

**WORK IN FREINET PEDAGOGY, OR HIS MILESTONES FOR THE RENEWAL  
OF EDUCATION**

**O TRABALHO NA PEDAGOGIA FREINET, OU SEUS MARCOS PELA RENOVACÃO  
DA EDUCAÇÃO**

**EL TRABAJO EN LA PEDAGOGÍA FREINET, O SUS HITOS PARA LA  
RENOVACIÓN DE LA EDUCACIÓN**

Ivan FORTUNATO<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This text is about the idea of work in Freinet pedagogy. This is not a purely theoretical text that seeks to break down the concept, but to demonstrate how the Freinet pedagogy develops daily when incorporated into practice. It is an essay produced in the first person, from the point of view of a teacher trainer of teachers, working in teacher training courses and in the master's and doctorate in education, in Brazil. The main objective is, in sharing the experience, to reflect on the meaning of teaching and the difficulties of achieving the pedagogical renewal presented by Freinet, a hundred years ago.

**KEYWORDS:** Education. Célestin Freinet. Free method.

**RESUMO:** *Este texto é sobre a ideia de trabalho na pedagogia Freinet. Não se trata de um texto puramente teórico que busca esmiuçar o conceito, mas, demonstrar como a pedagogia Freinet se desenvolve cotidianamente quando incorporada na prática. É um ensaio produzido em primeira pessoa, do ponto de vista de um professor formador de professores, atuando em cursos de formação docente e no mestrado e doutorado em educação, no Brasil. O objetivo principal é, na partilha da experiência, refletir sobre o sentido da docência e as dificuldades de se conseguir efetivar a renovação pedagógica apresentada por Freinet, um centenário atrás.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação. Célestin Freinet. Método livre.

**RESUMEN:** *Este texto trata sobre la idea de trabajo en la pedagogía Freinet. No se trata de un texto puramente teórico que pretende escrutar el concepto, sino demostrar cómo se desarrolla cotidianamente la pedagogía Freinet cuando se incorpora a la práctica. Es un ensayo producido en primera persona, desde el punto de vista de un formador de docentes, actuando en cursos de formación docente y en la maestría y doctorado en educación, en Brasil. El objetivo principal es, al compartir la experiencia, reflexionar sobre el sentido de la docencia y las dificultades para lograr la renovación pedagógica presentada por Freinet, hace un centenario.*

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Institute of São Paulo (IFSP), Itapetininga – SP – Brazil. Professor at the Pedagogical Formation Coordination. Doctorate in Human Development and Technologies (UNESP). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1870-7528>. E-mail: [ivanfit@yahoo.com.br](mailto:ivanfit@yahoo.com.br)

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Educación. Célestin Freinet. Metodo libre.*

## Introduction

If the student has no thirst for knowledge, nor any appetite for the work you present to him, it will also be wasted work to “shove” the most eloquent demonstrations into his ears. (FREINET, 2004, p. 19, our translation).

This text is about the idea of work in Freinet pedagogy, more as a practice than as a theory. I explain. Despite being a tributary to the work of Célestin Freinet, I do not recognize myself as a student of his pedagogy. Freinet is – and always has been – inspiration. For me, reading his works is escapism, because with them I escape the surrounding reality of education as a system, designed to achieve results in external assessments. Since the indexes are good, it does not matter what actually happens in the institutions. On the other hand, as Freinet well noted: “failures in exams are disastrous for both the students and the teacher” (apud FREINET, 1979, p. 106, our translation).

Based on the experience of the world lived as a teacher trainer, I can attest that teaching work, aimed at human formation and the development of each student, has lost its strength in the face of an apathetic and bureaucratic system that imposes its objectivity on human individuality. The system allows you to do nothing different from what is stated in the rules, built in, by and for the system. The claim is always the same: the system works like that.

Faced with this circumstance that has been tormenting and tormenting him for some time, I have returned to Célestin Freinet as a way of trying to find ways to remain obstinate in teaching. His pedagogical work is inspiration: it helps to move forward, hoping for a better world. Thus, the purpose of this writing is to share what I call “milestones” for pedagogical renewal.

Such landmarks are the banners of struggle for quality education, aimed at individual, social and planetary transformation. Flags raised more than seven decades ago, still valid. This is because the system reveals itself to be increasingly violent against education that seeks to provide for the individuality of each person, their affections, their desires, their dreams... A system that increasingly makes everyone equal and, worse, gives no voice To nobody.

To develop writing, the text unfolds into two sections. The first deals with the circumstances of education that make me often return to Freinet. The second concerns the pedagogical work carried out by the educator and how it becomes an impulse to maintain the

obstinacy in continuing the teaching exercise. In the end, there remains the hope that, by bringing these concerns to light, they will find an echo out there and that we will be able to chorus the flags for an education that understands and respects humanity.

