

Design of the Oppressed

## **Week 2: Paulo Freire and Participatory Design**

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What does Paulo Freire have to do with design? On a superficial reading, nothing, you won't find many references to the term design in his work. However, if you understand design as a tool for transforming reality, as a practice that is better when it is dialogic and participatory, if you understand design as politics, and that your choices as a designer either serve or subvert the current system . Well, in that case, Freire has a lot to tell us about design.

That's not just me saying, Scandinavian designers admit Freire's influence on the creation of Participatory Design. But many people, especially in Brazil, don't know that. It leaves the question: Who is interested in erasing Paulo Freire's influence in the origin of participatory design? We will come to a hypothesis later.

Before that, I would like to talk about the relationships I see between Paulo Freire and design, especially in participatory design. To begin with, I would like to quote a phrase from Freire that I think crucial to understand his ideas about participation:

Liberation - not a gift, not a self-achievement, but a mutual process.

This quote justifies why participation is such an important topic for Freire. Because it is only through collaboration, dialogue and participatory action that we can together achieve freedom from oppression. You cannot set anyone free, you cannot set yourself free, we, the people, will set ourselves free in communion.

So, as you can see, there is a deep political sense and a revolutionary vision in Freire's ideas about participation. This answers the Why of Participation, the next question is probably How this Participation can be applied.

It is important to point out that the word most used by Freire is not participation, but dialogue. For him, the collaborative process of transforming reality and overcoming oppression can be named "dialogic action". On the contrary, the oppressive action of maintaining the status quo is the anti-dialogical action.

And how does a process of dialogic action begin?.

For Freire, everything starts by defining together the themes of the dialogue. These are the generative themes, existential situations that are part of people's lives, themes that are of their interest, themes that are connected with their everyday live. So, it is not up to you, as a designer, to define alone what the project will be about or what are the most important problems to be solved. So, the first participatory decision is about "For what problems are we going to design?" Or if there really exists a problem to be solved at all?

You cannot make this decision alone. Defining problems in a community from your designer perspective is a cultural invasion. It is to deny the culture, the knowledge and the ways of being that already exist there, and replace the local culture with your foreign culture. Even if you have good intentions, It is to exchange one oppression for another type of oppression.

The importance of not imposing our values is usually learned quickly by those who engage in participatory design with the oppressed. However, then another risk arises, the risk of the designers just listening passively, and not taking stances, not expressing their own opinions to the community. But as Freire reminds us, dialogue must be transformative, must be the interaction between different people and their different ideas and visions. It cannot be a cultural invasion by designers, it cannot be passive listening as well, but a collective construction, a cultural synthesis between different opinions in search of transforming reality.

And transform is a central word for Freire. A dialogue in which words do not transform people or reality is an empty dialogue, it is pure verbalism. The opposite is also problematic, pure action without reflection is activism, action without critical reflection. For Freire, true dialogue must take place through praxis. And what is Praxis? Praxis is the radical interaction between action and reflection. Looking at our design practice, do we encourage or even allow these critical reflections to be part of the design process? Or are we only concerned in solving the problems in the most practical, fastest and functional way? Without thinking about what is behind these problems, without thinking about what are the real impacts of our projects, without thinking about how we take a stand in the conflict between the oppressed and their oppressors, without thinking about which side we are projecting for.

To help in the critical discussion of these generative themes, Freire proposes codification and decodification techniques. Codification is any representation of an existential situation in its totality, it is a photo of a peasant working the land, an illustration, a play or, why not, a design product in use. Decoding is the process of discussing this representation, always deepening the understanding until realizing the conflicts and oppressive relations that are involved. It's what Freire calls the unveiling of reality, seeing yourself as oppressed and seeing the forces that oppress you.

And this is the main objective of the participatory process, the objective of unveiling reality, understanding the situation of oppression in which you find yourself, understanding who oppresses you and fighting against that oppression. In this context, as designers shaped in a Eurocentric and capitalist vision, our role is first to identify the oppressor within us and present in our practices, to recognize that IDEO's design thinking is probably the main source of current cultural invasion in our practices, to abandon any posture of hero or savior, and join forces with the oppressed, to fight together with them for our liberation.

In this fight, one last word from Freire seems important to me: humility. The humility of recognizing that we don't know everything, of recognizing that our tools, our design thinking, our post-its and colorful sticky notes can be useful, but they are not the only way to transform reality, and probably sometimes not even work. Recognizing that we don't know everything and we still have a lot to learn, so that the participatory process can be a learning experience for everyone, designers and other participants.

These were some opinions, still very introductory, on how I see Freire's work contributions to a libertarian participatory design. I hope this short introduction will serve as an invitation for you to further study this work so rich, so important and, despite its age, such a contemporary and urgent work.

Finally, I would like to go back to the question asked at the beginning. Why was Freire's influence on the origin of participatory design erased, especially when these approaches are taught here in Brazil? My opinion: because recognizing Freire's influence is to see participatory design as a revolutionary force for liberation, it is to see the designer not as the main actor in the process, but simply another participant, it is to really put the design process in the hands of the people, and not in the interests of the market or other oppressive forces. A Freirian and political participatory design is too dangerous for

the status quo, while a depoliticized participatory design is a perfect tool for maintaining oppression, and a source of lucrative innovations for the capitalist system.