

ON QUESTIONS IN EDUCATION OR AN EDUCATION IN QUESTIONING¹

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Do you, reader friend, have any questions in relation to the title of this text? Before you answer, I'll ask you a question. Are you alone? Would you like to find someone so you can read this text together? It would be interesting. You could find several people, many, or just one. It would enrich your reading of this text because you could talk about what we are about to do. It would also allow you to more clearly notice how what we think is modified and grows when we do it with someone else. It's not indispensable, but it would be enriching. If you can't find company, just ask a question based on the title of this text. If you were able to find someone, tell your reading partner to also formulate a question or ask themselves a question. Let me repeat the title that you'll ask your question about or ask yourself about: *On Questions in Education or an Education in Questioning*. Is there anything about what's affirmed in that question that makes you unsettled? Ruminates on the "you" in the question. Does this question touch you? In what way? Don't hurry. I'll wait. There's no rush. Take all the time that you need. Please, just keep reading after formulating your question. It is important that you try to find an opportune time to think. Turn off your cell phone. Disconnect. Try to slow down the speed of your temporal experience. The time for asking questions is a special time, more delayed, slower. It is more intensive than extensive. Only when you have found that time should you keep reading. You're also going to discover why. Did you find the time? Did the question come? You could be asking yourself(selves): What type of question? It can be any question, as long as it relates to the title, and as long as it truly is a question, namely, that it arises from something which arouses your curiosity, that you do not know the answer to and that you're interested in searching for, and that you think it's worthwhile to ask yourself that question. Don't worry about it being "the" question, or that it seems complex or sophisticated. No, it's enough that it be sincere. It can be simple. The important thing is that you feel connected to the question, that you feel that you have a relationship with the question; that the question affects you. Yes, it can be more than one, it can be many questions. As many as you want. Just as long as you find one.

Now that we're getting into that, are questions sought after or found? Are they found when they are sought after or when they are not?

In fact, these are examples of the questions we are seeking (or finding). These would be my questions, the ones that I could write down if I were reading and not writing this text. Although, thinking it over, since they interest me, since I think they are worth asking and they arouse my curiosity, I will write them down. Think about your question(s). When you have it (them) we'll keep going. I repeat, there's no rush, take all the time you need. Have you got it (them)? Very good. Now, write that question or those questions down on a piece of paper and set it aside for a moment while we keep going, you reading and me writing.

Keep that question or those questions in suspense and try to relate what I am about to write back to it (them). In a little while we will return to the question(s). The relationship between teaching and learning is one of the central questions in any educational theory or practice. For the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, one of the principal references in critical theories in education, understanding this relationship was almost an intellectual obsession and he returned to it time and time again in his different books, letters, and interviews. Let's turn our attention to one of his "spoken books": *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*.² For those of us who feel drawn to its title, everything in this book is interesting: its format, since it is structured as a conversation which is perhaps the way in which writing can most closely resemble dialogue, and also its content, as it rightly deals with trying to understand the value and meaning of the question as the fundamental element of a dialogical educational practice. Our title seems to suggest something similar.

In this book, Freire and the Chilean philosopher Antonio Faundez reaffirm a pedagogy which is neither centered on the educator nor on the one being educated, but on the pedagogical relationship itself: both teach and learn through a relationship in which the question plays a principal role. Through their questions, they give life to their curiosity, they reconsider what they know, and they open up new perspectives and possibilities of knowing. Paulo Freire seeks to affirm an educational position which is democratic as well as rigorous for those who teach. One of the questions which he might write if he were reading this text

2 → Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation*, trans. Tony Coates (New York: Continuum, 1992).

would be: “How can we exercise that political position, in theory and in practice, without renouncing at the same time the exigencies of teaching and of a democratic educational life?” That is, perhaps, one of the questions which traverses not only this book of his, but a large part of Paulo Freire’s entire life and work. Like any good question it is impossible to answer and at the same time it is necessary to try. Yes, I know. You, reader, must be at this moment thinking if your question is or isn’t a good question. Don’t worry about that now. Let’s continue, you reading and me writing. Since all knowledge begins with a question, as Faundez affirms, the first thing that needs to be taught and learned is how to question. And to teach and learn to question, Paulo Freire suggests, one must begin with the question, “What does it mean to question?”, another necessary and impossible question.

