TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH CRITICAL LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Academy of the Oppressed

Paulo Freire and How Academics Lost Control of the University

TROY HEFFERNAN

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Transforming Education Through Critical Leadership, Policy and Practice is based on the belief that those in educational leadership and policy-constructing roles have an obligation to educate for a robust critical and democratic polity in which citizens can contribute to an open and socially just society. Advocating for a critical, socially just democracy goes beyond individual and procedural concerns characteristic of liberalism and seeks to raise and address fundamental questions pertaining to power, privilege and oppression. It recognises that much of what has gone under the name of 'transformational leadership' in education seeks to transform very little, but rather it serves to reproduce systems that generate structural inequalities based on class, gender, race, (dis)ability and sexual orientation.

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Academy of the Oppressed: Paulo Freire and How Academics Lost Control of the University

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Abstract

This chapter acts as an introduction to the book, where it sits in the current literature, why it contributes something new and why that contribution is important to the field. In some respects, the introduction acts as a literature review which allows the book to both build on and augment current thinking. The primary function of the introduction will be to highlight that this book removes itself from ideological aspirations of returning to a university governed by and for scholars and instead highlights the dangers of managerialism, how Freire helps highlight those dangers and subsequently what a realistic path forward might be to minimise the damage of several decades of the neoliberal university.

A majority of this book was written between 2022 and 2023. This timeline means some of the planning and writing was done during COVID lockdown in Australia while I was at La Trobe University in Melbourne, and some was organised and written after I arrived at the University of Manchester to take up a new position. This timeline is relevant in part because it allowed me to experience not just how two universities coped with the repercussions of COVID but also how two higher education sectors could best contend with one of the most significant global events in recent history. I think many researchers investigating higher education (and many other subject areas) will for several years to come have COVID be a part of their research landscape. In part, COVID changed and influenced the sector globally, but also differently from country to country, region to region and indeed, one university to another. In this book, however, the reason we have started our discussion with a summary of the global pandemic is because COVID highlights just how much the global higher education sector is shaped by outside forces. In this instance, it is not that university systems were shaped by COVID itself, but instead, by governments' responses to such a pandemic. This point is important because I will be up front and say a lot of this book is rather critical of higher education sectors and leaders, but on some level, I know the problem

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begins with governments choosing (and have chosen for decades) to reduce funding to universities at ever-increasing rates.

In many ways, the need for this book to be written would be greatly reduced if we had a global approach to higher education that saw the value in the sector being properly funded, saw the need for extensive research and acknowledged the benefits in having education be an option for everyone who wished to attend. Such a scenario may seem like fanciful dreaming, but it is important to remember that this very circumstance did exist in Australia, Canada and the United States (places involved in World War, but not where war took place so they did not have to contend with extensive rebuilding programmes). During the 1960s to perhaps the late 1980s, higher education was seen as a social good that was beneficial for the economy as it was an investment that set people on a path to safer employment, higher salaries, higher spending and subsequently, less of a cost to the state as they aged (Forsyth, 2014; Heffernan, 2022a).

It is because of government choices that the sector has changed in many countries to now be part of a corporatised, managerialist method of leadership. I will be the first to admit that most discussions about 'universities' or 'the sector' revolve around the Westernised idea of the university as countries like Australia, Canada, England, the United States and some areas in Europe dominate research about higher education. This circumstance is in part due to their size, their research, their research outputs, student numbers, wealth, prestige in perceptions and rankings (in some cases) and thus, desirability of attendance for home and international students. However, there is another reason these sectors globally get the most attention when we talk about the corporate university and how far higher education has wandered from its traditional purpose of creating and disseminating knowledge.

Now that we have a system of university governance that is often based on corporate models, and models that are designed with profit and growth in mind, for many of the leaders of these universities, the financial rewards can be much closer to CEO and executive salaries in private industry than they ever have been before. Vice chancellors and university presidents can now make $1,000,000 per year salaries, but in some areas total remuneration is now almost in excess of $2,000,000 per year, or well over 100 times what the army of precariously employed staff who so often make universities run in the modern age will earn in a year (Ryan et al., 2013). This is the juxtaposition of universities in the 21st century. The leaders will retire from these senior positions having amassed personal fortunes worth literal millions of dollars. For those at the top, this means assets totalling $5,000,000, maybe $10,000,000, for some, more than $20,000,000 is not out of the question as career vice chancellors and presidents is now something we see more commonly as people fill these roles for decades as they move from one institution to another (Heffernan, 2022a). Is this level of wealth justified from people working in often not-for-profit sectors that are supposed to lead our institutions forward? I would argue the answer is no. It is also important to note that these salaries are not reserved solely for the person at the top, as Hannah Forsyth points out, in the modern university there is an entire underbelly of

deputy vice chancellors, deputy presidents, managers and leaders who are now also lining up for salaries in the $500,000 or more range (Forsyth, 2014).

