



## education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

February 14, 2012

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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Souto-Manning, Mariana. (2010). *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Pp. 234

ISBN 1433104067

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In spring 2011, Mariana Souto-Manning delivered a lecture for the Urban Education Lecture Series at Syracuse University on the use of culture circles as a framework for inclusive education. During her visit to SU, she also met in a more intimate setting with doctoral education students to discuss her latest book, *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* (2010) (with foreword by Ira Shor and afterword by William Ayers). Many students were intrigued by the ease with which Souto-Manning talked about the work of Brazilian theorist and educator Paulo Freire, challenging many of their perceptions of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1982) as an inaccessible and hard-to-apply text and theoretical framework. Enlightened by our time with Souto-Manning, we decided to read *Freire, Teaching, and*

Citation: Nduati, Nyaboke; LaToya L. Sawyer & Marcelle Haddix. (2012 February 14) Review of *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* by Mariana Souto-Manning. *Education Review*, 15. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1152.pdf>

*Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* as an anchor text for our work together in both a research apprenticeship and independent study on transformative and liberatory pedagogies. From our collaborative and individual reading and discussions of this text, we concur that *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* moves critical pedagogy beyond theory and into the realm of action and transformative practice.

Drawing on the liberatory pedagogy espoused by Freire, Souto-Manning presents concrete examples of such pedagogy in multiple situated contexts, demonstrating how multicultural and democratic education can be realized within the current context of standards based curricula and high stakes testing. Some might view Freire's pedagogy for education as freedom as only applicable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian context, but Souto-Manning shows how it is relevant beyond that. Souto-Manning breaks down the theory behind Paulo Freire's culture circles, first designed as a means to promote adult literacy in Brazil, and demonstrates they can be applied to bring about democratic education in a multitude of contexts. Souto-Manning approaches Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from a place of lived experience and knowledge. Being steeped in Brazilian education both as a student and educator and having attended workshops with Freire, she says "critical pedagogy has long been a reality for me" (1). A former teacher and current teacher educator who has worked in educational institutions in both Brazil and the United States, Souto-Manning also theorizes based on data from her own professional experiences in a variety of contexts and through her work with fellow educators.

In her introduction, Souto-Manning states that her purpose is to make the process of implementing culture circles more clear, real, and accesible, particularly for teachers and teacher educators. She aims to arm educators with "theory-informed examples" of Freirian culture circles and problem-posing techniques across a variety of educational settings. To do so, she presents examples of the use of culture circles in different settings and with groups of people in Brazil and the United States – a first-grade classroom in the US, a Brazilian adult education program, a university group of pre-service early childhood education teachers in the US, a group of US public school elementary school teachers, and a lead teacher and

teaching assistant in a US university college of education. Souto-Manning offers adaptations of culture circles in and out of Brazilian contexts in order to show the portability of Freirian critical pedagogy theories and methods. The case studies of culture circles she presents include data collected from ethnographic observations. Souto-Manning used a combination of critical discourse analysis and conversational narrative analysis in order to “[mirror] the process whereby teachers engage in questioning their generative stories and locations in society” (134).

The book is composed of eight chapters and is organized in three parts. Part One, which consists of Chapters One and Two, introduces the concepts of culture circles and critical pedagogy. Souto-Manning outlines how Freirean culture circles employ a generative approach to education. A culture circles approach consists of the following steps: generative themes, problem posing, dialogue, problem solving and action at a personal or societal level. Culture circles, first conceptualized by Freire in the 1950s, are fueled by dialogue and the generative themes that come from the participants in the process. This process is often repeated as new problems arise. By documenting the most urgent experiences by many of the participants of a culture circle and codifying those experiences in a generative theme (e.g., a case, story, photo, drawing, document), facilitators open up opportunities for students to name, problematize and deconstruct issues which are paramount in their lives (p. 31). Souto-Manning explains that this process of identifying and deconstructing institutional discourses within personal narratives (Souto-Manning, 2007) makes social interaction a space for norms to be challenged and changed (2010, p. 41). From the beginning Souto-Manning is clear that education is not culturally or politically neutral. Further, critical pedagogy is necessary in order to honor the humanity of all students and their cultural backgrounds and is particularly important for the oppressed. One way that critical pedagogy honors the oppressed is by focusing on generative themes that are significant to those who have been marginalized instead of the information or “deposits” from the oppressors. According to Souto-Manning, “[c]ritical pedagogues propose that it is important to assess each student’s historicity and build upon the wonderful backgrounds, legacies, skills, and knowledges students bring with them to the classroom” (p. 11). She asserts that

