FREIREAN CONCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AND TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE – SAME STRUGGLE, DIFFERENT FRONTS

Paul Orlowski
University of Saskatchewan

ABSTRACT
There are similar assumptions between participatory action research (PAR) and teaching for social justice (TSJ). Much of this paper focuses on the influence of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on both PAR and TSJ. Personal anecdotes with both PAR and TSJ from my twenty years of experience as a teacher educator/researcher in western Canada demonstrate Freirean approaches. In their most successful incarnations, both PAR and TSJ use critical theory to deconstruct hegemony, utilize critical discourse analysis, and engage in ideology critique. Both aim to challenge the forces that give rise to false political consciousness. PAR concentrates on the subjectivity and lived experiences of the research participants. The TSJ approach I employ is also based on the lived experience of the students. Freirean conceptions of political consciousness-raising, or conscientização, is integral to both TSJ and PAR. Freire’s model for TSJ promotes a more progressive role for the school that encompasses pedagogy based on critical inquiry. Schools should unveil and transform oppressive practices and social arrangements that are created by unfair social hierarchies created by patriarchy, white supremacy, and unregulated capitalism. Freire emphasized the concept of praxis in his educational theory for emancipation. Praxis is the embodiment of students using their new found knowledge and political consciousness to employ agency and challenge the sources and structures of oppression. Praxis underlies Freire’s perspectives on both PAR and TSJ.

KEYWORDS: Action Research; Participatory Action Research; Teaching for Social Justice
Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.

(Freire, 1985, p. 122).

Most educators understand that traditional approaches have long influenced both teaching and research, and for the most part they still do. I was taught within the traditional classroom in which the teacher was the sole arbiter of what counts as knowledge and successful students were able to give back the same information that was given to them. Teaching for social justice was not even a concept in the Catholic schooling I received in Toronto in the early 1970s. In terms of social research, the traditional approach considered the focus of study to be mere objects, and claimed to seek and discover objective knowledge. Prior to the 1970s, conducting research for purposes of participant transformation was at most an abstract idea.

Traditional approaches to both teaching and to research were rooted in positivism and claims to objectivity. This positivist approach in both spheres has now been challenged for about half a century. There are similar assumptions between participatory action research (PAR) and teaching for social justice (TSJ). One major difference between traditional positivist orthodoxy and critical transformative approaches is the essential requisite that self reflection be a major part of the process (Delamont, 1992). Teachers and researchers improve their respective practices by locating themselves as learners and as participants (Hall, 2005). Moreover, both PAR and TSJ view students and research participants as subjects, as actors with the potential to change their material and social experiences for the better (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Singer, 2011). The motivation for this shift in epistemological paradigm is rooted in a desire for a more socially just world (Hall, 2005). It is of vital importance to note that the shift to studying participants as subjects, and to teach students as if they are conscious subjects, necessarily assumes a more hopeful future.

In both Canada and the United States, unfortunately, traditional claims of knowledge-making have been able to more or less withstand these challenges from the critical left. Indeed, with the rise of neoliberalism they are becoming even more entrenched in the K-12 school systems and also to a large extent in educational research. The popularity of standardized testing and the research that supports this form of student assessment attests to this (Apple, 2013; Orlowski, 2015; Solomon & Singer, 2011). However, this is not a reason to give up the fight; rather, it is merely stating the reality faced by critical teachers and educational researchers. They must continue the struggle to empower students and research participants and have them realize that they themselves, especially as a collective, have the power to make positive change in their lived realities. One way of accomplishing these social justice aims is to help them understand that they have the potential to be politically conscious actors in the social and economic relations that affect them and their communities. The objective is to foster informed and active citizens, or in other words, to strengthen democracy. The overall goal is emancipation.

This paper will delineate the ways in which these non-traditional approaches toward research (PAR) and teaching (TSJ) eschew any claims of neutral objectivity. It will begin by
briefly outlining the ways in which participatory action research concentrates on the subjectivity and lived experiences of the research participants. An early example of research I was involved with in Vancouver will be briefly described. The paper continues this theme by outlining one particular way of teaching for social justice, more specifically, by providing the critical pedagogy that I have utilized in the teacher education programs in western Canada where I have taught since 1999.

In their most successful incarnations, both PAR and TSJ deconstruct hegemony, utilize critical discourse analysis, and engage in ideology critique. The aim of these requirements is to challenge the forces that give rise to false political consciousness. PAR has its origins in the scholarly thinking of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. The TSJ approach I employ is also based on Freirean conceptions of political consciousness-raising, or conscientização, which Freire (1970) describes as “the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence” (p. 109). For these reasons, much of this paper will focus on the influence of Paulo Freire on both PAR and TSJ.

**PAULO FREIRE AND THE ORIGINS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH**

We can only consider ourselves to be the subjects of our decisions, our searching, our capacity to choose – that is, as historical subjects, as people capable of transforming our world – if we are grounded ethically.

