

Book Review

Pedagogy of the Oppressor: Experiential Education on the US/Mexico Border

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In this book, the work of one specific non-governmental educational organization (NGO) is explained within the context of an educational framework rooted in the work of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018). The book may be of interest to those interested in experiential learning or in educational pedagogy. The book wove together three separate threads, and it is important to keep them separated. First, there is a thread that explained various concepts within Freire's framework. Second, the Pedagogy of the Oppressor, based on Freire's work of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, is developed within the context of the US/Mexican political context. Third, examples that support the Pedagogy of the Oppressor framework, from an American/Mexican NGO called BorderLinks, are presented. BorderLinks is an NGO whose goal is to educate Americans about issues and realities on both sides of the American-Mexican border. It focuses on short and longer-term study tours. These tours give American students, church groups, and others the opportunities to experience life along the border.

The book is divided into five chapters. Within each of the first four chapters are several sections. In general, each section started with an outline of some aspect of Freire's framework. For someone wanting a general overview of Freire's work, the explanations are well worth a read. For instance, in chapter three, Gill provided an overview of Freire's insights on human nature. In chapter four, Freire's concept of "limit-acts" was outlined (p. 96). In the same way, throughout chapters one to four, various concepts of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, such as oppressed people's fear of freedom, reversed oppression, and the relationship between language and reality, are explained. The strength of the book is that Gill depicted each of Freire's concepts in a digestible segment, followed by examples and historical context. For example, Gill did an excellent job of describing Freire's concept of reversed oppression such that when the oppressed gain freedom from the oppressors, in order that humanity be restored for all, deliberate actions must be taken so that the oppressed do not take on the new role of oppressors. Gill gave examples, such as when revolutionaries of colonized countries in turn became repressors of others, such as in Africa after the Second World War, as opposed to when Nelson Mandela and others who moved South Africa out of apartheid without reversing the oppression.

Chapter five situated Freire's work within the Christian perspective of liberation theology. BorderLinks is an ecumenical Christian-based organization with connections with many faith-based groups. Gill tied the work of BorderLinks and Freire back to biblical scripture to support his arguments that BorderLinks not only reflects the work of Freire, but also liberation theology.

Chapter five might be of interest to those wanting a Christian perspective on educational pedagogy, but may be less accessible to those who are not from this faith tradition.

After each explanation of one concept of Freire's framework, Gill typically presented a counter concept creating a framework for the pedagogy of the oppressor. Just as others (Kimmel, 2002; Pathak, 2007; and Shudak, 2015) have extended Freire's concept to the pedagogy of the oppressor, Gill worked to build a framework, specifically within the context of the American-Mexican border and the lack of awareness many US citizens have with respect to the realities of their Mexican neighbors. Here, the oppressors are the US citizens, the oppressed are their Mexican counterparts. In explaining the oppressor/oppressed relationship, Gill not only relies on the experiences at Borderlink but also on broader historical examples from Mexican history, and Central American history, as well as other locations. The passing references to historical events such as "throughout its five hundred year history Hispanic America perpetuated its oppressive authoritarian monologue on the indigenous peoples of South and Central America" (p. 97) set the stage for Gill's descriptions of Freire's framework, but the reader will need to go to other sources to fill in the background to the events to which Gill refers.

Finally, within each section, an example was given for BorderLinks and how it followed the framework of the education of the oppressor. Just as Freire used a submersive approach to education, Borderlinks does something similar. For example, a participant might spend time with a Mexican host family. Through simple things like watching the television that the host family watches, or making do without a car, cellphone, or air-conditioning, the participant learns to appreciate the realities not only of Mexicans' daily life but also the relative privilege that North Americans have. BorderLinks relies also on role-playing, such as having participants taking on various roles of Mexicans crossing through US border services. Finally, there is the reflection that happens after the participants return home. For example, a participant returned to their home campus and gave talks to others.

