Glossary

The following terms (in italics in text) are used by Paulo Freire or by ALP to describe aspects of the process and the thinking which informs it. Further discussions of them can be found in Chapter 2.

action outcome: Organized, sustained activity, arising from and involving members of an ALP learning group, to achieve a mutually agreed objective (e.g. Play in the Terraces, the Skills Exchange, etc.).

action reflection: Intentional human activity, involving thought on the part of participants about the implicit problems, circumstances, causes, interconnections and relationships, and their own awareness of these. Also called praxis. Splitting praxis into either of its constituent parts can lead to activism or verbalism. Action reflection is identified by Freire with work, love, and saying a true word.

activism: Action for action’s sake, action without thought.

codification: Representation in pictorial, graphic, photographic, auditory, written, or dramatic form, or a combination of any or all of these, of a significant situation or situations in people’s lives, in such a way as to include contradictions and embody themes. Can be used to refer to the process of encoding or to the object or sequence of objects produced.

co-educators: All participants in a learning group – members, co-ordinator, observer, recorder, resource person – are described by Freire as co-educators. They are both learners and teachers, educating each other. Dialogical learning is an attempt to resolve the teacher-student contradiction, but not by destroying the authority of the educator.

co-intentionality: A key feature of human consciousness is that it is intent upon the world, literally tending towards it in order to know it. Co-intentionality is Freire’s term for the process by which people collaboratively focus their attention on a particular topic or aspect of reality. The means of co-intentionality is dialogue.

co-investigators: People in a locality who volunteer to work with the educators to investigate the life of the area, with a view to identifying significant situations and the themes implicit in them, organizing this
thematic material, helping to prepare a sequence of codifications for decoding, and helping to create learning programmes.

conscientization: The process by which people are stimulated and encouraged to explore their reality and their awareness of it, so that their understanding of both reality and their own consciousness is deepened, and they begin to engage in praxis.

consciousness: For Freire, consciousness includes not only awareness, which can have a passive implication, but also an active sense of moving towards the world in order to know it. This involves the capacity for investigation and for understanding. It seems to include what we call conscience: the capacity to make value judgements about the world, others, and self. Finally, there is the capacity of consciousness to be aware of itself (consciousness of consciousness) which can lead to new perceptions. Freire conceives of a geology of stages or levels of consciousness, existing within each person, each of which represents a different orientation. He names these stages as MAGICAL, NAÍVE (with possible backward deflection to FANATICAL or MYTHICAL consciousness), and CRITI-

contradictions: Contradictions are contrary, mutually opposing and sometimes antagonistic ideas or elements in people's lived reality which exist in tension with each other, and which are a source of potential energy for overcoming the limit situations or blocks in people's lives.

culture: Freire uses the term culture in its anthropological sense, not as we normally use it to refer to high culture (plays, poetry, opera) or popular culture (brass bands, trade union banners, popular celebrations). In this sense it denotes all aspects of the way of life of a human society or group: its language, art, technology, economy, means of exchange, family, kinship and class structures, ways of relating, religion and values. His use of the term culture is also infused with an awareness of its root meaning, which has to do with people acting on nature in order to produce the means of their continued existence. Culture is nature transformed by people's work. Freire regards it as important that oppressed people should be enabled to see that they are makers of culture.

culture circle/learning group: Freire uses the term culture circle, rather than class, to refer to a group of people engaged in decoding or taking part in a dialogical learning programme. Seating arrangements are likely to be circular or semicircular. He uses the word culture because he believes that people involved in this process are making culture. ALP uses the term learning group because culture circle is felt to be strange, as is the use of the word culture in its anthropological sense.

decoding: The process which occurs in a culture circle or learning group when its members are exploring a codification. It starts with description, then participants are encouraged to put themselves into the situation represented, and to recognize the situation in their own lives. It shades into analysis of both the codification and the life situation represented, involving movement to and from part to whole and from representation
to reality. Throughout the process, themes emerge and begin to be identified.