(Freire, 1998, p. 25)

Participatory research was in its infancy when, in 1971, Paulo Freire was invited to Tanzania to present his ideas about research (Hall, 2005). This event took place a year after Freire’s masterwork, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was published (Freire, 1970). Freire used the Tanzania presentation to challenge the traditional approach of doing dispassionate research with its claims of neutrality and objectivity. He states: “The investigator who, in the name of scientific objectivity, transforms the organic into something inorganic … is a person who fears change” (2012, p. 108). It would seem that Freire’s concern here is with the positivist approach to research that relies on statistics and experiments to reveal a version of the reality of a society. The result of such research is an inorganic depiction of real life, an oxymoron in Freire’s understanding of research. Moreover, as the quote at the top of this section states, the Freirean prescription of “transforming our world” clearly calls for a grounding in ethics. Meaningful research for Freire is about striving for social justice.

The Brazilian educator took the opportunity of presenting to the Tanzanian audience of primarily adult educators to outline his theory of thematic investigation. This theory eschews any narrow research focus, instead calling for “the comprehension of total reality” of the participants (2012, p. 108). For Freire, social research must investigate the ways that people are thinking, especially within a community, in order for them to become conscious and therefore able to collectively change their living situations. “Producing and acting upon their own ideas – not consuming those of others – must constitute that process” (2012, p.
For Freire, knowledge is a social construction created by all participants, including the researcher.

Freire states that rather than beginning with a focus on methodology, the central issue for the researcher is to understand the theoretical underpinnings for the research before it begins. In other words, “[i]n social science it is easy to see that the ideology determines the methodology (of searching) or of knowing” (Freire, 1971, p. 2, emphasis added). This stance indicates that Freire believed research is not objective; indeed, it cannot be objective. He emphasized the researcher “should invite people to believe that they have knowledge” (Freire, 1971, p. 5). The researcher and the participants possess knowledge of their own lived experiences. In other words, research should be understood as “engaged practice” between the researcher and the participants in the co-construction of new knowledge (Hall, 2005, p. 4). Research therefore becomes a dialectical conversation at all times. By corollary, the researcher is a participant in the conversation, and as a participant, is learning along with all of the others.

Freire’s presentation in 1971 is considered by many to be the birth of participatory action research theory (Hall, 2005). Over time, PAR has evolved in such a way that differences with traditional research have become even more clearly delineated. A major difference is in its intention: genuine participatory action research fosters action for social justice purposes. It is particularly focused on power relationships, beginning with the researcher and the participants, and moves toward an analysis of the conditions that the oppressed live in. Another difference is what Freire advocated for in the 1971 presentation – the participants are active players, employing agency throughout the research process. In short, “[p]articipatory research is a proposal for action that focuses on transformed understandings of the creation of knowledge among human beings” (Hall, 2005, p. 19). The underlying assumption is that knowledge is socially constructed and for ethical purposes should be co-constructed by researcher and participants. This co-constructed understanding is borne out of a struggle that is committed to revealing a trustworthy and accurate depiction of the shared reality of researcher and participants. This co-construction of reality, along with its emancipatory objective, sets PAR apart from traditional positivist research methods.

**My first experience with PAR**

PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it. At its heart is collective, self reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon … the situations in which they find themselves.

(Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, p. 854)

For the past few decades, participatory action research has expanded from the developing world to Western nations in contexts where there are clear power differentials between social groups (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). As an example of this, I will briefly
describe a study I conducted with 25 working-class youths from various racial backgrounds in east-end Vancouver in the late 1990s. The effects of neoliberalism were first being felt in the city and across Canada during the 1990s as the federal Liberal government conducted “deep public spending cuts” to contend with growing debt (Stanford, 2003). Vancouver real estate prices had been increasing for close to a decade, and large segments of the working classes were becoming increasingly economically marginalized (Beers, 2005). Immigration to the Lower Mainland, mainly from Asian counties, was also on the rise. Under these conditions it was not surprising that racial tensions appeared, especially toward Asians, and acts of racism became more commonplace in British Columbia’s (BC) Lower Mainland during this period (Crompton, 2012). As a veteran teacher during that period, I can attest to these rising tensions among students in the multicultural high schools of east-end Vancouver. I wanted to do something to help working-class students from various races understand that working-class students from other racial and cultural backgrounds were not the enemy. Indeed, much of the working class in the region was experiencing anxiety because of these changing economic conditions. The goal of this study was emancipatory in that it intended to help the working-class students develop a class consciousness and to realize that they had much in common with all working-class people, regardless of race and culture.

Although I am a first-generation Canadian of a Polish father and an Irish mother, I was born in the late 1950s when the prevailing economic system in Canada was Keynesian influenced. During the Post Second World War period in Canada, the white working classes, including recent immigrants, were experiencing life in more or less comfortable conditions. A few decades later, however, Keynesian economics had been replaced by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism and its dog-eat-dog ethos had not yet infiltrated the society in which I grew up. The main tenets of neoliberalism have been designed to maximize corporate profits. (More will be said about neoliberalism in the next section.)

In the late 1990s, thoughts of Asian immigration, neoliberalism, and white defensiveness were swirling in my head when I read some graffiti on the wall of an east-end store: “Class War, Not Race War!” After reflecting upon this missive, a research question formulated that would enable me to better understand the complex social dynamics that these students were forced to negotiate: How do working-class students understand economic uncertainty and racist attitudes? I wanted to learn more so that I could alter the pedagogy in the social studies courses I taught. Through this research, I wanted to help make a difference.