This is a question which, underneath its apparent simplicity, hides an extraordinary complexity and which provokes many other questions, such as: Is it possible to teach (and learn) how to question? If it were, how would one do it? Why question? Why do it? Is questioning the same for the one who teaches as for the one who learns? Questioning or questioning oneself? And so many more questions...

Yes, I can imagine. You must be thinking, and rightly so, that I should have presented these questions to you before asking you to formulate a question. Again, don’t worry. On the one hand, no one is going to judge your questions; on the other hand, one of the good things about asking questions is that we learn how to do it by practicing. Thus, there is no better way to learn these questions than by exerting oneself in the very act of questioning. So, if you are asking questions like that one or others similar, we’re off to a good start and we’re on the right path. Relax. Let’s continue.

Freire and Faundez were not alone in this preoccupation, nor, of course, did they inaugurate it. We need look no further than to one of the great teachers of the Latin American popular school, Simón Rodríguez, who created a school in which it was taught, first and foremost, how to question. He believed that it was necessary to teach how to question in order to teach how to think, which itself is at the base of all other teachings, including reading and writing. Consider that he or she who learns how to think can not only learn anything that

he or she can think of, but also learn how to move between two opposites, which are also crucial for any pedagogical theory or practice: authority and freedom. In his words:

BLIND OBEDIENCE is the principle that governs. That is why there are so many Slaves - and for that reason the first one who wants to be Slave-Master becomes one. Teach children to be QUESTIONERS. So that by asking WHY, regarding what they are told to do, they become accustomed to obeying... REASON! And not AUTHORITY, as the LIMITED do. And not CUSTOM, as the STUPID do.³

21

Rodríguez believed that if we want a shared way of life which is not authoritarian then we must educate questioning boys and girls, who search for the “why” of things and are not content with habits and customs nor with the authorities that govern. Rodríguez did not stop at words: as a kind of Minister of Education for Simón Bolívar, he invented a popular school in 1826, in Chuquisaca, the then capital of Bolivia. His school was revolutionary: it reversed the regular order of things. In Rodríguez’s time, the dominant educational discourse in the colonies said – and still says – that schools are necessary to educate citizens. Rodríguez held that it was not the schools which made citizens, rather that the citizens made the schools: “schools for all because all are citizens.”⁴ His plan was to establish many schools like that one with all the citizens that the royal schools did not consider fit to include, and through questioning and thinking, to invent a new shared way of life. Rodríguez emphasizes that it was necessary to consider students to be citizens before offering them school, otherwise a school would not deserve to be called this name. If we think that we are making citizens in school, then we are not really inventing school.

Something about Simón Rodríguez’s school must have strongly perturbed those who defended different ideas because they tore it

3 → Simón Rodríguez, *Obras completas, Tomo II* (Caracas: Presidencia de la República, 2001), 27.

4 → Simón Rodríguez, *Obras completas, Tomo I* (Caracas: Presidencia de la República, 2001), 284.

down during one of his trips to Cochabamba where he was exploring the possibility of inventing another popular school. It's a shame. Who knows if Rodríguez's schools had been allowed to exist whether we would be concerned with other issues in education today. And whether we'd be asking ourselves different questions. In this way we realize that the questions we ask ourselves do not only come from within ourselves, but that they are questions with a history, a memory, and a geography.

Rodríguez also offers an indispensable element for the educating in the question of which we have already spoken, but it is worth appreciating the twist that the Venezuelan teacher gives it: if someone wants to teach how to question (or question him or herself) it is necessary that he or she also question. There are no questioning children without questioning teachers, not in the sense that the teachers ask what others know, but that they question what they themselves think they know in order to be able to know in a different way.

