



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Where we begin

Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Union Theological Seminary, NY*

Blog Series: Stories from the Front

January 19, 2016

Tags: philosophy of teaching | liberative pedagogy | critically reflective teaching

I am delighted to be writing this blog with two other fantastic teachers I admire greatly: Lynne Westfield and Tat-siong Benny Liew. The Wabash Center has been a fantastic place that has empowered so many teachers, and has expanded resources and possibilities for learning and networking, and I am grateful to them for this opportunity.

As I start, I must say that I write as I teach, from a Latino/a perspective. And I write, as I teach, with an accent, carrying within me voices that liberate me and voices that persist in colonizing my mind, my body and my soul.

It was at the Independent Presbyterian Seminary of São Paulo, Brazil that I started to think critically. My teachers introduced me to a life I never thought existed! I learned about God's love for all, and about how that love was opposed to the ways in which Brazilian society was structured. There I learned about liberation theology and the gospel possibility for the liberation of the poor. Being poor myself, that resonated vividly in my bones!

With Paulo Freire, Moacir Gadotti, Marilena Chauí and others, I learned that education could be either an apparatus for government control or an action, a social praxis against hegemonic power, against the ideology[1] of those who use the power to benefit themselves, a social praxis that could construct a new society. Fundamentally, education was for liberation! When I remember my theological education, I have a clear sense of what James Baldwin wrote at the end of *The Fire Next Time*: "Every time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and chains fell

off. The impossible is the least one can demand.... We must engage in the perpetual achievement of the impossible."

Now that I see myself as a teacher, I want to teach what I learned from many liberating educators across the globe. Our context in the US is one that is fundamentally marked by a neoliberal economic system. This system is turning education from a social right for all into a private profit-driven enterprise. Education is becoming the responsibility of the individual rather than a responsibility of the government. This system fosters exclusion and inequality, widening the already huge gap between the haves and have-nots. Additionally, this economic system does not foster education in order to increase awe and wonder, self-knowledge and liberation, but rather, turns everything into a narrowed set of skills demanded by a continually shrinking job market.

Against this ideological force, educators are called to resist and to think in expansive ways, holding onto a social praxis that can build a better future for all, and especially for the poor. In this way we must say:

Education is a struggle for justice, justice for all, beginning with the poor, the disadvantaged!
Education must be given first to those who cannot afford it. Then to the 4.0 GPA students!

Education must help us gain emancipation and autonomy for peoples, as a struggle for the common good and not to reinforce the beliefs of the upper class that feed social inequality!

Education is a collective act, one of being-with others, learning with each other contextually. Theological education still has the fantastic gift of preparing people to engage with a large network of life, not only for the constrained job market.

Education must be a plural event, involving a kaleidoscope of voices and histories and beliefs!

Education must help us transgress, disobey and unlearn!

Education must help us get rid of fears, real and imaginary ones!

Education is not about entrepreneurial productivity and efficiency only, but is, rather, a form of social learning with various outcomes, productivities and efficiencies according to different social groups and contextual needs! In this way, education is empowerment!

Education is about bringing from the ashes of history, peoples, movements, stories and social events that have been denied, silenced, or named as thugs, agitators, outlaws or evil.

As we have just celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. Day, it is good to remember that theological education also has to do with faith. For those who have faith can be reminded of what Dr. King said: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

With or without faith, theological education or any education is fundamentally for liberation!

We start from the margins and from there, together, we think and create a social praxis that can help us engage with the possibilities of a new world!

There! We start there!

[1] Ideology is “an instrument of class domination and as such, its origins lie in the division of society into contradictory classes who are always fighting.” CHAUI, Marilena de Souza. *O que é ideologia*. 38.^a ed. (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994), p. 102.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2016/01/where-we-begin/>