It was not difficult to recruit 25 working-class youth from the school associated with the alternative program attached to the school where I worked. These adolescents, none of whom I had taught, came from five backgrounds: Chinese-Canadian, Vietnamese-Canadian, Indo-Canadian, Indigenous-Canadian, and Euro-Canadian. Over a period of several months, I spent a lot of time with these young people, first interviewing them on an individual basis, followed by five more group interviews with their racial peers. I provided food for them all the way through (both to keep them involved with the study, and because many of them came from impoverished backgrounds). Not one participant dropped out of the study; indeed, they all seemed to be genuinely interested in the process and in the thoughts of
their peers. We were all learning about how economic uncertainty was affecting their attitudes toward people from other racial and cultural groups (Orlowski, 2001). 

There is not enough space here to devote to the myriad findings, many of which were fascinating, but a few are worth mentioning. With the exception of the five white students, all were very aware of their racial and cultural identity. (This finding points to whiteness as a hegemonic norm in Vancouver, at least during that period.) Indeed, all of these students only socialized with peers from their own racial and cultural background. With the exception of the five First Nations students, all were only able to refer to covert acts of racism. The white students were unable to describe any acts of racism toward themselves. (Indeed, they would claim that having to hear “Chinese spoken on the streets” was uncomfortable for them.) The First Nations students had also spent some school years in rural BC, and were aware of institutional racism such as the residential school policy that had ended in the very recent past. Only a few students, two Indo-Canadians and one Euro-Canadian, had any sense of a working-class consciousness, and each one of these students had a parent who belonged to a union. All of the non-white students felt many of their white peers had an attitude of superiority. They also felt that if they were in a confrontation with someone from a different racial background, their racial peers would back them up. (Apparently, gang fights would sometimes grow from these one-on-one conflicts.) The major finding of this study, however, was that each racist attitude described in the interviews was associated with economic concerns. Some of these concerns involved competition for jobs, others the cost of accommodations, while still others were around what tax dollars were used for (including financial support for Indigenous people). It was also clear that many of these racist attitudes and economic concerns came from their homes.

These working-class adolescents were growing up with pressures that I had not had to contend with, pressures that often included tensions hinting at violence. Vancouver in the late 1990s was much more multicultural than Toronto in the early 1970s, and neoliberal economics were firmly entrenched. The results of the study were illuminating about social relations between working-class youth from various racial backgrounds, but the study was not yet complete. Based on the knowledge co-constructed from the study, it was necessary to enact transformative pedagogy in the hope for a better world and an easier future for these students and their peers.

**Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

Donald Macedo (2000) explains:

> If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing. (p. 19)

I wanted the participants to benefit from the research, to help them transform their racist attitudes that divided them into an understanding that they all shared these economic
pressures. I decided that taking the first steps to foster a class consciousness was the best strategy to help them see their world more clearly.

Utilizing the data from the 25 individual interviews and the five group interviews, I led a session that took an entire morning in which 23 of the 25 participants attended. As the facilitator of the session, I began by demanding all comments must be stated in a respectful tone, to which everyone agreed. I then offered some of the statements of intolerance heard in the interviews. The subsequent discussions were fascinating as well as enlightening. Sometimes I offered alternative views to the ones that exhibited racial intolerance (including the deconstruction of economic privilege that some white students claimed Indigenous people enjoyed in Canada) that the students would discuss. Most often, however, alternative positions were offered by the participants themselves. My facilitation involved using Socratic techniques, helping the participants to come to their own conclusions. At the end of the morning session, the seeds of a working-class consciousness seemed to have been planted. Indeed, the participants made comments indicating an understanding that they shared similar economic concerns. Apparently, the racial bonding that they had entered the research with was being challenged by a cross-racial working-class bonding. In other words, signs of a working-class consciousness across race appeared.

The research project described here ended without me knowing if there were substantive tangible results in the lived experiences of the participants. In truth, the goals of PAR would include demonstrable transformation in the thinking and material conditions of the participants. It was several years later that I inadvertently met two students on separate occasions. Both told me with a hint of pride that they now belonged to trade unions. Indeed, an Indo-Canadian fellow, now in his mid-twenties, had become the shop steward where he was employed. For me as a researcher-participant, I can also attest to the benefits of the study. In subsequent years I incorporated labour history and Indigenous perspectives in a much more detailed manner into the critical pedagogy of my classrooms.

Freire (1998) asks an important question at the root of participatory action research: “Why not establish an intimate connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals?” (p. 36). After the research was completed, deconstruction of racist attitudes in my teaching of working-class youth was more clearly connected to economic concerns. With this improved critical pedagogy, my future high school students, primarily from the working classes, benefited from this study. This section describes the perceived benefits for researcher and participants through PAR. The next section will describe the perceived benefits for teacher and students through teaching for social justice (TSJ) based on Freire’s work.

**PAULO FREIRE AND TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

> Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning.

(Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, 1998, p. 31)
This section is mostly a reflective narrative of self-practice in teaching for social justice. It begins with a brief discussion about the purpose of schooling within a Freirean teaching for social justice framework. As mentioned earlier, Freire emphasized the importance of ideology in selecting a research methodology. Similarly, ideology is at the root of his prescription for a pedagogy of the oppressed. As such, a discussion of political ideology in the Canadian context will ensue, followed by an explanation of how neoliberalism impacts civil society in Canada and elsewhere. Lastly, the discussion turns to important concepts in courses I teach in order to help beginning teachers become politically aware, and in turn, encourage them to develop a political consciousness in their future students. I utilize Freirean theories of knowledge construction and critical pedagogy for this endeavor. The intention of utilizing Freire is to give student teachers an opportunity to employ praxis and transform the ways in which they view the world.

Since 1999, the university courses I teach to preservice teachers have mostly been social studies methods and anti-oppression courses. Each course begins with me asking student teachers to reflect upon the following question: Should schools be used to maintain the status quo or to challenge the status quo? This question lies at the root of my perspective on teaching for social justice (TSJ), and Paulo Freire’s theory of emancipatory education (1970; 1998). It is a rhetorical question, of course, because only in a perfect society would one choose to maintain the status quo. This sets the stage for student teachers to reflect upon the ways society should change in order to have less suffering.

One of the most crucial influences of Freire’s work in the social studies methods courses I teach addresses teaching styles. He argues that pedagogy requiring students to “memorize mechanically the narrated content” of the teacher “turns them into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (Freire, 2012, p. 72). Freire calls this the banking concept of education, a strategy that views students as mere objects in their relationship to knowledge construction. He contends that the “more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 2012, p. 73). This approach to teaching maintains the status quo, and therefore, renders large segments of society along axes of race, gender and especially class to be continually oppressed.

Also known as social transmission theory, the banking concept of education posits that society is best served if it can maintain and replicate the present socioeconomic and political relations in society. Knowledge is viewed as objective and not open to interpretation. The dominant group’s cultural traditions, beliefs, and values must be transmitted from one generation to the next. It is true, of course, that some objective facts could be offered to students that challenge the status quo – statistics on the growing wealth divide in Canada and the USA is one example – but this type of information is not usually in state-sanctioned curricula. The banking method of teaching is generally politically conservative and views social inequities as inevitable. It holds that the purpose of schooling is to promote patriotism, the acceptance of laws, and the obedience of all authority figures (Westheimer, 2007). In short, the banking concept of education is most often the antithesis
of teaching for social justice. Whether it is this transmission approach to education or the co-construction of knowledge approach that can result in transformative outcomes, what is most crucial for TSJ is that the content is seen through a critical lens.

Freire’s model for TSJ promotes a more progressive role for the school that encompasses pedagogy based on critical inquiry. Schools should unveil and transform oppressive practices and social arrangements that are created by unfair social hierarchies created by patriarchy, white supremacy, and unregulated capitalism. In order to accomplish this, a different teacher-student relationship is required, one that has the teacher as the guide to learning, not the source of all knowledge. This notion also gives opportunity for the teacher to learn from the students through discussion. For Freire, teaching for social justice entails:

[T]he teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.
(Freire, 2012, p. 80)

I have learned much about the lived experience of my students through discussions oriented toward social justice. While teaching in east-end Vancouver, I became aware of the racial and economic tensions faced by the students. As a teacher educator on the prairies, I now have a better understanding of the lived experiences of students who have spent much of their lives on isolated farms. Teaching with the banking method would not have enabled me to grow in these ways.

An effective approach to accomplish this more sophisticated teacher-student relationship is through what Freire (1970) calls problem-posing education. Problems that arise in the students’ lives are addressed through questioning. The questions are designed out of social justice values so that the subsequent discussions help foster a critical political consciousness, or conscientização in Freirean terms, in the students.

In A Commonsense Approach to Educational Leadership (2012), Robert Palestini contends that problem-posing education has social justice objectives:

“To Freire, ... education has to be critical or questioning, dialogic or interactive, and practical or relevant. To educate in the Freirean sense is to use education to build a better society by actively resisting both overt and covert oppression on the part of the dominant culture. (p. 110)

The last sentence is the core value statement that underpins the pedagogical tools teachers of social justice use. In other words, to become informed is not enough. Freire emphasized the concept of praxis in his educational theory for emancipation. Praxis is the embodiment of students using their new found knowledge and political consciousness to employ agency and challenge the sources and structures of oppression.
To this end, the preservice teacher must first become aware of hegemonic norms along axes of gender, race, class, sexuality, and others. Once they become teachers, they are expected to do the same for their students. Teachers and students must understand what is meant by the social construction of knowledge and how power is implicated in the official knowledge found in the state-sanctioned curriculum. These are necessary first steps in social justice education. Applying critical theory to social justice education, the purpose of schooling is to support civil society and a stronger democracy. Students should be taught to recognize historical, economic, and political influences on human relationships. According to Freire, this is best accomplished by teachers utilizing social justice-oriented problem-posing questions that enable students to understand where power is located and the manner in which it operates to maintain the status quo. Further, teachers should always make space for ideological, cultural, religious, and social diversity.