If the above is what university leadership looks like in the 2020s, it is necessary to examine what the university looks like for those on the other end of the spectrum. Precarious employment, underpayment, real-life wage cuts, overwork, exploitation and ever-increasing hoops to jump through for even mild promotional opportunities is now standard practice for those carrying out the teaching and research duties (Spina et al., 2022). Of course, as this book and Freire will attest, is it the success of the university leaders who created these situations and tricked an underclass into thinking that this is just what life is like in the modern university that in part led to their exorbitant salaries?

In my own time in higher education, I have been part of, and witnessed much of the above take place, and I have been forced to fight for the opportunity to gain a short-term contract, to teach a class that required more unpaid labour than paid labour just to meet the minimum expectations. At the same time, to gain another short-term contract, minimum expectations were not enough and in reality, the university knowingly paid me a few hours a week with the knowledge that I would make myself available to my students 24 hours a day, 7 days a week because that is what everyone did, and that is how you positioned yourself to 1 day gain a permanent academic role.

The same is true of people in research assistant positions. I have been employed on several day-per-week, and full-time research assistant contracts on multiple occasions, and for the most part very little about those roles had to do with carrying out work in the allotted time. Instead, they were very much about being on-call to do what needed doing regardless of what work you were getting paid to complete. As with the above paragraphs, all of these tasks and work were assigned with the understanding that if things were not done, despite how much time they took or what I was getting paid for, me not doing them would equate to me not gaining another contract.

These might be my experiences, but none of them are rare and I have written extensively about how and why universities operate in this way (see *Bourdieu and Higher Education: Life in the Modern University*). Of course, gaining full-time, permanent employment only replaces one set of problems with another. The question of ‘how do I get a job?’ is then replaced with ‘how do I do my job and get promoted?’ and in some sectors, such as Australia where I started my career, the answer is that university leaders have spent decades designing an elaborate system of wage theft that is thinly disguised as competency checking and being merit-based. In practice, that looks like succumbing to statements like ‘you need to work at the level you are applying to for several years to show you can do it’. For anyone not in academia (because this is just part and parcel of life in academia), please stop and think about that statement.

Universities, in the 21st century, have designed open policies that clearly state that someone should work above their paygrade, completing duties they are not being paid for, and take on a level of responsibilities for which they will not be paid for, before they can apply to start being paid for the work they have been completing for several years.

Additionally, make no mistake at this point, the cycle begins again for the next promotion. I am sure there are examples out there, but I cannot think of too many industries where this would happen, and even fewer where leaders and managers had created such an environment where these things are happening openly and in public, and have somehow been shaped and worded into policies allowing people to be underpaid. Some readers at this point may be thinking 'but if you just have to meet a set number of requirements to be promoted, that may not be so bad'. There may be some argument to that claim if that was the case, but of course, the modern university has that situation covered too. Over time, all of the (sometimes) clear parameters for promotion have been removed and replaced with ambiguous wording. Whereas once academics in a faculty might have had a rough idea of how many publications, how much funding, what sort of teaching scores (as problematic as they are) and what types of administrative roles may have led to promotion, this is now largely replaced by unclear wording that provides no set targets (Heffernan, 2022b).

These changes have occurred for several reasons – all of which are based around the university seeking out profitability, and maintaining control over its staff. Providing no set targets for staff to be promoted means academics are at the whim of their leaders. The objective of the modern university's leaders is to follow the neoliberal and capitalist principles of coercing people into completing the maximum amount of work possible, while paying them the lowest amount they will accept. With that in mind, unclear work targets are the surest way to be certain that you can get every effort from someone while only having to reward them intermittently, at best. If universities had clear targets, people could meet these targets and be promoted faster than planned. It is the removal of clear targets that leads to the free labour of academics trying to meet vague objectives that they will one day be told they have met.

At the same time, this system is also much better at control. When there are no set targets for you to achieve in order to gain promotion, and thus you know you are at the whim of those above you to decide whether you have done enough, the options for those above you to withhold or delay promotion because of your actions (if they do not like your actions) are plentiful. In a professional setting, what better way for managers to make sure people do as you prescribe without complaint like having the ability to freely influence their salary, and thus, the size of their pension, their ability to pay their rent or mortgage or to provide for their family. The element of control is particularly important in a field like academia which was once known for academic freedom. When a university has someone's financial well-being under their complete control, the likelihood of someone criticising those who lead that control is slim.