### **Freinet and the circumstances of education**

With Freinet I understood why I grew up averse to school. With Freinet I learned to believe that another school was possible.

Today I am a teacher training course at the Instituto Federal de São Paulo, Itapetininga campus, in the southwest of the state of São Paulo, in Brazil. However, my path to teaching was truly paradoxical, because, having the childish desire to become a teacher, despite not liking school at all, I continued my studies at the higher level in the faculty of pedagogy. Throughout the course, I became even more frustrated with the abysmal separation between the theory studied in the classes and the classes themselves; not to mention the gap that separated the university from the elementary school, although there was an assumption that university studies would serve to work on the school floor.

Even so, I followed the course until the end (completing it in December 2005) and applied for a municipal primary school teacher, being approved in first place (in January 2006). It was only when I went to take over the vacancy I had won that I realized that I knew nothing about school, much less about educating children. I had four years of theoretical, rhetorical, systematic studies on education, schooling and teaching, but almost everything was built on beautiful allegories. I backed off. I didn't accept the teaching job and went to build a career elsewhere, far from the classrooms. I remained that way until, years later, I discovered Freinet.

Much of this trajectory has already been written in other essays (Fortunato, 2018a; 2017), but I usually retell it whenever there is an opportunity. This is largely due to the fact that I recognize my debt to Freinet and the only way to pay it off is to put him in the spotlight in my pedagogical work. In this way, I have been trying to discover what it would be like to teach through his “experimental groping” (I think it is easier to understand this there if I translate it as trial-and-error), his “free method” and “common sense”. To do this, I always try to question my own performance as a training teacher, in Itapetininga, since August 2014. In this sense, I am always questioning myself: would I be promoting an education based on these principles or giving a new guise to the “old scholasticism” that Freinet so critical?

Such a question is not mere rhetoric, because, as Freinet (2004, p. 69, our translation) has well outlined, it is a “vital point of pedagogy” – either we keep moving away from life, pouring schooling on the principles of scholasticism, or we opt for the natural way; there is no middle ground. But, also, such a question does not present a simple choice by which path to follow; after all, it is not a matter of choosing here or there without first having a deep understanding of the educational system and its complex history based on a way of doing education, as well as it implies digging through, poking at beliefs and wounds about the school, about teaching and about learning.

One of the most important necessary considerations concerns the role played as a teacher, reflecting from the initial and continuing education itself, passing through the daily challenges and attitudes, to the broader meanings attributed to the profession and what is believed in it. None of this has ready and finished answers. All this requires constant understanding of everyday life and reinvention of the way to be an educator. This is because there is a previous fundamental question, which is the foundation of the teaching practice, but which little is explored except superficially: what is the role of education in human life?

When reflecting on it, thought tends to wander and fantasize along different routes... from the perpetuation of culture, to the transmission of knowledge and values, to preparation for the most diverse jobs, etc. etc. In this digression about the meaning of teaching, a passage from one of the works of Alexander Neill (1978), founder of the century-old Summerhill School, located in the county of Suffolk in England, always reappears in the mind:

I want education to produce the best in a child. This is the only way to improve the world. The naked truth is that we adults cannot make the world any better than the gigantic slum it is, and when we pretend to know how a child should be raised, we are merely being silly (NEILL, 1978, p. 34, our translation).

This passage is very blunt and calls into question vital points of education and the work carried out as a teacher, as it makes all scientific, social, axiological... accumulated knowledge understood as paradoxical, because what makes us evolve at the same time that we put ourselves against ourselves. Thus, while we are creating new technologies of communication, locomotion, construction, food production, health, etc., we are also producing garbage, poverty, wars and diseases. We have advanced in everything, but perhaps we are still groping for humanity itself.

Education – particularly formal, school and university education – has accompanied this paradox. If we don't already face a big problem of lack of vacancies in school benches,

the challenges are different... lack of infrastructure and conditions of permanence, excess of classes and crowded classes, bureaucracy, control, plastered and obsolete curricula, etc. There is also an imperative discourse about (lack of) quality. However, such quality is rarely defined, becoming synonymous, therefore, with the results obtained in external evaluations: the higher the grades, classifications, indices..., the more educational quality is attributed to a particular educational institution.

However, this way of measuring quality does not even concern the learning of curricular contents, after all, an external evaluation is almost always taken by sampling, which does not represent the totality of students. Worse, this relationship between quality and results tends to repress other forms of education that are not covered by official curricula. And it is worth remembering that the official curriculum is imposed, it comes from outside, coined far from everyday life, but within a world of wars, misery, exploitation, diseases... Unfortunately, none of this represents today's school education.