An oft remembered phrase of Rodríguez's, which has a lot to do with questions and questioning, says: "*we invent or we err*",⁵ a phrase which Bolívar's teacher thought of in particular for the person in the position of teaching. The phrase can be read in many ways: "to invent" is usually associated with a creative and innovative activity, proper to an individuality which brings to the world something which did not exist before. It's true that it also held this meaning for Rodríguez, since it was necessary to create, in the school, a world and a way of inhabiting that world which did not exist in the colonial schools. But also, etymologically, "to invent" means something more: it is derived from the Latin word *inventus*, which is from *ventus*, the past participle of the verb *venire* which means to come, to arrive. This means that *ventus* is that which came or arrived. That which arrived in, as in that which arrived inside, which was outside and came in. In this way "to invent" from its etymology also means to come inside, and in the case of an educator, to open the doors so that anyone can come into the school. The second part of this disjunction is a conjugated form of the verb "to err" which most commonly means to be mistaken, to not get it right. Regarding

5 → Rodríguez, *Obras Completas*, I, 344.

this meaning, there is actually a vast literature about being wrong and making mistakes in education, and more and more this is seen in a positive light both for the teacher and the student. Nevertheless, “to err” has at least one other meaning: to wander, to roam, to move about without a final destination point, mindful of the meanings of its own wandering. Finally, the disjunctive “or” also has more than one meaning. As a disjunction, it can be exclusive, that is, in the sense that it can affirm only one of the things it is contrasting: one thing or the other, but not both: does a triangle have 3 or 4 sides? If it has 3 it can’t have 4; if it has 4 it can’t have 3. Or it can be an inclusive disjunction, that is, one thing or the other, but also both: does a triangle have 3 sides or 3 angles? One or both options can be true. In this case both are true, but we could also ask: does a triangle have 3 sides or 5 angles? And the disjunction would continue to be inclusive even though the answer to the second part of the question is false because all triangles have 3 angles. But for a triangle to have 5 angles isn’t incompatible with it having 3 sides, even if isn’t true. On the other hand, the disjunction could also mean something else, i.e. that the two alternatives are equivalent or different forms of the same thing: “a triangle or a figure with 3 sides and 3 angles.” This means that there is no triangle which does not have 3 sides and 3 angles, nor is there a figure with 3 sides and 3 angles which is not a triangle. They are the same, they are equivalent.

23

Without having exhausted its meanings, it is notable that “we invent or we err” can mean many things for the person who occupies the position of teaching. What would it say, reader, readers, to you and to me in this moment? That teaching demands that we invent so as not to err? That erring is a form of inventing? That he or she who teaches must invent in the sense of creating, of opening the doors or both? Is errancy an inventive figure in teaching? We could also ask questions to the disjunction itself. Is it even possible for an educator to invent or err in our schools in our time? If so, how? Why do it?

We could also ask ourselves about the relationship between questioning, inventing, and erring: could questioning be a form of inventing and erring? Is it possible to invent or err without questioning? Or better yet, is it possible to invent or err without questioning oneself?

As I think about these questions that I have just written, I ask myself if they really are questions, because it seems to me that I know their answers. In that case, as it were, I wouldn't be questioning, and, perhaps, this isn't about questions that ask, but rather questions that affirm. Besides, do they question me? Do they question us, reader(s)? Well, I realize that perhaps this is a good moment to stop asking questions. Hopefully in your errant reading(s), you are also asking your own questions, inventing or erring school, however you want to understand this phrase.

24

This is how we arrive at a complex yet delicate point: questions do not have owners, but we also can't separate them from the people who ask them without losing something significant: the same question can have very distinct meanings for different subjects in diverse contexts. Thus, this is one of the principle issues: what matters is not so much the wording of the question as it is the relationship we establish with it, the effect that the question provokes, what we allow a question to do with our ideas, expectations, and knowledge. In other words: the space that we give a question so that it can help us think. Think back to your question(s), it's not the wording of your question, but rather what you are doing with it, or letting it do with you, that matters: have you allowed it to question you?