In sum, from a Freirean perspective of teaching for social justice, the purpose of schooling is clearly to challenge the status quo. Problem-posing pedagogy, conscientization, and praxis are Freirean concepts that influence the teacher education courses that I teach. But more is required to help preservice teachers utilize this educational model. The concept of political ideology has been mentioned several times and underlies Freire's philosophy of teaching and educational research. To become politically conscious, teachers and educational researchers must first understand the related concepts of hegemony and political ideology. The next section addresses how I begin the undergraduate and graduate courses I teach by teaching about political ideology, ideology critique, and hegemony.

**Political Ideology and Hegemony – A Very Short Primer**

Ideology is about the “thought-production of human beings” (Giroux, 1981, p. 19). A political ideology contains “a specific set of assumptions and social practices” that leads to various “beliefs, expectations and biases” (Giroux, 1981, p. 7). In other words, a political ideology socially constructs its own knowledge. Further, political ideology is at the root of most important debates in our society about social, economic, and political relations. Ironically, among most Canadians there is a lack of awareness of political ideology and how it organizes our lives.

It is helpful to have an understanding of an important concept related to political ideology. Hegemony refers to the ideal representation of the interests of the most privileged groups as universal interests, which are then accepted by the masses as the natural economic, political, and social order (Orlowski, 2011). This conception of hegemony explains how social hierarchies and order are maintained within capitalist societies. Force is not required to maintain these hierarchies if citizens willingly give their consent to accept them. The general acceptance of tax havens or tax cuts for the wealthiest people is an example of this.

The effects of hegemony are difficult to combat because hegemonic discourses shape how people view life itself through a set of social relations that enables meaning to be made. In other words, resisting hegemonic discourses becomes more difficult as these discourses
colonize the minds of citizens. This often results in *false political consciousness*. False political consciousness features prominently in Freire’s work (1970) and throughout all critical theory, and attempts to explain why some people (for instance, the working classes) consider themselves to be politically conscious and yet vote against their best interests. Many supporters of American President Donald Trump appear to exhibit this trait. For example, some American citizens were apparently swayed by Trump’s claims that the influx of Muslim and Mexican immigrants was a threat to American society, and making it more difficult for them to become financially secure. Race and culture concerns trumped class awareness (pun intended). The result is that Trump’s working-class supporters feel politically empowered, unaware that they have been co-opted by hegemonic discourses that lead them to vote against their own economic interests.

The George W. Bush administrations of 2000 to 2008 used different strategies and discourses on social issues than Trump, but were equally adept at obtaining support from the working classes. Similar to Trump, they utilized church leaders and journalists (often from Fox News) supportive of their agenda to champion conservative positions on cultural issues such as LGBTQ+ rights and abortion. This hegemonic strategy implicates conservative churches and media outlets as hegemonic institutions. In short, the backlash against progressive politics in many parts of twenty-first century America is about an economic elite that has managed to manipulate cultural anger around immigration and feminism to achieve even more profits for themselves. This is not to dismiss the economic arguments of the conservative elites, which are often couched in neoliberal discourses (Harvey, 2005). The increasing concentration of wealth at the very top echelons of American and Canadian society since the advent of neoliberalism indicate that complex discursive formations around race and class are at work in the minds of these voters. Hence, I attempt to deconstruct these discourses with a focus on current social, economic, and political events in both countries in teacher education courses.

Deconstructing false political consciousness is an important goal of Freire’s model for social justice education. He makes the link between ideology and false political consciousness clear: “[ideology] is directly linked to that tendency within us to cloak over the truth of the facts, using language to cloud or turn opaque what we wish to hide” (1998, p. 113). Hegemonic devices such as corporate media outlets and the formal school curriculum are effective in this endeavor to make reality opaque. In order for teachers to deconstruct these tendencies, they themselves must become politically conscious. They must understand what is in the best interests of citizens and how to make society more socially just, making it crucial to have a comprehension of the major political ideologies in their country. This is a necessary requirement in understanding the hegemonic and counterhegemonic discourses that they are bombarded with. It is helpful to briefly describe the core characteristics of the major political ideologies in Western nations: liberalism, conservatism, socialism, and the hybrid of liberalism and socialism called social democracy.

The first ideology to articulate a new way of perceiving the world and organizing society through human reason, *liberalism*, arose during the Enlightenment (Schwarzmantel, 1998).
Democracy and emancipation of the masses are the progeny of classical liberalism. Initially, liberals were quite happy to engage in the pursuit of wealth through laissez-faire economic policy and the conquest of nature. By the early 1900s, however, classical liberalism in many western European nations evolved into a more progressive version referred to as reform liberalism. This involved a more state-interventionist approach developed (partially to appease growing working-class discontent). Reform liberalism, based upon Keynesian economics, included a tempered version of individualism, which developed out of the inevitable tension between an ideal of liberty and an ideal of equality. In North America, only during and after the Great Depression and the Second World War did classical liberalism give way to the more progressive version of liberalism. (As mentioned in the previous section, beginning in the 1980s, Keynesian economics has been replaced by the model of unfettered capitalism called neoliberalism, which will be discussed in the next section.) Liberalism has become associated with human rights that emphasize inclusivity around social issues.