Acknowledging Freire's observation that oppressors are not conscious of their oppression, Borderlinks as an organization builds into its program ways to make the participants more conscious of their privilege. The program asks its participants to consider how they get their information. For instance, rather than answering participants' questions directly, Borderlinks' leaders request the participants address their questions to their Mexican hosts. Gill described not only how the participants are educated on being the oppressor, but also how Borderlinks functions. For example, all meetings are conducted in English and Spanish. Gill outlined how Borderlinks interacts with a wide range of other American and Mexican not-for-profits such as Humane Borders and Derchos Humanos. Given that the program takes participants from a wide number of sources and works with a range of organizations, describing the logistics provides a helpful summary of how an experiential learning program based across two countries can operate.

The examples given of how BorderLinks operates are informative and instructive. Gill gave specific examples of how BorderLinks engages its participants in educating themselves about the situation of people living along the Mexican border. For example, there are descriptions of home visits where participants visited a family of six living in a two room home with dirt floors, or staying overnight and sharing a meal with another family. There are visits to border factories (*maquiladoras*), as well as day to day activities such as shopping in Mexican grocery stores with only the wages of a typical border worker. The actual experiences of people who participate in BorderLinks is more anecdotal. Gill did not collect any specific qualitative or quantitative data on the program, so information in the book is more observational. He recounted his own experiences participating in BorderLinks, as well as giving impressions of others' experiences.

Gill is a retired American academic, so some terminology or perspectives might be off-putting to Canadian readers. He referred to “North Americans” throughout the book, but it is evident that he is typically referring to Americans. He also referred to “Mexicans,” however, in some cases, it appears the people to whom he may be referring are part of a wide range of different Latin Americans. He stated that the American Revolution is seen as favorable, but not the Cuban Revolution, a perspective perhaps not shared by all Canadians.

In several cases, Gill made statements without references. These omissions weaken the book considerably, as it is not clear from where the information is derived, especially when it does not corroborate with other easily obtained sources. For example, he made the claim, without references, that “[u]ndocumented Mexican immigrants seeking asylum now number at least eleven million” (p. 8). The Pew Report (Krogstad et al., 2019) stated that in 2017, there were 10.5 million undocumented migrants in the United States, with 43% being Mexicans, and the remainder coming from other countries. Similarly, in arguing that the United States economically exploits Latin American countries, he stated that “[i]n Central America, as well as in several South American countries, this practice has resulted in entire national economies being devoted to producing one or two products, such as rubber, coffee, or sugar, for North American consumption” (p. 20). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD et al., 2021), less than half of exports from South America, and less than 30% from Central America, were primary products, including food, live animals, beverages, and tobacco, with the majority of exports being natural resources, manufactured goods, and non classified goods. Although Gill’s statement may result in readers’ sympathy towards Latin America’s historic and current exploitation by the United States, specific data and references would have strengthened Gill’s argument.

The reference section in Gill’s book is brief. There are only 15 sources. It is unfortunate that he did not include references for several authors that he made mention of, such as Hegel and Lukus (p. 50) or Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (p. 45). As well, although there are many others who have used the terminology Pedagogy of the Oppressor, Gill made no reference to others who have developed this concept previously, relying only on Freire’s original work.

A core theme of the book is that the oppressors must be educated about their oppression for there to be a change in how things are done. A second theme is that the relationship between who is teaching and who is being taught must be examined. In this case, the teachers are the Mexicans and other border residents, while those being taught are the North Americans. The idea that oppressors need to be educated is one that is relevant in many contexts, not just at the border of the United States with Mexico. With careful reading, the book’s outline of the approaches of BorderLinks could be adapted to other experiential learning situations. One that specifically comes to mind is the educating of settler Canadians on the experiences of Indigenous Canadians, to make the settlers more aware of the oppressions they help to perpetuate. Gill’s book provided an accessible reflection on Freire’s work. It also has value in discovering ways an experiential learning program could be implemented. For people interested in either area, it would be worthy of further investigation.

References

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