

*Zdzisław Aleksander*

Ateneum Szkoła Wyższa w Gdańsku  
zalex@univ.gda.pl

## **The concept of teachers' learning in the field of early education. From the Freinet pedagogy to the training of academic teachers**

### **Summary**

According to the author, pedagogical methods coming from the Freinet concept of classroom management can be used not only among children. This kind of didactic works can be useful in organizing activity among academic students as well. The author also claims that academic teachers find that Freinet pedagogy is not only interesting intellectually, but that they are able to transform Freinet ideas into the practices of students' learning.

**Keywords:** Freinet pedagogy, academic education, active intellectual students

Celestin Freinet's pedagogy (referred to as Freinet Pedagogy) and the terms connected with it such as 'expression', 'creative activity', 'intellectual and social development', 'subjectivity and dignity of a student', 'free writing', 'school newspaper', 'field investigation', 'Freinet teachers' do not need to be associated with early education (as happens quite often). The essential concepts of Freinet Pedagogy may be close to any teacher's heart, including also academic teachers, independent of their students' ages.

The following text is the result of my academic experience connected with teaching students and their professional development. I have also to emphasise my long term cooperation with the Freinet association, which has supported my pedagogical concept of being a flexible teacher.

At this point I need to emphasise that Freinet's concepts are understood as a certain way of teacher's behaviour and attitude expressing respect for a student's character, thoughts, and work, but most importantly taking an interest in a student's development. It requires taking into consideration Freinet's indication that the relationship between the teacher and his or her students, and mutual respect for personal dignity are crucial. That is why, according to my beliefs, some academics find confirmation of Freinet's pedagogical ideas in personalism. Here I may quote a theory of B. Śliwerski (2008) that personalism is not only one of the trends in modern philosophy, but also a radical view in educational sciences, which treats every subject in the educational process as a human being. It is connected with those movements, trends, and theories of education which strongly support (and here we encounter Freinet's pedagogical ideas) a person's autonomy, his or her dignity and rationalism. Personalism in those trends is understood as an interpersonal attitude, expressed in recognition of laws and dignity, respect for another person and the interest in his or her development.

In academic education the meaning of Freinet's techniques supporting creative, intellectual students' activity cannot be omitted, as it is one of the most effective ways to support their development. I will start my dissertation with a technique known as Free Writing, whose educational value is seen mainly in a chance for creative expression, stimulation of creative thinking, possibility of free expression of thought and feeling, as well as shaping creative language. Using this technique in school education we let ourselves be guided by Freinet's idea that a vast richness of a child's thoughts, feelings, and observations is hidden in his or her natural verbal behaviour. As such it should be included in the school process of education, and special conditions should be created which do not hinder, but stimulate free speech, free expression of thought, also delivered by children who come to school with their mother tongue in the form of a restricted code (as understood by B. Bernstein) or an ethnolect.

How can this technique support an academic teacher, especially in the Arts or Social Sciences Faculties? It is common knowledge that recently a lot of secondary school graduates have been getting into universities with a limited ability to create written texts. It is also true that the mass character of studies make people functioning with the restricted code choose the Arts Faculties. It creates some major problems for thesis supervisors (both undergraduates and graduates of the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle of study) because in the process of writing those works, linguistic and communicative difficulties are fully revealed. In those situations the technique of Free Writing comes in handy. The seminar is a place of cooperation over separate elements of students' final theses: introductions, endings, texts which present and interpret results of research, or conclusions. We concentrate here on work identical to what we put into Free Writing. It can support students' communicative development and improve the final version of the text. It assumes equal chances of being creative, disregarding the communicative competency of a given person. Taking part in the process of text improvement which aims at making a given piece of work linguistically and stylistically correct may be extremely educational. A student participating actively in the process of 'smoothing out' the text learns not only how to express his or her thoughts in a convincing and precise way, but also how to use properly the elements of academic vocabulary. Working on a student's text not only involves finding mistakes and vagueness, but also enriching those pieces of work with different, often new, linguistic and stylistic elements. The true value of this solution is students' discussion over a given text and cooperative improvement of their academic works.

A very similar problem to that described above appears in classes and workshops at the Faculties of Journalism, where the usage of Free Writing brings positive results. Personally I use this method teaching a course in 'Stylistics and Culture of Language'. In case of those classes all the steps of the Free Writing process are being preserved – starting with creation and ending with collaborative work on a selected text. However, taking into consideration the specific requirements of the course, the type of text is purposefully chosen. These are most often connected with journalistic publishing and include: an essay, article, commentary, feature, review and others. The fact that discussion and improvement of the

text has a collective character (although it can also take place in a group environment) creates a chance to make invaluable interactions, good rapport with and within a group of students. The division into students with better or worse cultural capital is fading away, just as division into those with bigger or smaller communicative competences does.