dialogue: The communication that goes on between two or more people who are genuinely thinking and working together on some aspect of their lived reality. Dialogue is not a neutral descriptive word to describe verbal or other meaningful symbolic exchanges between people. It is a normative term denoting a desirable process of communication involving trust, collaboration, and active contribution (which can include silence). It also involves naming the world, or saying your own word, and is equated with true communication and with love.

intentionality: A key feature of human consciousness is that it is purposively intent upon the world. Freire’s use of this word is infused with a sense of its root meaning, to tend towards. Consciousness tends or stretches towards the world. It can also be intent on itself (consciousness of consciousness).

intersubjectivity: The inter-experience, interaction, intercommunication, and interrelationships occurring between human beings through their consciousness. Freire’s use of this term links it closely with dialogue and co-intentionality. He does not appear to include the specialized meanings found in psychoanalytic writings.

investigation: An unprejudiced exploration of some aspect of reality in its complexity, in order to understand it, including an understanding of its causes and connections. Freire uses such metaphors as to go into, to unveil, to understand, and to discover, to explain what he means by investigation, which should be carried out in dialogue, not in isolation.

key word (generative word): A key word in ALP usage is one which is charged with significance for people living in an area, or for members of a learning group. It is key in the sense that it unlocks or opens a way into the nature and meaning of some aspect of the world. When Freire’s term generative word is used, two other meanings are added. First that the word generates discussion leading to other words or areas of concern. Secondly and more technically, it is a polysyllabic word which can be broken down into its constituent parts and used to create families of syllables from which participants can make up their own words. This technical possibility and the learning method based on it are described in Chapter 2. Some people argue that this possibility does not exist in English because it is not a syllabic language. In practice, ALP believes that it is possible to generate other words from an English key word, both by means of breaking it down and by association.

learning programme: The plans and materials for, and the actual experience of, finding out more about an agreed topic or theme in a learning group. The advance planning is done by the ALP workers, co-educators, and resource persons, and arises out of the processes of investigation, codification, and decoding described throughout the book.

limit situations: In the process of investigating their lived reality people come up against blocks which may be external, internal or a mixture of the two. At first they seem insurmountable, like walls. As the investigation deepens
and confidence grows, they begin to appear less overwhelming. Gradually participants come to recognize that these limits are places where new possibilities begin, and that they can tackle the job of overcoming them.

*nature*: Freire links the term nature with the term *culture*. Nature is what is there, or perhaps what would be there if people were not there: the sea, the rivers, the land, the plants and animals, the sky – everything the world consists of. Culture is nature transformed by people’s work. This distinction is illuminating, but also problematic. First, human beings are themselves parts of nature, and secondly in many parts of the world the transforming activity of human beings has gone so far that their products seem to overwhelm nature. This does not destroy the value of the distinction, but radically complicates our use of it. For Freire’s image of oppressed people experiencing themselves as submerged in *nature*, we may have to substitute an image of submergence in alienating and dehumanizing *culture*.

*object*: A thing or construct in the world capable of being perceived, known or acted upon by people. Human beings can also be seen and treated as objects and it is in this sense that Freire uses the term, which he contrasts with the term *subject*. He formulates the contrast as follows: people can be seen and treated either as subjects who know and act or as objects which are known and acted upon. Freire normatively opts for the first and opposes the second: this is the philosophical and ethical bedrock of his approach to education, politics and living. He is opposed to all those forces, whether of left, right, or centre, which treat people as objects of beneficence or of manipulation.

Further, his use of the words *object* and *subject* is infused with the meanings they have in the linguistic sequence subject, verb, object. Subjects act on the world. Objects are acted upon. Though they can be treated as objects by others, Freire believes that people can never be reduced completely to the level of objects. But they can allow themselves to become objects in certain respects, for example by becoming submerged in reality, by becoming caught up in fanatical movements, or by confining their purposive activity to meeting their basic survival needs only.

*objectivism*: Objectivism for Freire is a pitfall to be avoided. It consists of believing that what is externally real is the only thing that is important, and in downgrading human consciousness, which is our only means of knowing the world. Freire believes that the objective world is real and knowable. He describes its objective aspects as the empirical dimensions of reality. Where he parts company with empiricism and objectivism is in his emphasis on the fact that we know the world through our consciousness.