critical pedagogy views education as being political and is dedicated to the alleviation of human suffering. Souto-Manning points out that Freire believed that literacy is a tool for transformation, change and liberation, and that education cannot take place in a vacuum, but in real contexts.

In Part Two Souto-Manning describes how she adapted Freirean culture circles in the contexts of a first-grade public classroom, pre-service teacher education and in service teacher education in the United States. She also describes her work with Freirean culture circles in an adult literacy program in Brazil. In each of these contexts, she illustrates the ways in which Freirean culture circles resulted in learning, awareness, and action. The students in her first-grade classroom, described in Chapter Three, engaged in dialogue about the “racially and socio-economically segregated nature of pull-out educational programs in American schools” (p.49), and through dialogue were able to problematize this issue that affected them on a regular basis. In an effort to create an inclusive environment where students embraced different voices and viewpoints, Souto-Manning used books that told the same story from different perspectives (p.61). In one example, she and her students read the story of the three little pigs written from three different perspectives. At the end of this exercise, the students agreed that there can be different ways of looking at the same story, and no one way of understanding is right or wrong. Through the readings they did in class, the students were able to draw parallels between their experiences with pull-out programs and the experiences of various protagonists in the books. They dialogued about the issues and how the experiences with racism made them feel, and they decided that they had to take action. With the help and support of Souto-Manning, the students shared what they learned with their principal. They also decided that they wanted to “engage in inquiry studies as described by those students receiving gifted services” (p.71). Although this worked for the Souto-Manning’s classroom for the following school year, she acknowledged that it took a lot of time and sacrifice on her part and the parts of other teachers involved, and she cites these difficulties as “challenging” (p.73). She adds, however, that she is not suggesting that this course of action would be impossible to implement, but that “this is an area needing to be addressed” (p.73).

In the context of a Brazilian adult education program (Chapter Four), Souto-Manning shares examples from her work with a group of adults that met regularly in the culture circles. She provides background on the historically low rates of literacy in Brazil and the civil unrest that gripped Brazil, for a time, making it impossible for Freire to practice culture circles in the country, since culture circles were considered a threat to the government. She points out that in the late 1980s, culture circles were re-established, becoming the national model for adult literacy programs (p. 78) and, in June 2003, she was involved in one such culture circle in northeastern Brazil. In this culture circle, the participants identified issues that they all faced—that of inhumane minimum wages they could not live on and that of gender discrimination in allotted salaries. They dialogued about the injustices in minimum wage, citing that those that made the decisions about minimum wage did not themselves earn minimum wage and therefore had no way of determining what was livable income for a family. They also took issue with the fact that women were paid less for the same work as their male counterparts, a salary allocation based on their gender. The “teacher” in this context acted as a facilitator, as Freire advocates in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, keeping the discussions in focus while allowing the participants to generate their own themes and ideas. As the Souto-Manning points out, “[t]he role of the facilitator is to facilitate and not to lead (p.84). The participants decided, after much dialogue, that they were going to take action by asking their employers about the gender disparities in their salaries. They also resolved to further their studies in order to afford themselves better economic opportunities.

In Chapter Five, Souto-Manning describes her use of culture circles in the context of a pre-service teacher education program. She worked with early education pre-service teachers to dialogue about multicultural education. Souto-Manning defines multicultural education as focusing on “challenging these ideas that saw diverse individuals in terms of deficits (as lacking something or needing to be fixed) or as inferior” (p.99). The pre-service teachers in this culture circle problematized this issue and dialogued about the disparities between the multicultural studies they were exposed to and the practices they

actually saw in the early childhood classrooms. One of the participants pointed out that teachers claim that they “don’t see color” (p.106) but when a student’s first experience with school is being told that he or she doesn’t “speak right, then you know that this talk about race not having anything to do with their experience, with their lives is nonsense” (p.106). The pre-service teachers discovered that students are segregated in schools and the lowest levels become the dumping ground for minority students while White middle-class students are provided with enrichment activities, such as gifted programs.