Socialism is considered a spin-off ideology from liberalism, another attempt to realize the goal of emancipation of the masses. For Karl Marx, liberalism’s major flaw was its emphasis on the individual as the most important unit in society. Because of grotesque disparities in wealth in nineteenth-century Europe, Marx and other socialists considered social class to be the crucial aspect of a person’s identity. Pure socialism is opposed to capitalism. Yet as the capitalist system demonstrated its resilience by surviving the Great Depression of the 1930s, and knowledge of the atrocities of the Stalin-led Soviet Union became known to people in Western nations, the popularity of socialism began to wane. Toward the mid-twentieth century, a progressive political ideology popular in parts of Europe gained currency in Canada and to some extent in the U.S., a hybrid of socialism and liberalism merging together to form social democracy (Orlowski, 2011). The basic tenets of social democracy include an acceptance of a regulated capitalism with the intention of helping those social groups that have little chance of improving their economic standard of living. It also shares with liberalism a respect for the rights of the individual, something that most forms of socialism do not value to the same extent.

Conservatism as an ideology arose as an alternative to the rapid changes occurring in Europe because of liberalism and new found wealth (Schwarzmantel, 1998). A central tenet of conservatism was that society should be led by a stable group of people who, through past experience, would have the ability to do so wisely. Authority should be respected. The idea of each person accepting their place in society at least partially explains why there has been a vociferous conservative backlash in recent years against feminism, multiculturalism, and trade unions. After all, these progressive movements challenge traditional social hierarchies built around patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. Today conservatism has evolved into an ideology that promotes these traditional hierarchies with aggressive support for the interests of the economic super-elite.

These three political ideologies – conservatism, liberalism, and social democracy - are the major ones vying for power in Canada today and to some extent in the USA, as well. Understanding the power of political ideology should be a crucial component of teacher
education program. In Freirean terms, this is necessary to develop conscientização (i.e., political consciousness) in the preservice teachers. It is prudent to discuss another aspect of contemporary society that preservice teachers should understand because of its widening influence on the lives of so many Canadians and Americans. This is the economic paradigm that has come to define the present era in all Western nations, namely, neoliberalism.

**Neoliberalism: Laissez-Faire Economics Revisited**

We need to say no to the neoliberal fatalism that we are witnessing at the end of this century, informed by the ethics of the market, an ethics in which a minority makes most profits against the lives of the majority.


Neoliberalism can be a confusing term for people, including preservice teachers and researchers, to comprehend. After all, progressive citizens accept the basic tenets of liberalism in terms of individual rights. Neoliberalism, however, only refers to economic issues, not social issues. The “liberal” part of neoliberalism refers to its association with classical liberalism that was discussed above in terms of liberalizing the movement of capital. Adding to the confusion, ever since the 1980s, both liberal and conservative governments in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere have aggressively supported neoliberalism. Indeed, even some social democratic governments in Western nations have been influenced by neoliberal economic orthodoxy. The only goal of neoliberalism is to increase corporate shareholders’ profits over all other concerns. The following discussion will help clarify this focus on corporate power and profits that preservice teachers should understand.

There are five main tenets to neoliberalism on the domestic front: the deregulation of private industry, the regulation of the public sector (especially public education), tax cuts (primarily for corporations and the wealthy), privatization of the commons, and the weakening of collective bargaining rights for workers (Harvey, 2005; Orlowski, 2011, 2015). In short, neoliberalism refers to economic and public policy based on a powerful discursive formation that aims to entrench the corporate agenda throughout society. Recent calls for austerity, attacks on public sector workers, and the threat to seniors' pensions are all part of the neoliberal agenda (Orlowski, 2015; Thorsen, 2010). Austerity often requires less social spending, at least a partial dismantling of the commons, and a lowering of wages for public sector workers. In other words, austerity is a reaction to the mistakes or greed of the economic elites that makes life more difficult for everyone else. Some middle- and working-class people even support these policies that are clearly not in their best interests. The economic crisis that befell most Western economies in 2008 resulted from the deregulation of industry in general, and the financial industry in particular (Orlowski, 2015). Paradoxically, this near collapse has resulted in calls for even greater austerity measures against the downtrodden and more economic opportunity for
those who were doing well in the first place. A Freirean approach to critical pedagogy would help students understand this irony.

False political consciousness created by hegemonic forces influenced by corporate propagandists in the mainstream media is a factor. The frequently heard *trickle-down* discourse stating that neoliberalism will help everyone no matter their social and economic standing – the deregulated economy will create a rising tide and all of the boats, big and small, will rise with it (Harvey, 2005). The evidence shows otherwise, however. The burgeoning gap in income inequality is dramatically widening to proportions not seen since the 1930s (Albo, Gindin, & Panitch, 2010). Moreover, neoliberalism encourages the state to create markets in areas such as education, healthcare, social security, and environmental pollution (Harvey, 2005). It is worth noting that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently released a report called ‘Neoliberalism: Oversold?’ in which the authors conclude that cutbacks in social spending and privatization of the commons has resulted in a serious affront to civil society (Ostry, Loungani, & Furceri, 2016).

