

Teachers as Cultural Workers

*Letters to Those
Who Dare Teach*

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SECOND LETTER

Don't Let the Fear of What Is Difficult Paralyze You

I believe the best way to begin is by considering the whole issue of difficulty, of what it is that is difficult and that triggers fear.

It is said that something is difficult when facing it or dealing with it proves painstaking; in other words, when it presents an obstacle on some level. "Fear," as defined by the *Aurélio Dictionary*, is a "feeling of unrest before the notion of real or imaginary danger." We fear weathering a storm. We fear loneliness. We fear not being able to overcome the difficulties involved in understanding a text.

There is always a relationship between fear and difficulty. But it is obvious that in this relationship the subject also figures, a subject who is fearful of what is difficult, who fears the storm, who fears loneliness, or who fears not being able to overcome the difficulty in understanding the text or not being able to produce some intelligence of it.

In this relationship between the *subject* who fears and the situation or object of that *fear*, there is yet another component, which is the fearful subject's feeling of *insecurity* in facing the obstacle. This insecurity may be based on the subject's lack of physical strength, lack of emotional balance, or lack of scientific competence, real or imaginary.

The issue here is not denying fear when the danger that generates it is fictitious. The fear itself is concrete. The issue is not allowing that fear to paralyze us, not allowing that fear to persuade us to quit, to face a challenging situation without an effort, without a fight.

When faced with fear of any kind, one must first objectively ascertain whether there are real reasons for that fear. Second, if those reasons do exist, one must match them against the available possibilities for overcoming them successfully. Third, if an obstacle cannot be overcome right away, one must determine what steps to take toward becoming better capable of overcoming it tomorrow.

I wish to emphasize that *difficulty* is always in direct relation to an individual's capacity to respond to it, in light of his or her own evaluation of the ability to respond. One may experience more or less fear or unfounded fear; one may even, when realizing that a challenge surpasses the limits of fear, drown in *panic*. Panic is the state of mind that paralyzes an individual faced with a challenge that he or she easily identifies as absolutely beyond any

possible attempt to respond. I can be in fear of loneliness, but I experience *panic* in a city struck by an earthquake.

At this point I would like to reflect specifically on one's fear of not being able to understand a text whose comprehension is necessary to the discovery process that is part of education. I would like to focus on that paralyzing fear that defeats us even before we make any attempt to understand the text.

If one takes on a text whose comprehension will require some work, one needs to know

- whether one's ability to respond is at the level of the challenge posed, that is, the challenge of understanding the text.
- whether one's ability to respond is less than needed to meet the challenge.
- whether one's ability to respond is more than needed to meet the challenge.

If one's ability to respond is *less* than needed to meet a given challenge, one must not allow oneself to be immobilized by the *fear* of not understanding or, by defining the task as impossible to realize, to simply abandon it. If my ability to respond to a text is less than needed to comprehend the text, I must seek the help of someone, not just the teacher who assigned the reading, in overcoming at least some of the limitations that make the task more difficult. Sometimes the reading of a text requires some previous

experience with another text that prepares the reader for a step upward.

One of the most dreadful mistakes we can possibly make as we study, either as students or as teachers, is to retreat before the first obstacle we face. Such a retreat makes the mistake of not accepting the responsibility presented by the task of studying, as by any other, to those who must complete it.

Studying is a demanding occupation, in the process of which we will encounter pain, pleasure, victory, defeat, doubt, and happiness. For this reason, studying requires the development of rigorous discipline, which we must consciously forge in ourselves. No one can bestow or impose such discipline on someone else; the attempt implies a total lack of knowledge about the educator's role in the development of discipline. In any case, either we are the agents of this discipline, or it becomes a mere appendage to our selves. Either we adhere to study with delight or accept it as necessity and pleasure, or it becomes a mere burden and, as such, will be abandoned at the first crossroads.

The more we accept this discipline, the more we strengthen our ability to overcome threats to it and thus to our ability to study effectively.

One such threat, for example, is allowing ourselves to not use such auxiliary tools as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and so on. We must always incorporate into our intellectual discipline the habit of consulting such tools to

the extent that, without them, studying would be made difficult.

Allowing the fear of not successfully accomplishing the process of text comprehension to immobilize us evades the first battle. From there, it is just one step to accusing the author of being incomprehensible.

Another threat to serious study, a threat that is one of the most negative forms of avoiding overcoming the difficulties we face instead of taking on the difficulties of the text itself, is our *proclaiming* that we understand without, however, putting our assertion to the test.

There is no reason why I should be ashamed of not understanding something that I read. If, however, the text I cannot understand is part of a body of readings seen as essential, in order even to gain the perspective to judge whether the text is essential I must overcome my difficulties in understanding it.

It is no excess to repeat that reading, like studying, is not simply browsing leisurely over the sentences, phrases, and words of the text without any concern for knowing where they may take us.

Another threat to completing the difficult and pleasurable task of studying, a threat that results from the lack of discipline I spoke of, is the temptation always before us to abandon the printed page in the middle of reading and to glide far away in imagination. Suddenly, though we have the book physically in front of us, we are reading it only mechanically. The body is here, but the

mind is on a distant tropical island. This way, it is really impossible to study.