Souto-Manning also writes about how in addition to codifying and decodifying specific challenges faced by participants in culture circles, participants also become more aware of how their social realities are constructed. She gives an example of this and how it can translate into individual and collective agency in Chapter Six, which highlights Souto-Manning’s use of culture circles with in-service early childhood teachers. She points out that often teachers resent going to professional development sessions and workshops, not because they do not want to learn, but because these sessions often involve someone who knows nothing about their particular classrooms and situations telling them what to do and how to do it. Souto-Manning decided to engage in “generative, Freirean professional development” (p.117) with a group of eight early childhood teachers. She met with these teachers every week and engaged in “dialogic, collective, critical learning processes” (p.118) where she aimed to provide a safe space for the teachers to share, problematize and problem-solve the everyday issues they faced in their classrooms. They all sat in a circle (a deliberate move by Souto-Manning to break the teacher-learner barrier) and in the Freirean culture circle fashion, questioned various practices and values in their school settings. The teachers in this culture circle added an extra step to the Freirean culture circle since after taking action in their various classrooms to try and change what they considered problematic in their classrooms, they reported back to the group. One of the outcomes of Souto-Manning’s work with the in-service teachers was that a year after she stopped facilitating this culture circle, the teachers petitioned to continue having their own culture circles where they could discuss their professional issues.

Chapter Seven in this book takes a slight shift from previous chapters as Souto-Manning discusses the use of Boalian theatre in teacher education. Boalian culture is a version of culture circles that is performed. The originator of Boalian theatre, Augusto Boal, was a friend and colleague of Paulo Freire and his work was greatly influenced by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Boal's (1985/1993) work *Theatre of the Oppressed* is a "performative version of the concepts presented in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" (p.140). Therefore, instead of having a dialogue about issues in questions, in Boalian theatre, various issues are acted out and what Boal called "spect-actors" are invited to offer alternatives for problem-solving in the given situation. The spect-actors, or spectators turned actors, join in the acting to offer their view of how the particular situation might be resolved. The group then has a reality check session where the protagonist comments on the feasibility of the offered suggestion to her particular situation. If the suggested course of action is deemed unfeasible in the given situation, then an alternative course of action is acted out. In this section, Souto-Manning gives us a peek at the use of Boalian theatre in an early childhood teacher education setting. The pre-kindergarten teacher whose situation the group chose for the Boalian theatre was having problems with her teaching assistant, who seemed to view herself as more knowledgeable than the lead pre-kindergarten teacher because she had more experience working at the school. The group worked with her to problem-solve by acting out various scenes with different ways this lead teacher could deal with the issues she had with her teaching assistant. At the end of the Boalian theatre, the lead teacher expressed a new feeling of awareness that she believed would help her deal with the situation.

Part Three (Chapter Eight) consists of reflections from the participants in the culture circles. The participants reflect on the use of culture circles in education, the roles and strategies of the facilitator in culture circles, the process of culture circles as a safe space for learners, the effects of culture circles in teachers' beliefs and practices, and the concept of having many different voices and perspectives.

Souto-Manning concludes by extending an invitation to teachers to "embrace Freire's critical, hopeful, and liberatory pedagogy" (p.190). She moves us beyond

theory and research toward a plan of action for educators across geographic locations, institutions, disciplines, and grade levels. In the “Afterword,” William Ayers writes, “we must ask ourselves whether schools geared to preparing loyal subjects or obedient workers also build thinking, literate, active, fully developed and morally sensitive citizens who carry out their democratic responsibilities to one another, to their communities, to the earth” (p. 194). As a critical researcher and teacher educator, Souto-Manning embodies praxis—reflection *and* action upon the world with the goal of transformation (Freire, 1970/1982)—and *Freire, Teaching, and Learning: Culture Circles Across Contexts* is a testament to her commitment to education as freedom for all students and their communities.

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