A thought of J.S Bruner (1974) is worth quoting here. It states that as we raise the value of cooperation between students in the process of education, the language of this interaction becomes the property of the learner and the norms of style and clarity of action used in this interaction become this learner's norms.

In everyday practice, the university has the task of shaping the intellect and intellectual culture of students. The intellect is the main tool to be used by a student at the university and later in his or her pedagogical work.

The creative and active character of a human personality manifests itself and gets shaped in the process of expression. The real assimilation of knowledge and skills takes place when we try to create something. This is when our knowledge becomes operative. As follows, creating 'the attitude of an open mind' should take into consideration an expressive form of student's activity. Expression is always connected with the creative activity of an individual. It is not a form of simple reproduction and even not only a reflection of the internal vision of the real world, but also interpretation and transformation.

In the study prepared in cooperation with Dr Wanda Frankiewicz (Aleksander and Frankiewicz 2014), a lot of space is dedicated to the problem of speech and thought development, to the issue of creative personalities of students studying Modern Languages, as well as to the methods of work stimulating the development of the communicative abilities of future graduates, based on the expression and creativity of students. In our study we suggested considering Freinet Pedagogy as a rich source of inspiration, which can play an important role in rebuilding and enriching forms of work organization while learning a foreign language at Polish universities. The theory was exemplified by selected solutions carried out at one of the universities. They were derived from the concept of 'shaping creative personality, developing the intellect and intellectual culture of students while undergoing linguistic education'. Basic categories were: students' expression (literary and current affairs) as well as 'diving into culture'.

Here, I will focus on presenting experiences connected with respecting Freinet's ideas while working with students of Pedagogy. In the process of everyday work at the university it was hard not to notice that students, irrelevant of their age and type of studies, reacted badly to the authoritarian attitudes of lecturers, a threatening atmosphere (which is sometimes considered as motivating for better work), boredom and lack of chances for activity resulting mainly from traditional forms of work. Certainly it is not our goal to undermine the importance of active listening to lectures, participating in seminars, or studying literature. However, we are saddened by the practice of studying based on passive participation in lectures which results in the mechanical process of taking down notes that serve memorizing, and of participating in classes during which previously read texts are being reconstructed. At the same time, students, who are low in the academic pecking

order, are sometimes refused the right to make their own interpretation of the text. Results of this kind of education (universally criticized) are not difficult to predict. They include: the lack of the ability to think creatively, encyclopedic – impractical – knowledge, and fear of novel solutions that go beyond the traditional.

Being directed by the pedagogical message of C. Freinet it needs to be assumed that every academic teacher should feel responsible, not only for the level of factual knowledge and vocational skills of his students, but also for their intellectual development. Individual efforts aimed at changing the situation described above need to be directed at liberating the audience from fears and tensions connected with the attitude of academic teachers or fellow students, mainly autocracy, criticizing, and grading. This is one of essential solutions supporting creativity and development. Students fairly easily get accustomed to the fact that they can pass judgments and need to listen to their colleagues. They individually choose their circles of interest, which are connected with their field of study, select the problem they want to describe, and make a presentation to their colleagues. They often work in small groups to accomplish a given task. They also learn how to cooperate sharing particular tasks according to their abilities (gathering material, creating texts, planning the layout etc.)

The creations of active intellectual students may be put into three different areas. The first one is a non-compulsory subject: 'Freinet Pedagogy' which presents all of Freinet's techniques. The main goal is not to gather information about this French pedagogue from lectures and monographs. Students' activities result in the creation of worksheets for Field Investigations (allowing students or children to work independently), Self-Correcting Files (for children or students) and a newspaper containing the results of the students' self-expression, divided into categories: Current Affairs, Poetry, and Rhetoric. I need to stress at this point that articles published in this newspaper are created by students for their colleagues, not for children and at a child's level, as is often practised. As a result, the discussion that follows the process of correcting and editing chosen texts is incredibly stormy, but also interesting. In case of doubts, students often make use of dictionaries, poetic textbooks etc.

Following the first is the second area which allows incorporation of Freinet's 'pedagogical truths' into academic work. These are all non-compulsory subjects chosen by students of Pedagogy who end by receiving a credit for a written assignment. The preparation of this dissertation starts with the selection of a particular problem which will create the basis for the study. The choice is made by the students themselves, and they also formulate the topic and choose the method of work, which is free. Depending on the problem, Field Investigations or various forms of expression (mainly verbal and artistic) create the basis for the study. In the case of the former, a schedule of work and specific tasks are designed by students themselves. A teacher – according to C. Freinet – plays only a supportive and cooperative role. This role is limited to the facilitation of contact with different institutions, schools or people important for a given topic, making suggestions about crucial literature, and supporting the process of selection and verification of the material collected

for the study. Before editing the final version of the study, a working version is shared and presented to the group. Any doubts which may arise will necessitate making corrections or supplementing texts with additional explanations. Pieces of work based on expression include: essays, stories, autobiographies (concentrating on the pedagogical analysis of individual education paths), letters (to the principal of the school after some visits to his institution), works of art including models, posters, and boards.