We must be forewarned that only rarely does a text easily lend itself to the reader's curiosity. At the same time, it is not every curiosity that can penetrate the text intimately in order to study its truths, its mysteries, its weak points. Only epistemological curiosity—that which, by taking some distance from the object, “approaches” it with the intent and the pleasure of unveiling it—can begin to uncover the text, and even this fundamental curiosity is not enough. Using that curiosity to approach and examine the text, we too must give ourselves to the text, must surrender to it. In order for that to happen, we must equally avoid other fears that *scientism* has instilled in us. For example, there is the fear that our emotions, our desires, may ruin our objectivity. Whatever I know I know with my entire self: with my critical mind but also with my feelings, with my intuitions, with my emotions. What I must not do is stop at the level of emotions, of intuitions. I must place the objects of my intuition under serious, rigorous investigation; I must never disregard them.

In sum, the reading of a text is a *transaction* between the reader and the text, which mediates the encounter between reader and writer. It is a *composition* between the reader and the writer in which the reader “re-writes” the text making a determined effort not to betray the author's spirit. And it is not possible to do that without critical comprehension of the text, which in turn re-

quires overcoming the fear of reading, which gradually takes place within the process of developing the discipline that I spoke of. Let us insist on that discipline. It has to do with reading and, for that reason, with writing as well. It is not possible to read without writing or to write without reading.

Another important aspect, and one that challenges the reader even more as “re-creator” of the text he or she reads, is that text *comprehension* is not deposited, static and immobilized, within the pages of the text, simply waiting to be uncovered by the reader. If that were the case, we could not say that reading critically is “re-writing” what one has read. That is why I spoke of reading as a *composition* between reader and writer in which the most profound significance of the text is also the creation of the reader. This point brings us to the need for reading also as a dialogic experience in which the discussion of the text undertaken by different readers clarifies, enlightens, and creates group comprehension of what has been read. Deep down, group reading brings about the emergence of different *points of view* that, as they become exposed to each other, enrich the production of text comprehension.

Of the experiences I have had with reading in and out of Brazil, I would single out as the best the ones I gained from coordinating reading groups around the text.

What I have observed is that apprehension before reading or fear itself tends to be overcome and one is free to

attempt to *invent* the *meaning* of the text in addition to just discovering it.

Obviously, in preparation for group reading each participant reads individually, consults this or that auxiliary tool, and establishes this or that interpretation for certain portions of the text. The process of creating comprehension of what is being read is gradually built in the dialogue between the different points of view about the challenge, which is the author's core meaning.

As an author, I would be not just satisfied but exultant if I came to find out that this text had caused its readers to conduct the kind of committed reading that I have been insisting on throughout this book. Deep down, this must be every author's true dream—to be read, discussed, critiqued, improved, and reinvented by his or her readers.

Let us return for a moment to that aspect of critical reading according to which the reader becomes, little by little, equally the producer of the text's meaning. The more the reader makes him- or herself a real *apprehender* of the author's comprehension, all the more he or she will become a producer of text comprehension, to the extent that such comprehension becomes reader-created knowledge rather than knowledge that is deposited in the reader by the reading of the text.

When I understand an object, rather than memorizing the profile of the concept of the object, I know that object, I produce the knowledge of that object. When the reader critically achieves an understanding of the object

that the author talks about, the reader *knows* the meaning of the text and becomes coauthor of that meaning. The reader then will not speak of the meaning of the text merely as someone who has heard about it. The reader has worked and reworked the meaning of the text; thus, it was not there, immobilized, waiting. Here lies the *difficulty* and the *fascination* in the act of reading.

Unfortunately, in general what has been done in schools lately is to lead students to become passive before the text. Exercises in reading interpretation tend almost to be verbal copies of the text. Children learn early on that their imagination does not work: Using their imagination is almost forbidden, a kind of sin. In addition, their cognitive abilities are challenged in a distorted manner. They are invited neither to imaginatively relive the story told in the book nor to gradually appropriate the significance of the text.

It would certainly be through the experience of recounting the story, leaving their imagination, feelings, dreams, and desires free to create, that children would end up taking a chance on producing a more complex understanding of texts.

Nothing, or almost nothing, is done toward awakening and keeping alive children's curiosity, their consciously critical reflection, so indispensable to creative reading, reading capable of unfolding into the rewriting of the text read.

This curiosity, which needs to be stimulated in the student by the teacher, decisively contributes to grasping the

content of the text, which in turn is fundamental for creating the text's significance.

It is true that if the content of reading has to do with a concrete fact of social or historical reality or of biology, for example, no interpretation of the reading may deny that concrete fact. But that does not mean that the reader should memorize word-for-word what has been read and repeat the author's discourse mechanically. This would be like a "banking"¹ kind of reading, in which the reader would "eat up" the content of the author's text with the help of the "nutritionist teacher."

I insist on the undeniable importance of the educator in learning to read, inseparable from learning to write, which learners must dive into. Learning to read entails the discipline of mapping out the text thematically,² which must be realized not by the educator alone but also by the learners. The learners must unveil the interactions between themes within the whole of the author's discourse, and their attention must be called to the citations made within the text, as well as to their role. It is also important to underline the aesthetic moment of the author's language, his or her command of the language and vocabulary, which implies overcoming the unnecessary repetition of a given word four times on a single page of the text.

A rich exercise, which I've heard of now and again, even though it is not carried out in schools, is to enable two or three writers, of fiction or not, to speak to their

student readers about how they produce their texts. They speak about how they deal with the themes or with the plots that involve their themes, how they work out their language, how they pursue the beauty of speech, of description, of leaving certain information suspended so the readers could exercise their imagination. They also speak about how they play with the transition from one time to another in their stories and, finally, about how writers read themselves and how they read other writers.

Finally, as learners experiment more and more critically with the task of reading and writing, they must grasp the social plots in which language, communication, and the production of knowledge are constituted and reconstituted.

NOTES

1. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1970).

2. See Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom and Other Works* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra).