el trabajo de Paulo Freire en el foco de trabajos académicos realizados por el profesor Peter Roberts, ya sea estableciendo puentes dialógicos entre Freire y otros autores, o buscando nuevos caminos que actualicen el pensamiento de Freire.

**Palabras clave:** Diálogo; Freire; Legado freireano.

**RESUMO:** Em fase das discussões propostas e esperadas para o debate do pensamento freireano em ocasião do centenário de seu nascimento, buscou-se neste texto estabelecer um diálogo com um dos pesquisadores que têm, ao longo de décadas, estabelecido toda uma caminhada científica, acadêmica e

social, tendo como um dos aportes de reflexão a obra do professor brasileiro Paulo Freire. Assim, foi realizada entrevista com o professor Peter Roberts, cuja produção tem atravessado fronteiras e alargado a discussão com e do pensamento freireano. Peter Roberts é professor na University of Canterbury, em Christchurch, na Nova Zelândia, na área de Educação. O objetivo da entrevista, portanto, foi realçar a obra de Paulo Freire no enfoque dos trabalhos acadêmicos realizados pelo professor Peter Roberts, quer estabelecendo pontes dialógicas de Freire com outros autores, quer perspectivando novos caminhos que atualizam o pensamento freireano.

**Palavras-chave:** Diálogo; Freire; Legado freireano.

Peter Roberts is a teacher at University of Canterbury, in Christchurch, in New Zeland, in the Educational field. He also talks about the Philosophy, Ethics and Politics and highlights the force of freirianian studies for the Literature field. One of his publications, in 2000, talked about Education and Literature in the humanization scope as treated by Paulo Freire. Besides these publications, we highlight the 2010 study, when he highlighted the force of freirianian thought for the XXI century ethics confrontations<sup>1</sup>.

Peter Roberts study Paulo Freire since 1980. The researcher Colin Lankshear showed him the texts of Paulo Freire at Auckland University. In 2009, he deepened the concepts of Awareness.

This interview was granted to Educational Praxis to compose this special number in honour of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paulo Freire. Peter Roberts answered the questions by email. We invited him in April 2020, because we recognizes the pioneering initiatives that Professor Peter Roberts in order to disseminate Freire's thought at the University of Canterbury. The author emphasizes the ethical and aesthetical dimension of Freire's work for production of knowledge in different fields of knowledge.

Our purpose was to highlight the work of Paulo Freire in the researches made by Peter Roberts, either establishing dialogic bridges between Freire and other authors, or prospecting new paths that updated Freire's thought in Australia. Peter Roberts also express the humanist and emancipatory dimension of Freire's thought in Philosophy, in Education and, as pioneer studies, reveals its dimension in Literature.

It is worth emphasizing the cordiality in which Professor Peter Robert treated us. He was attentive to respond. His attitude provoke us to pay attention on his expressiveness of his responses to our interview script, willing to highlight the way he approaches Freireanian themes in his studies, to expand the approach to the Brazilian public. Thus, our option was to translate

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<sup>1</sup> ROBERTS, Peter. **Paulo Freire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**: education, dialogue, and transformation. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2010.

the interview, in recognition of the interviewee's important contribution to this issue. We hope that the readers, like knowledge tunnel diggers, will penetrate the words of this interview-text and find dialogic clues for encounters with the two authors: Paulo Freire and Peter Roberts.

*1. Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: Professor, thanks in advance for this meeting and for this interview. You have published on the work of Paulo Freire, patron of Brazilian education, for more than three decades. Can you tell us how and where this interest in Freire started?*