Group studies based on Field Investigation reveal some important information. During the research, a so-called Working Library was created which contained brochures with information about private schools in Gdańsk, Sopot, and Gdynia area, monographs on selected schools and preschools working with alternative pedagogies, studies (beautifully illustrated) containing different ideas about Modern Education and its creators. A separate place was restricted for works in sociolinguistics e.g. dealing with the language of different teenage subcultures, barriers in the process of communication, and others.

Listed studies, books and brochures create an invaluable source of knowledge for students (especially extramural and post-graduate ones). They play an important role owing to a universally known problem with getting access to academic literature. Some materials were made available to parents searching for non-commercial information on private schools. This clearly visible usefulness of selected studies gives a lot of satisfaction to the authors and motivates further generations of students. Yet again we can confirm one of Freinet's ideas that factors motivating students to creative activity are the ability to choose their work freely and the awareness of usefulness of its results for others. It needs to be stressed that the results presented above were obtained owing to the authentic engagement of the students in their work.

The situation is different in the third area of actions of the academic teacher who wants to support the creativity and intellectual activity of his or her students. I am thinking here about classes on different aspects of Pedagogy taught at teaching departments of various faculties. Those subjects, although compulsory, are not treated as the important ones. This is why all the initiatives going beyond the schedule and time limits, unlike the traditional understanding of the studying process – need to be negotiated. However, whenever students discover presented solutions and accept the idea of active studying, the results of their work may surpass every expectation.

I will illustrate this with an example of a course in Pedagogy I taught at one of the teaching departments at Gdańsk University. We started the course with an agreement that instead of traditional classes we would make a textbook entitled 'The Book of Pedagogy'. It was decided that it would be divided into three parts: 'Psychological and Social Aspects of Education', 'Problems of Modern Teenagers' and 'Alternatives in Education'. The next step was to separate the parts into chapters, in reality, problems, which were assigned to small two – or three-man teams. The material necessary for the preparation of different chapters was gathered in places (institutions) where education, upbringing, and resocialization take place, or from experts having knowledge on a given subject (e.g. teenage subcultures). Students visited orphanages, resocialization centers, special schools, public

schools, and private schools making use of alternative teaching methods. Students were experiencing real-life situations, but they also had a chance to document some pedagogical thoughts shared by those involved in education on a daily basis. They gathered knowledge on education ‘diving into pedagogical reality’ through observations, interviews (discussions) with pedagogues, students, parents, but also specialists and therapists. Using the term from Freinet Pedagogy, they experienced Field Investigations. The sincerity of their emotional involvement can be confirmed by the fact that a lot of students joined institutions analyzed for the project, becoming volunteers and co-workers and continuing their work after getting a credit for the course or even after graduation.

After the initial editing, the gathered material was presented during group meetings taking place regularly at a time and space formally assigned for the classes. The reports were often very emotional and the discussion was animated. Students did not need to be additionally motivated e.g. by having their attendance checked. In a very natural way, a certain psychological atmosphere was created in which it would have been considered impolite not to come for classes (meetings) where fellow students presented collected material and shared their thoughts.

It often occurred during those meetings that some participants, who were not students of Pedagogy, had problems with understanding certain notions or pedagogical phenomena. It sent a clear signal to the author of a given chapter that further explanations needed to be included. This, on the other hand, created a natural necessity to use specialist dictionaries, textbooks and studies. Students needed good material because ‘the Book’ was the only source of knowledge for the final exam. Using resources such as monographs, studies, textbooks etc. when necessary is one of the most important principles of Freinet Pedagogy.

The texts of the different chapters of ‘the Book’ are not homogeneous in form. Depending on the subject, preferences and creative abilities of the various authors they are written in the form of an essay, reportage, academic dissertation, reports etc. I need to add that the objective value of students’ creative investigations was confirmed as some of their texts were published in the press or in academic journals.

In conclusion I can say that pedagogical methods coming from the Freinet concept of classroom management can be used not only among children. This kind of didactic works can be useful in organizing activity among academic students as well. Academic teachers find that Freinet pedagogy is not only interesting intellectually, but that they are able to transform Freinet ideas into the practices of students’ learning.

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