Some readers at this point might think that the above is unjust and a severe criticism of higher education. Therefore, it is here that I will point out that most of my time in universities has been based in Australia which has for several decades been identified as one of the best examples of what path universities should not travel down. In Lew Zipin's work from the 2000s, and John Smyths' work (though particularly is hugely influential work *The Toxic University*, 2017) and in my own works, many researchers have highlighted that Australia should provide

the roadmap of what universities should not do, and other sectors should look to Australia to see how bad things could become. This statement is not to suggest that every university in Australia is a difficult place to operate within, and that every university not in Australia is in a better position. However, on the whole, it cannot be ignored that Australia has collectively adopted neoliberal policies, and allowed universities to turn teaching and research into profitable entities in a way that most major university sectors have not yet reached.

Where Australia sat in the global higher education sector and how its universities choose to operate was something I was aware of as a researcher in this space, but the differences have become a little more stark now that I live in England. Yes, England has its own set of issues to contend with where higher education is concerned, but Australia is nonetheless a solid example of what not to do and what to watch out for in the future. In practice, Australia is simply further along the neoliberal route than most other university sectors. Put plainly, Australian university leaders have perfected getting more work for less pay from their employees then most others; and this is done under the guise of unclear pathways to promotion, and academic's fear for future employment.

We have already touched on how universities can influence people to work harder in this opening chapter, but the use of fear is also a valuable tool Australia has in its arsenal. A university job (like many others) was once considered a job for life, but that is no longer the case (and nor is it for many other occupations). In Australia, however, this was done with particular precision to ensure that every employee knew their employment was no longer permanently safe – a key factor in crushing academic freedom and the risk of those speaking out against the destruction of the sector. Throughout the 2010s, Australian higher education heard the word 'restructure' echo through its corridors. Universities successfully campaigned to be allowed to restructure their faculties by governments and unions if doing so was deemed necessary for the financial health of the university. How this was applied though was largely up to the individual institution. Universities turning multiple-hundred-million-dollar per year profits were still restructuring faculties, or departments, or even courses that were not deemed to be profitable enough.

What cannot be ignored is that a university can make a course or faculty unprofitable. A course or faculty that was profitable one year could have its funding reduced the next year, and all of a sudden, that course can be viewed as a weight on the university's financial security, and therefore, restructures and job cuts have been legitimised. It was under this system that job cuts swept through many universities. If there are any questions about how successful this system was, I am always reminded of a delegation of university leaders from North America travelling to Australia in the late 2010s to *learn* how to fire people without successful intervention from governments or workers' unions – this is perhaps Australia's legacy in higher education administration – it is the country that successfully worked out how to fire people that for the previous 150 years had secure employment. Of course, with the above strategies in place, the administrative repercussions of COVID was the golden goose Australia's higher education sector leaders could have only dreamt of in their efforts to downsize and to

get more work for less pay from its employees. Without remorse, 40,000 Australian higher education workers were let go, even while many universities were still turning a profit or faced only a minimal and temporary financial downturn (Blackmore, 2020).

Once events such as the above had started, fear is now the primary motivator, and what keeps people obedient, which is necessary in a sector rife with overwork, underpayment and exploitation. The idea that you might lose your job if you were bad or unwilling to do what you were employed to do is one set of circumstances that could make someone properly consider what is expected from them in their role. However, in the new university world, where anyone can be restructured out at any moment under the guise of financial necessity, the control this fear invokes is significant. Now, someone can be good at their job, even very good at their job, but personal disagreements, or the unwillingness to promote and follow the university's increasingly managerialist lines, will still face the fear of losing their employment. Few of these circumstances are necessary, and most of the policies that allow this to happen have been manufactured by university leaders with a clear purpose to gain and maintain control over their staff.

I will be the first to highlight that how Australian higher education got into this position is not entirely due to the planning of university leaders but was rather the combination of a series of responses to funding cuts, a drop in student numbers, an oversupply of academics and governments that had grown cautious of the social impact and influence universities could have stretching back to the 1980s (Forsyth, 2014).

However, we got to today, though exploitation of staff (particularly for younger staff, newer staff, women and staff from marginalised backgrounds) is now the standard rather than the exception to the rule. Australia's publishing expectations have a closer relationship to quantity, rather than quality, than many other sectors. Teaching is conducted in ways that are measured not by what is being taught or how it is being taught, but in ways that result in a higher level of customer satisfaction. A significant emphasis for career advancement is also placed on grant and funding success, but the number of grants is shrinking, and they rarely go to the most deserving candidate, they go to the applicant with the strongest networks (Heffernan, 2022b, 2023a). At this point, I could launch into a long discussion about how merit is a myth in education, but Pierre Bourdieu (1988) has already done that, and I have made my own contributions (2022a, 2023b) to what the lack of a meritocracy looks like in modern universities and what it means for people without the connections and *capital* (as Bourdieu would tell us) to succeed. Merit in higher education today is simply a word we cloak over the success of those privileged academics who have faced fewer barriers, and received more success, than their counterparts.