The effects of neoliberalism on public education have been particularly devastating. Referred to as the Global Educational Reform Movement, or GERM (Sahlberg, 2011), many countries have adopted similar tactics to serve the corporate agenda. These include the use of expensive standardized tests as the main student assessment strategy, funding cuts to the public school system (including teacher supports), and an overall shift from teacher responsibility to teacher accountability. GERM leads to a series of negative educational system consequences that include a decontextualized curriculum, pedagogy based on the transmission of facts, and overworked teachers who have become devalued as professionals (Sahlberg, 2011). Put succinctly, the values underlying GERM are the antithesis of Freirean values. Beginning teachers should understand these external forces on their profession. Parents should understand what neoliberalism is doing to one of the most important components of the commons, namely, the public school. If more citizens understood this, I am hopeful that support for the neoliberal project would decrease. This is where the role of the school comes into the discussion.

**Teaching for Social Justice and Civil Society**

The preceding discussions about political ideology, hegemony, and neoliberalism are embedded into the social studies methods and the anti-oppression courses I teach with preservice teachers. In order to help students understand the major political ideologies, they categorize issues as either social or economic (see Appendix 1). For example, on the social spectrum minority rights are on the left side, while the conservative pro-life and pro-death penalty positions are on the right. On the economic spectrum, tax cuts are on the right side, while publicly funded social welfare programs are on the left. In Canada, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party are positioned where their American ideological counterparts are; yet, the social democratic NDP is on the left side of both the social and economic spectrum.
Both conservatism and liberalism are positioned on the right side of the economic spectrum, although liberalism is slightly to the left of conservatism. In its ideal form social democracy is on the left side of both the social and economic spectrum (see Figure 1). Social democrats and liberals often agree on social issues. In Canada, for example, the social democratic NDP and the Liberals mostly agree on rights for Indigenous and LGBQT+ people. They usually differ on economic issues, however, as their traditional stances on trade unions and free trade indicate. Conservatism is anti-union, yet many working-class people support this ideology for social reasons. This approach allows me to demonstrate the extent to which each of the political parties stands in relation to the neoliberal agenda. In this way, students begin to understand that neoliberalism is an economic paradigm with significant social and political consequences in the lives of citizens. This is in keeping with Freire’s objective of emancipatory education.

**Figure 1 – Approximate Positioning of Major Canadian and American Political Parties on Economic and Social Spectra in 2019**  
(Note: subject to change over time)

**SOCIAL SCALE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LW</th>
<th>XXY</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NDP/Liberal</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**ECONOMIC SCALE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LW</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>X</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: Canadian political parties are marked X; American political parties are marked Y)

After the preservice teachers have a sufficient grasp of political ideology and have a developed political consciousness, they are required to examine their own beliefs. Stating their positions on various economic and social issues, they are able to determine the political ideology that most influences them. Preservice teachers come to understand that the dominant discourses used in corporate media support the interests of elites over the common good, indeed, they support profits over broad, societal interests. The dominant neoliberal discourses in the corporate media for the past 25 years – tax cuts, deregulation of industry, and cuts to social programs – have been the building blocks for a resurgence in
economic and political power for the elites in North America (Albo, Gindin, & Panitch, 2010). Countless working-class people, as well as much of the middle class, have had their lives significantly disrupted by this series of economic policy shifts supported by the corporate media. For Freire, it would be unethical for educators to ignore these powerful forces because of how influential they are on the lives of most people.

The preservice teachers presumably employ similar pedagogy once they have their own classrooms. This form of praxis would enable them to understand who their students are, and the backgrounds they come from. Knowing one’s students in these terms is crucial in order for the Freirean model of TSJ to be effective (Freire, 1970). This focus on political ideology is necessary in order to deconstruct the false political consciousness many people hold.

**Final Reflections on the Objective of PAR and TSJ**

As the title of this paper suggests, the objectives of participatory action research and teaching for social justice are more or less the same. Both are aspects of similar epistemological and ontological positioning. This is certainly true if educational researchers and critical pedagogues utilize the theories of Paulo Freire in their work. Researchers using PAR techniques and educators committed to TSJ clearly do so with the aim of making the world a better place. As discussed throughout the paper, this is the struggle shared by PAR and TSJ.

The similarities do not end with the same end goal, however. In terms of epistemology, both educational researchers using PAR methods and teachers committed to social justice understand the social construction of knowledge. Neither pretends to be neutral as taking a stance is a necessary aspect to this kind of work. Moreover, and this is also vitally important, the participants in PAR and the students in a TSJ classroom are very much part of the process in constructing knowledge based on their own lived experiences. This demonstrates the assumption within PAR and TSJ that everyone is in possession of knowledge, a unique knowledge. Researchers and teachers become participants and students respectively. Self-reflection is a crucial aspect of this co-construction of knowledge.