**Peter Roberts:** My initial encounter with Freirean ideas was via undergraduate courses at the University of Auckland in the early 1980s. I went on to complete a Master's thesis on the concept of conscientization, just as Freire was entering the most productive phase of his writing career. A doctoral thesis, on Freire, literacy and higher education, would follow some years later. By the end of the 1970s, Freire had, with the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and other early works (Freire, 1972a, 1972b, 1976), already made a major contribution to educational studies, but he had much more to say. The release of his co-authored volume with Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Freire & Shor, 1987), marked the beginning of an intense period of intellectual activity over the last ten years of his life. Several other books with a dialogical format appeared (Escobar *et al.*, 1994; Freire & Faundez, 1989; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Horton & Freire, 1990), along with multiple sole-authored works addressing a rich range of philosophical, political and educational themes (Freire, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). These later publications, together with the well-known earlier texts, provided fertile territory for my own engagement with Freirean ideas via my teaching and research. Other books have emerged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Freire, 2004, 2007; Freire, Freire, & de Oliveira, 2014), and these have stimulated further thought. Of course, I have other scholarly interests beyond the work of Paulo Freire, and these have been helpful in deepening my understanding of the limits and possibilities in Freirean pedagogy.

*2. Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: What are some of the key lessons you have learned from Freire over these decades?*

**Peter Roberts:** Freire's pedagogical principles need to be considered in relation to the broader ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions of his thought. Freire has much to teach us about humanization and dehumanization, the nature of knowledge, the politics of education,

and the possibilities for communication across differences. From Freire we can acquire a keener sense of the need for coherence between our words and deeds. Freire gives us a set of ideals to which we can aspire in our work as teachers and researchers. He demonstrates the need for humility, openness, tolerance, care, commitment, and rigour, and these virtues can be exhibited – and compromised – in myriad situations in daily life. Needless to say, his work is not without its weaknesses, but these too can have educative value, prompting constructive debate, deeper reflection, and further reading. Freire fostered a certain restlessness in attitude toward education and knowledge, keeping us all a little on edge, and allowing us to see that there is always more work to do. (See further, Darder, 2015; Kirylo, 2011; Mayo, 1999; Morrow & Torres, 2002; Roberts, 2000, 2010; Schugurensky, 2011.)

*3. Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: How would you evaluate the global legacy of Freire's work?*

**Peter Roberts:** Whatever one thinks of Freire, it is readily apparent that his work has been extraordinarily influential. It is not just the number of people who have read and cited his books that is important here; it also the breadth of his influence that must be noted. Freire's ideas have been taken up by educationists at all levels in the system, from early childhood to older adulthood, but they have also been engaged by theologians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and development theorists, among others. They have been applied not just in classrooms but also in counselling, social work, nursing, prison rehabilitation programmes, the peace movement, and struggles for indigenous rights. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Freire's reach has been truly global, with readers in almost every part of the world. Books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* have been translated into numerous languages. There is no one best way to evaluate his legacy, but some sense of what he has left us, and of the ongoing significance of his ideas, can be gained from the variety of contributions in edited collections on his work over recent years (e.g., Peters & Besley, 2015; Kirylo, 2020; Torres, 2019). That so many people, in such a diverse array of different fields, have found something worthwhile in Freire's ideas suggests that he taps into deep and abiding human concerns. He prompts us to ask searching questions about ourselves and the world we inhabit. He encourages us to reflect on the ideals to which we are committed, whatever our domain of study or activity. He offers hope, while also acknowledging the existence of despair and providing a sobering assessment of political realities (Roberts, 2016). He rubs against the prevailing cultures of performativity, instrumentalism, superficiality, and selfishness, offering

a utopian view of education that is anchored in the idea of building a better, but never perfect, world (Roberts & Freeman-Moir, 2013). This is a world, he would say, that is always in the making, always incomplete.

*4. Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: What impact has Freire had in New Zealand?*

**Peter Roberts:** Freire has certainly left his mark in New Zealand (see Roberts, 1999). In the educational community, he is perhaps best known among philosophers of education, but most sociologists of education and educational historians will also have some knowledge of his work. Those who have taught courses in curriculum studies, the politics of education, adult education, and comparative education have also frequently incorporated his ideas in their lectures. Freirean themes will often be addressed via supervisor/student relationships, in the completion of Masters and Doctoral theses (cf. Roberts, 2019). There has been little space for educational theory in many teacher education programmes over recent years, but again, most who have had a long-term professional commitment in this area will have some familiarity with key texts such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's work has been important for many Māori scholars in education (see Smith, 1999), who have adapted his ideas in distinctive ways to advance our understanding of indigenous knowledge and experience. And, as has been the case elsewhere in the world, Freire's influence has extended well beyond the realm of education. Freire's educational philosophy appears to have had little direct bearing on policy thinking, but that is hardly surprising; policy documents in New Zealand seldom demonstrate an in-depth engagement with theory.

