Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts
M. Souto-Manning
New York
Peter Lang
2010
Pp. xiii + 218
ISBN 978-1-4331-0406-0 (pbk)

Reviewed by Sally Brown, Georgia Southern University
SallyBrown@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

Freire, Teaching, and Learning brings long awaited practical applications of
Paulo Freire’s work to life for educators. Mariana Souto-Manning
exquisitely crafts this book to illustrate the cultural nature of teaching
through dialogue in social interactions as opposed to inflicting politically-
driven, prescribed curricula. The chapters in this book address the critical
theory behind culture circles, several practical applications, and possibilities
for using culture circles to enact change in the world.

Part I of this book opens with two key chapters: (1) culture circles and
critical pedagogy and (2) the critical cycle. In the first chapter Souto-
Manning frames the entire book by providing details about the history of
critical theory and culture circles. This lays a solid foundation for readers
who may be new to exploring the political, cultural, and social nature of
education. The author draws attention to the use of language in this
transformational work since historically language has been used to maintain
the status quo in society. For this reason contesting language-in-use is
necessary for transformation. Souto-Manning makes explicit connections
between social justice, literacy, and the ways competency in oral and written
communication frees people to transcend their proscribed worlds. She closes
the chapter by linking people’s everyday lives to their learning.
Chapter 2 expands on the work of critical theorists like Freire through the development of a theoretical model called the critical cycle. Here, Souto-Manning uses her expertise to expand what has been written about critical theory and creates a new model that shows experienced educators and scholars how to take the generative themes developed in groups and move them forward toward action at personal and societal levels. Her critical cycle makes the process visible and therefore, possible to achieve. She builds on Freire’s ideas and illustrates ways the teaching profession can promote freedom, democracy, and change. Specifically, Souto-Manning describes the authentic pedagogy involved in conducting culture circles which includes the role of teachers, inclusion, engagement, and seating arrangements. The author also weaves in storytelling as a space for collectively identifying problems and creating community action plans.

Part II of this book is the result of Souto-Manning’s many years of field work across a variety of settings in the United States and Brazil. These chapters focus on the practical use of culture circles in a first grade public school classroom, a Brazilian adult education program, pre-service teacher education, in-service teacher education, and Boalian Theatre in teacher education. Chapter 3 presents the author’s research involving six and seven year olds who identify the racial and socioeconomic segregated nature of pull-out programs at their school. Even though Souto-Manning’s students are very young, she supports their ability to problematize this important issue. The author uses children’s literature as a catapult for class discussions about race, economics, equity, and fairness but then moves outside of the standard curriculum to include media and news reports. As these students engage, the author documents the multiple perspectives brought to the culture circle. The critical essence of talk is highlighted as the students and author co-construct knowledge about the pull-out programs to enact change. At the end of the chapter Souto-Manning draws attention to the realities of altering the public school system but also puts forward some practical solutions to tackle the problem.

In chapter 4 Souto-Manning moves her research to an adult education program in a Brazil. The author opens the chapter with a rich history of Brazilian politics, illiteracy rates, and Freire’s popular culture movement. This sets the stage for her ethnographic description of one community’s journey into culture circles. As the group’s facilitator leads discussions about everyday themes and issues, the community focuses on earning a livable wage. The author captures the actual dialogue and documents it through
transcripts in the text so that the reader is able to appreciate the essence of the culture circles. This project leads to social action with employers at the local level and letter writing to government representatives at the national level. In this case the culture circles promote the development of community empowerment and the participants ultimately re-imagine themselves and affect the status quo.

Chapter 5 reveals the use of culture circles with pre-service teachers in the United States. The setting for this chapter is particularly timely since American public schools are dealing with the pressures of No Child Left Behind legislation, increased standardized testing, and adequate yearly progress. Souto-Manning launches this chapter with a scholarly critique of traditional models used in teacher education programs. She also makes an argument for a move toward critical multicultural education through which adults learn experientially and use transformative pedagogy in the classroom. As Souto-Manning applies culture circles with pre-service teachers, she illustrates how curriculum can emerge from the participants and result in more meaningful teaching. It is through this type of interaction that deficit lenses about students are removed and replaced with more respect for individual differences and humanity. The author details the learning, talking, and teaching of 22 practicum/student teachers. The culture circles commence with an awareness of stereotypes and in-depth discussions about cultural mismatches discovered from experiences and course readings. As these teacher candidates develop an awareness of the privileging of White, middle-class ways of being and knowing, they start to question best practices and why certain pedagogies are considered best practices. The group continues questioning the historical forces shaping education policy in the United States and as a result the role of teacher educator is questioned. Souto-Manning concludes the chapter by critiquing her own actions and learnings from this group of pre-service teachers. She skillfully illustrates the complexities surrounding schooling and teacher education and offers the reader strategies for identifying problems and moving toward transformation.

Culture circles shift to in-service teacher education in Chapter 6. Souto-Manning initiates this chapter with an analysis of the typical forms of professional development in American public schools. She notes that most of these attempts do not address the stark realities of everyday lives of teachers. Instead of stopping at a critique of the problem, the author offers a new approach for professional development that builds upon teachers’
knowledge, experiences, and backgrounds. Souto-Manning applies culture circles to a group of preschool teachers working at a university affiliated child care center. These circles begin by questioning parental concerns about the ways that early literacy is being taught in their classrooms. The group decides to deconstruct issues of pedagogical practices over time. As the generative themes emerge, the group shares stories and vignettes to illustrate the problems. The author pushes the group to move from acceptance of the status quo toward transformation. Through the culture circle experience teachers develop a sense of agency that leads to change. Souto-Manning does not end the professional development here. Instead, she adds another layer to the critical process. She gathers the teachers together again and shifts focus to include time to report on the implemented plans of action. This last step was highly successful in strengthening the teachers’ power and unifying them as a community of learners. As part of the results of this study, the author found that this process was effective in lowering the attrition rate of teachers at the preschool.

In the last chapter of section II Souto-Manning introduces her readers to the Theatre of the Oppressed (T.O.) based on the work of Brazilian activist Augusto Boal. The author opens with a brief historical framework for understanding the Brazilian origins of T.O. Next, Souto-Manning brings the key roles and guidelines for applying T.O. to life so that the readers can easily implement them in their own settings. In this chapter the author uses T.O. as a way to counter traditional notions of teacher education that focus on text-based multicultural education or single-answer solutions. T.O. allows all participants to rethink conflict by adding a performative element that encourages disruption, questioning of conflict, ways to examine multiple viewpoints, and social action in people who otherwise feel powerless. In this research study, Souto-Manning presents a case study of a full day preschool teacher who explores the conflicts found between lead and assistant teachers. This real world example brings T.O. to life in a way that readers understand the application of this strategy. The case study is evidence of the power of T.O. to change lives. These performative circles led preschool teachers to consider the multi-facets of being human, to add to their repertoire of strategies to deal with oppressive situations, and to assist them in dealing with the everyday stresses of teaching.

Part III of Freire, Teaching, and Learning addresses praxis. Souto-Manning does this first by revisiting Freirean pedagogy and dialogue as a method for change. Next, the author draws upon the words of her participants to
highlight several themes that illustrate the benefits of using culture circles or T.O. across a variety of settings. Although the author offers several insights into possible solutions for problems related to schooling, she does not pretend to have all of the answers. Instead, this book is about gathering a community of people and moving them through the critical cycle so that they problematize their own lives and move toward transformation. The book is a priceless resource that makes a worthwhile contribution to the field of teaching and learning by bringing critical theory to life through real world applications.