Further, PAR and TSJ advocates understand the importance of a solid grounding in political ideology among participants and students. Comprehending the ways in which political ideology influences one’s perceptions of their lived experiences is vital in deconstructing hegemonic discourses. An understanding of political ideology through ideology critique lessens the likelihood of a false political consciousness becoming entrenched in a person’s thoughts. This awareness or conscientization is a requirement in order to have a citizenry wanting a more fair society. An informed participant or student is necessary for this, but it is not enough. As Freire repeatedly emphasized throughout his work, praxis is also an imperative. Informed or politically conscious participants (through PAR) and students (through TSJ) must use their understanding to employ agency in order to resist the powerful forces working to oppress them. In the current social and economic climate,
neoliberalism is the dominant force that is shifting massive amounts of wealth to go the wealthiest people, and allowing racist tensions to flourish among the working and middle classes as their economic predicaments mount. PAR and TSJ can strengthen this resistance.

This leads to the final similarity between PAR and TSJ – both are based in the notion of hope. At the root of both PAR and TSJ is the assumption that positive change is possible and that a better world is possible. Paulo Freire often said that the world is unfinished, that it is continually in the process of becoming. Similarly, people are unfinished and always transforming. In his book *The Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Freire claimed: “Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness” (p. 69).

**References**


**End Notes**

1 This presentation was published in its entirety by the people who invited Paulo Freire to Tanzania. See Freire, P. (1971) *A Talk by Paulo Freire*, *Studies in Adult Education*, No 2, Dar es Salaam, Institute for Adult Education, 1-10.

2 This study fulfilled the thesis requirement for my Master’s of Arts degree at UBC.

3 Growing up in Toronto I had no idea of the oppression faced by Indigenous Canadians during that era. I had never met an Indigenous person, and moreover, the school curriculum throughout kindergarten to grade 13 in the Catholic schools I attended had completely ignored anything to do with Indigenous people, past and present. This was a blatant example of omission as a hegemonic strategy, but I digress. In other words, I was unaware that the benefits brought about by Keynesian economics depended upon which side of the colonial divide one was born in.

4 Alternative school programs in Vancouver, as in most places in Canada, were created for at-risk youth, those deemed unlikely to graduate from mainstream high schools mainly because of truancy issues.

5 For a full description of this study, see Orlowski, P. (2001). Ties that bind and ties than blind: Race and class intersections in the classroom. In James, C. E. & A. Shadd, (eds.), *Talking about identity: Encounters in race, ethnicity, and language*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 250-266.

6 I became acutely aware of my own ignorance about the colonial experience that First Nations peoples had experienced at the hands of white settlers. Subsequently, my teaching of Canadian history improved because I had rectified these glaring omissions in my knowledge.

7 The state-sanctioned formal curriculum is most often conservative and in recent years neoliberal in its orientation. But the evolution of the political ideology underlying the document is uneven. For example, the 1956 social studies curriculum in British Columbia included units on the trade union and cooperative movements, but completely ignored Indigenous issues. For more, see the following:


8 *Laissez faire economics* was the dominant policy during the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It supported the notion that the major role of government was to pass business-friendly legislation. Laissez faire economics opposed the rights of workers and promoted an unregulated economy for industry. It is similar to neoliberalism in many aspects.

9 At the time of this writing in the summer of 2019, several Democrats are calling for a social democratic alternative for American politics. A few of these politicians are Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Ilhan Omar.’
Appendix 1
An effective way to have students understand political ideology is to consider all issues as either economic or social. Economic issues are those that represent significant amounts of money, while social issues do not. For example, capital punishment is a social issue while tax reform is an economic issue. The case can be made that some issues, such as healthcare, are both social and economic. Yet, to save on confusion, the basic economic/social distinction is useful.

With political ideologies and political issues divided into the economic and the social, students are able to understand how political policies either support emancipation or oppression. They will be better able to determine which political party best serves their interests and the interests of the communities to which they belong. Voting in one’s best interests is a basic example of praxis.

Figure 1: Left and Right on the Social and Economic Spectra

**SOCIAL SCALE**

- pro-choice
- anti-death penalty
- pro minority rights

**ECONOMIC SCALE**

- strong social welfare state
- pro publicly funded universal healthcare
- wealthy pay tax at a higher rate

Assignment for Preservice Teachers:
Using a separate set of axes to represent the economic and social scales, place the letter representing each of the following issues on one of the scales. Be prepared to explain why you placed each one where you did.

**SOCIAL SCALE**

- A – capital punishment
- B – increased rights of gay people
- C – gun control
D – tax cuts for corporations
E – decreased funding for public education
F – pro-life
G – pro-choice
H – regulating the financial industry
I – increased military spending
J – increased social welfare spending
K – publicly funded healthcare system
L – subsidized daycare
O – support for unions
P – support for public transit
Q – progressive tax reform
R – banning worker strikes

**Biographical note:**

Paul Orlowski is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan. He received his PhD in 2004 from UBC in Vancouver in both the sociology of education and social studies education. Paul’s research interests are in critical media literacy, teaching for democracy, ideology critique, environmental education, international education, and critiquing neoliberalism. Both his research and his teaching fall under the broad category of teaching for political consciousness. Before receiving his PhD, Paul was a high school teacher in Vancouver, BC, for 19 years.