*5. Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: Professor, your main attention is to education and philosophy, but you have also said a great deal about literature. Do you think that literature offers a useful complement to the traditional sources of non-fictional journal articles and books? How are these aspects highlighted by Freirian ethics?*

**Peter Roberts:** I have always had a love of literature, but for many years I kept my reading of novels, short stories and plays separate from my academic work. I suppose I felt that bringing these two spheres of my life into active conversation with each other, subjecting my responses to works of fiction to the scrutiny of the scholarly gaze, could taint my relationship with these books and their authors. I have found that the risk of making this leap has been entirely worth taking, and over the last fifteen years, I have provided philosophical and educational readings



of the work of several literary figures, including Fyodor Dostoevsky, Hermann Hesse, Albert Camus, and Iris Murdoch (Roberts, 2008, 2012; Roberts & Freeman-Moir, 2013; Roberts, Gibbons & Heraud, 2015; Roberts & Saeverot, 2018). Freire's ideas lend themselves well to this kind of scholarship, providing both a robust foundation for asking educational questions of a literary text and the opportunity for a work of fiction to 'speak back' to Freirean theory. This has been evident to me in previous Freirean readings of Hesse (see Roberts, 2010, 2012) but the point was brought home to me again in a recent paper I completed on Freire and the Brazilian author, Lima Barreto (Roberts, 2021). Barreto's novel *The Sad End of Policarpo Quaresma* (Barreto, 2011) poses some significant educational and ethical questions for pedagogues committed to the Freirean ideal of conscientization. Reflecting on Policarpo's 'madness' helps us to better appreciate some of the limits of education, dialogue and critical consciousness, while also reinforcing the need for empathy and compassion.

*6. Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: The idea of the incompleteness of being is present in Paulo Freire's work. We, as teachers and researchers, often find numerous situations in which verbal interaction constitutes our formative process. Can you comment on how Freire helps us to understand the process of educational formation?*

**Peter Roberts:** You are right: the notion of incompleteness is a key theme in Freire's work. Freire was consistent on this point throughout his writing career. When he spoke about humanization in his early books, he stressed that this was a matter of becoming *more* fully human, more completely what we are meant to be. We become more fully human, his work suggests, through engaging in critical, dialogical praxis, but we do so in an imperfect world. Struggling against dehumanizing structures, policies, attitudes, and practices is part of the process of humanizing ourselves. We never engage in this process alone; thus *my* incompleteness is also *your* incompleteness. Your use of the word 'formation' is interesting, particularly in the light of current trends in education. The emphasis on performance, on measurement, on relentless assessment, within a crammed curriculum, with teachers and students always up against the clock, runs counter to the less precise but arguably immeasurably more important process of formation. The idea of formation is central to the European notion of *bildung*, and Freire's work complements this, in a healthy way. In particular, I would say that Freire sharpens our awareness of educational formation as a necessarily political process. Schooling is a relatively short-term affair; formation is a lifelong process. We are, Freire shows, formed through the relationships we build, the books we read, the jobs we undertake, the

moments of joy and of great sadness we experience, the decisions we make, the actions we take, the words we utter, and the silences we inhabit. In short, we are formed through the difficult, complex, unpredictable task of living and being in and with the world.

*7 Ester Maria de Figueiredo Souza: We thank you for this moment. Finishing, we would like to ask you for an exercise of invention. Can you suggest for us one question that Paulo Freire would want to ask in seeking the construction of a non-fascist world?*

**Peter Roberts:** We live in an age structured by excessive certainties. This is so in multiple respects, but one of the most telling examples has been furnished by the style of leadership adopted in some countries over recent years (Roberts, 2020). With a mix of arrogance and ignorance, some in positions of power have lied repeatedly, refused to listen to good advice, deliberately promoted division and hatred, and failed abysmally in their duty to respond to the Covid-19 global crisis. Freire might want to ask: In what ways might being a little less certain of our certainties help us in building a better world?

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