We must therefore maintain a double focus, on the objective aspects of reality and on our subjective awareness. To know is to know our consciousness, our selves, and the consciousness of our fellows, as well as what is out there. Objectivism is an attempt to deny the simultaneity of consciousness and the world. The opposite pitfall is *subjectivism*.
objectivity: The quality of the real world, its particular empirical nature or this-ness, which we can strive to know through our subjectivity.

observer: In a culture circle or learning group, one member who may be one of the team of educators or one of the co-educators has the task of observing the contributions and behaviour of individual participants, their interactions and the life of the group as a whole. Towards the end of the meeting the observer feeds back to the group his or her observations, and members have the opportunity to respond, accepting or rejecting the observations and using them to take the exploration further. The role of observer can be combined with that of recorder.

peak of action: A term used in ALP in relation to the task of preparing codifications of significant situations. A peak of action is a moment in the development of a significant situation in which the main actors are present, a maximum of significant action/interaction/communication is occurring, and in which some of the principal contradictions and themes are embodied. ALP photographers and artists hope to capture such moments.

praxis: The German word for practice, used by Marxists to denote political activity guided by a correct analysis of history and the present conjuncture. Freire has borrowed this term and given it his own meaning: praxis means action preceded, accompanied and followed by reflection, and/or reflection with an ongoing commitment to action. He uses praxis interchangeably with action reflection, and equates it with love, work, and naming the world.

problem-posing (problematizing): Freire sometimes calls his method of education the problem-posing method, by which he means that the co-ordinator often turns statements about the world made by members of a culture circle into questions to be explored. This implies an approach to education in which the educator’s role is to encourage people to see reality not as taken-for-granted but as presenting itself in the form of problems or challenges to be worked at by the group. The co-ordinator is inviting participants to adopt a curious, investigative, questioning stance.

psycho-social: Freire uses the term psycho-social to characterize his educational method, which is based on the experience, feelings and thoughts of each participant; on their direct (past and present) relationships with others, in their lives and in the learning group; and on their relationship to the wider world as it impinges on their lives directly or indirectly.

recorder: In a culture circle or learning group, one participant (a member of the education team or one of the co-educators) may be given the task of recording the themes emerging during the discussion, sometimes noting down the actual words used by participants or the significant interactions occurring. This role is often combined with that of observer. The task of recorder is not the same as that of minute secretary at a committee meeting.

re-present: To re-present is to give back to a person or to members of a learning group something significant they have said, which is connected with the theme or aspect of reality being explored. It usually involves
repeating some of the key words used, and is done at a moment when the educator feels it will be most helpful to the process of learning.

resource person: Resource person is the term used by ALP (Freire uses expert or specialist) to denote someone with specialist knowledge or skill in an area of interest to members of a learning group, for example a political theorist, a health visitor, a psychologist, a medical doctor, an economist, a poet, etc. The resource person is approached when a group has completed the process of decoding and created a sequence of themes about which they wish to know more. The resource person may be invited to participate in one or more sessions of a learning group, having first of all discussed it with ALP workers and/or co-educators, who will also explain the ALP method. The resource person is expected to present their expert knowledge in such a way as to dovetail with the group’s present knowledge of and interest in the theme, within the sequence followed in each session of an ALP learning programme: say your own word (group members); presentation (resource person); dialogue (all).

significant situation: Conjunction of circumstances in the lives of people living in an area, in which events, interactions, and acts of communication are occurring. It involves elements of the physical circumstances (houses, streets, schools, work places, etc.) and the presence of people, in whatever roles and relationship and carrying out whatever tasks and responsibilities they have. It contains contradictions, and embodies themes. The choices of which situations are seen as significant are made in the process of dialogue between the educators and their local volunteer assistants, at the phase of initial investigation, and at later stages also by the participants in decoding discussions and learning programmes.