In this sense, I think that at this point I can now tell you, esteemed reader(s), that what is most important is not so much to ask this question or that question but to ask questions of yourself, to question yourself, to let yourself be interrogated, to traverse thought itself and the life we live through a question: to allow a question to rattle and move us to begin to be able to err, in the dual meaning of being wrong and of wandering, in thought itself.

Think for example about the temporal experience we have had up until now, from when we searched for the question up until this moment. It's a different experience of time compared to what we are used to at work, right? Less productivist, results oriented, and instrumental. It's a more personal time, which touches us more directly. Nothing concrete can result from it. But perhaps we ourselves can emerge modified from this exercise. And who knows if this temporal experience will allow us to ask ourselves how in general we experience time in our

work, affective, and romantic relationships. And that process of questioning begins, but it doesn't end...

In the case of a joint educational exercise, what matters is that together we question the common world which we inhabit, and that we make for ourselves a world of questions upon questions: in the world, about the world, from the world, to put in question the way that we inhabit this world, with the sense that, inventing or erring, we will be capable of inhabiting another world. Inventing school, erring with others. Erring, inventing school with others.

25

Accordingly, questions and questioning occupy a very important space in my pedagogical practices, as much in the university and in schools as outside of them, with students of any gender, age, class, or color. I always strive for a pedagogical activity to begin and end with questions because, as we saw, this is where a thought begins. This is also why I asked you a question at the beginning, reader(s), because I wanted this text to be as consistent as possible with what I think about the role of questions in learning and teaching, and also because I truly believe that one can only really question from the questioning exercise itself. So that, I hope, you are now thinking something different than if you had simply read this text without a question which, in some way, would affect and impact that reading.

Now we're going to take this small exercise a step further. We're going to take that question we asked ourselves at the beginning. If we're not alone we're going to exchange questions, taking our partner's question. And after, once we have the question(s) from our partner, what can we do with that/those question(s)? Answer it/them? That's one possibility, and sometimes it is important to answer some questions. In this case, however, since we're more interested in the value of the questions and of questioning, instead of answering it we're going to ask a question to that initial question (if you're alone use your own question, if you made or received more than one at the beginning then pick one of them, the one which you are most drawn to at this moment). Or better yet, we're going to ask two questions to the initial question. Ask two questions to the initial question and write them below it. When you have them ready, if you exchanged questions with someone else, then return them. If you're alone, read them carefully for

a little while. And then, what can we do with the two new questions that we now have? Well, again, we can do many things, but we're going to bring them together again in a new question, only that it can't be the same question as the initial question.

Thus, I repeat the exercise: we had one question, someone (yourself or a partner) asked that question two questions, and now we're bringing those two questions together again in a new question, which is different from the first. Is that clear? We started with one question, with a concern, with something that we wanted to know, something that interested us. We asked or we were asked two questions, that is, we moved or we were moved, in two directions, to be interested in or concerned about something related to our initial concern, and at the end we reunited these two possibilities in one new question that we are interested in thinking about now. Let me put it another way. We have questioned ourselves. Others have questioned us about our questioning. We came back to our questioning from a different direction, with another meaning. We have been walking in thought: inventing or erring? I think that at this point each one of you could be practicing these and other questions.

26

We are close to the end of this exercise. In a sense we are back at the beginning. We started with a question. We are ending with another question. If it is not the same one (and it can't be!), then we are not back in the same place, we are not asking ourselves the same thing, we have walked with our questions... or our questions have made us walk. We can now keep walking in many directions: for example, if any part of what is written here or of what we have thought about while we read this text helps us think about the questions we have asked. Or if we raise more questions. Or if we want to change any of the questions we made before. Or if we still raise new questions. Or if our questions are indeed good questions or also what makes a question "good"? Or if... or if... or if... the exercise of thinking and questioning seems infinite, in the sense of having no end... like a straight line, but also like a circle which begins and ends in the same place, in any place, but where the beginning and the end meet.

We've finished and we could begin again. Each new beginning

opens new paths for thinking: new paths for inventing or erring. Have we learned anything about the educational value of questions, questioning, and questioning oneself? Hmm. Now that I think about it, I have also changed my question. Sometimes, a single question says a lot more than many answers. ■