Some readers may feel slightly shocked by my rather frank assessment of higher education in Australia and beyond in the current period. This book is a further exploration of these issues. Over the last 8 years, a solid portion of my research has been dedicated to the people in universities. I have conducted multiple studies throughout the global higher education powerhouses including Australia, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and some which have

included university sectors from much further afield. These have seen me (and my co-authors) collect data, conduct surveys and complete interviews with everyone from undergraduate students, postgraduate students, higher degree research students, precarious employed academics, early career researchers, senior academics, faculty leaders, deans, deputy vice chancellors, deputy presidents and even university vice chancellors and university presidents. The state of higher education that I have described might be unfamiliar to academics working in faculties or institutions that do not have the issues I have depicted, or might even come as a shock to those who are not part of higher education in the 21st century. Nevertheless, these above scenarios will be familiar to many readers, and nothing that I have described would be enough to raise Paulo Freire's eyebrow, which leads me to discuss how this book came to be written.

My decision to write this book was in part due to a rather everyday exchange on social media in the beginning of the COVID lockdowns in 2020. For many academics at that time, Twitter (or *X* as it is known at the time of publication) was perhaps in its peak of popularity. *Academic Twitter* was a safe haven for people to share ideas, their work and their lives as the global higher education sector shifted beneath us to accommodate the often-devastating consequences of the global pandemic. Among the turmoil of the world and subsequent comradery that could be found on Twitter at that time, I asked a simple question which was, 'I need a new book to read, does anyone have any suggestions?'

A friend and colleague asked if I had read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I said that I had several years before – as it is a rather fundamental text in education circles, it is a work that I think many people come across naturally very early on in their research journeys. Nonetheless, after telling my colleague that I had read it, their response intrigued me. They did not offer another suggestion of what book to read, instead they simply replied in reference to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 'Read it again'.

I thought about this suggestion for several days and eventually decided that I would read the book again, it is not a long text so it would not be a significant undertaking. As I started turning the pages, taking in the information that I had read before had a whole new meaning. Several years more of higher education research had given me a whole new perspective on what control looked like, how some people rose to power, stayed in power and made majority populations feel helpless and like they were unable to challenge the power of the few who controlled them. Long before I finished my second reading of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I had been to the library to download and borrow every other publication of Freire's that I could find. Some are about control and violence, others are about education and reading and learning, but both of these avenues of thought bear clear resemblance to what is happening in higher education in the 21st century.

These avenues are what provided the motivation for this book because once higher education systems began to travel down the path of neoliberalism and being corporate-led institutions, Freire's work provides a whole new lens through which to understand what has happened, and is happening, why it is not a surprise, and why it is not unpredictable. In fact, once we enter a world where

leaders' success is based on the exploitation of those below them, what has happened becomes highly predictable (Freire, 1970). His work uses studies conducted in educational settings, but he also considers life in government and the corporate world. Essentially, all of these studies can be synthesised and teach us something new about what has happened in higher education over the last few decades because what Freire's work is really about is power – and what power looks like when the leaders have it and the employees do not (Donoso Romo, 2020).

As we have already touched on, higher education sectors have made great efforts in syphoning off influence from academics and handing that influence to university leaders. This transfer was, as this book will attest, a purposeful move by universities; and maybe it was forced by lower government funding and increased competition for students but that does not change the result. Universities were once institutions for scholars, led by scholars and which were driven by the creation and dissemination of knowledge in institutions that were purposefully separate from government and business (Heffernan, 2022a). This book does not argue against that ideal, but it does approach potential university reform as a system that has gone far beyond those ideals ever being possible to return to in the short term. If we accept that a return to the ideological university is unlikely, we also need to accept that decades of university reform has turned higher education into a system of corporate universities led by millionaire executive teams who are accountable to each other, governments and sometimes student customers; they are not accountable to academics – academics are the most disposable component of the equation.

This book thus takes Freire's primary works as a theoretical guide to dissect how university administration teams (the oppressors) have slowly eroded the power the academic body (the oppressed) once had in guiding the institution and themselves. Over the last three to four decades, Freire's thinking has helped demonstrate how declarations of academic empowerment and consultation have created the illusion of the university being a single entity, when in fact, for academics in the modern university, their options to shape their own fate are largely non-existent.

To work through this analysis, we will begin with a brief look at Freire himself and highlight his history and ideologies because it allows the text to act as in introductory work for those interested in looking at education from a Freireian perspective. As such, the book pulls together the many aspects of Freire's life and ideas; this is important because a lot of existing texts and journal articles tend to view Freire from very distinctive perspectives. For example, far and away his most popular text is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), but we will also explore what he wrote about in the dozens of other publications he authored. Freire examined oppression in education, but also in government, due to race and language, and throughout these explorations is a myriad idea about how oppression works, and why the oppressed let themselves be controlled by a minority. Highlighting these facts is a key starting point to the book.

We will then look at how universities (and more importantly their staff) got into the predicament in which they currently find themselves in, or the situation