subject: The word subject is not used in its root sense of a person who is under domination (e.g. by a monarch or a state), but in a combination of its grammatical and philosophical senses. Philosophically a subject is a human being, the self, who thinks and knows. Grammatically the subject is that part of the sentence about which something is stated. Freire is particularly interested in the kind of sentence in which a named agent (subject) acts in some way (verb) on the world (object). Verbs, he point out, can be transitive (expressing an action which passes through into the object) or intransitive (expressing an action which does not pass through into the object). Freire takes these facts about the structure of human language as powerful metaphors expressing how human beings can relate to the world, and combines them with the philosophical meaning of subject already mentioned, to create his concepts of human beings as subjects who know and act on the world, transitivity (acting on the world), intransitivity (not acting on the world) and semi-intransitivity (acting on the world in relation only to basic survival needs).

subjectivism: The opposite pitfall to objectivism. At its extreme, subjectivism leads to the belief that only the self exists or is real (solipsism). Subjectivism is an imbalance in the relationship between human consciousness and the world, in which consciousness is given too much weight. It leads to misperception of the world and of others.
subjectivity: Human consciousness, through which we know the world, ourselves, and each other. In order to know the world truly we must also know our means of knowing it, our consciousness.

theme: By not giving excessive weight to objective reality, and by trying equally to avoid the distortions of subjectivism, Freire focuses our attention on the world as known by people through their consciousness, and through their purposive collaboration. That is, he focuses on the relationships between people and people, and people and the world. Such different orientations give rise to different languages. Objectivism strives to create a language neutrally and accurately describing what is there, purged (as if that were possible) of subjective interference. Subjectivism creates an imaginative language centring on the self as a lighthouse illuminating a dark or phantasmagoric outer space, purged of any steady sense of what exists out there. Freire’s orientation leads him to create a language characterized by a constant to-ing and fro-ing between self and world, self and other, subject and object, part and whole, concrete and abstract. A key word of his language is theme. A theme is a human proposition about the world. It is an attempt to understand the world and our relationship to it, at some level of abstraction. Themes exist in the relationships between people and the world, at various levels of scale, temporally and spatially. Freire often refers to twin themes, and appears to hold that themes exist in relation to their opposites, for example domination and liberation, development and underdevelopment, etc. A generative theme is one the consideration of which by a learning group leads on to consideration of other themes which are implicit in it. Finally, themes are real, they exist, but they exist for people. They cannot be imposed on people. It is in this sense that basing an approach to education on people’s themes diverges sharply from the pedagogic tradition of determining the shape and content of an education programme purely in terms of the logic of a specialism. Themes emerge and are named in the dialogue which goes on between people who are co-intent on some aspect of reality.

verbalism: Mere talk; reflection without action; a purely intellectual interest in a topic without engagement or commitment to what it means to people, or to its action implications for the speaker.

word: The name of the product of the core human act of naming the world. This is seen as the distinguishing essence of our humanity, which makes us different from animals. It is associated with God’s creation and naming of the world as described in the book of Genesis. That is, naming and creating are intimately associated. Words are our key means of knowing the world and of acting on it in order to transform it. That is, naming and acting on the world reflectively are intimately associated. Words are not to be dichotomized from the human being who is using them to name the world. A word can, therefore, be true or false, that it represents an attempt to reveal the world or to obscure it, and to reveal or obscure the true intentions of the speaker. Saying a true word, for Freire, is a characteristic of praxis, love, and work.
Select bibliography


Digest of statistics

Total number of courses, investigations and groups: 31
Total of enrolments: 1,579
Total of participants in training and consultation: 2,100

Breakdown of enrolments

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Gerri Kirkwood was one of the original ALP team, and played a leading part in developing ALP’s approach to co-investigation, identifying themes, building codifications, decoding, learning programmes and community action outcomes. Originally a Reporter to Children’s Panels in Glasgow, she later became Head of Community Affairs in Wester Hailes Education Centre in Edinburgh. Since her alleged retirement, she has taught English to international students, and is now much involved with her grandchildren.

Colin Kirkwood taught courses about the ideas and methods of Paulo Freire in the 1970s and acted as consultant to ALP. He was Tutor Organiser, then District Secretary, with the Workers’ Educational Association in south-east Scotland. He taught Community Development and Community Education and later became Head of Counselling Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Since retiring, he has worked with women and girls suffering from severe eating disorders, and now practises as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist.

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