This is because the generalized statements I made in the previous paragraph – taken from the memories of my schooling lived in the 1980s, through the years of teaching degree in pedagogy to the current findings of the daily life of a teacher trainer, all of this in the countryside of São Paulo – resonate with the Freinet's writings (1998, p. XXVII, our translation) about the beginning of his teaching career, in the 1920s, in the small French province of Bar-sur-Loup: “he was forced to return to traditional techniques and instruments, to teach classes that no one understood” , having texts read that, although simple, meant nothing in the educational development of children” or “the study to which we were forced lost all the advantages of lived study, becoming a tedious and fruitless task”.

Thus, taking this similarity of the school in such different times and places, whose denunciation of its way of teaching also appears in the famous work “Cuidado, Escola!” (HARPER *et al.*, 1980) – carefully elaborated by members of the Instituto de Ação Cultural, founded by Paulo Freire, at the University of Geneva – some general problems are highlighted in this model of education, which Freinet (2004) constantly refers to as “scholastic”, being a form of education separated from life. In this model, common sense is lacking, interest is lacking, life itself is lacking.

Freinet (1998, p. XXVII, our translation) began his career in this educational formula of scholasticism and recalls that he felt like “a talentless clown” trying, in every way, to artificially capture the attention and interest of the students - this metaphor is still very valid , because I often read that teachers need to do everything to make their classes attractive, or something similar. With that, the French educator noted that he felt shipwrecked, adrift,

feeling obliged to find a way to survive in teaching; as Freinet himself stated (1998, p. XXV, our translation), it was “an insane obstinacy to honor the profession I had chosen and loved”.

### **Freinet, pedagogy and work**

Célestin Freinet fulfilled his obstinacy, honoring his teaching. To demonstrate such honesty, it would be enough to recover the lessons learned with his common sense, the natural method and the experimental attempts that became my bases for insisting and persisting in the teaching profession (FORTUNATO, 2016a), or resuming his sensitivity to educate that made me register, in the form of a tribute, the idea that he was a “hero of school education” (FORTUNATO, 2016b). Still, Célestin Freinet left his “pedagogical invariants” as a legacy, coined from his experience as a teacher, on the school floor, over more than 30 years; such invariants concern, for example, the need to abandon scholastic methods, as well as the relationship of equality between children and adults (we are all human) and the idea that work is something natural (FORTUNATO; CUNHA; TEMPLE, 2016).

The fact is that Célestin Freinet left us an extensive library, with writings about his free method of education, his pedagogical techniques, his battles for popular education and the need for schools for the people, the community and cooperation between teachers, human psychology etc. (LEGRAND, 2010). However, I dare say, his greatest contribution to school education were the three banners raised throughout his life (FREINET, 1975), summarized more or less as follows: (1) below school textbooks, (2) up to 25 students per room, and (3) below to classes.

The first flag, “down with school textbooks”, was raised in reference to textbooks, handouts or the like; in this sense, fighting ready-made content is equivalent to going against official curricula that are not inscribed in the lives of students and educators. Regarding the second flag, each classroom must have a limit of 25 students; in this case, although I still believe that the proposed number is high for a school education focused on individual and collective interests, it is a substantially lower number than that practiced in schools and universities around (I myself have had a class with more than 120 students, in the not too distant past). Last but not least, when he shouted “down with classes”, Célestin Freinet would be demanding the end of scholasticism, because, as his wife, Élise Freinet (1979, p. 100-101, our translation), “must dethrone the class, which serves the prestige of the teacher, often to the detriment of the initiative and interest of children, who become passive, against their nature”.

This educational turnaround initiated by Célestin Freinet, to dethrone the classroom, is not about eccentric or visionary theories about learning, much less requires the use of daring



techniques to capture attention and interest, or has the need to make use of technology (digital) cutting edge. It is enough not to follow the curriculum, but the intuition; it is enough to place fewer students under the guidance of a professor and, finally, it is enough not to teach in the classic sense of lectures on contents that are not part of student or teaching life. Its flags are not magic formulas, but evidence that, through common sense, it is possible to cultivate an education as a work of sensitivity, affection, free expression, learning that is born of interests, curiosities, the desire to discover.

In all this, attention is drawn to the simplicity of the thing – “so simple that I was even surprised that no one had thought of it before”, exclaimed Freinet (1998, p. XXVIII, our translation). Simple, but not easy.

The biggest obstacle is scholasticism itself, which, over the centuries of domination of the school chair, crystallized a coherent and systematic model, subject to control and to be replicated regardless of place and time. Even though it is repetitive to describe it, here is the model: there is a manual (read book, handout, curriculum...) with contents organized in sequence, there is a teacher trained to expose such content and a few dozen students who have the mission to memorize to reproduce, at the required time, the same content. Hence, in view of this model, this eloquent observation emerges:

In our old school, it's the teacher who wears out the most. What I mean by this? He is often the only one in his class to manifest some activity, as if it could be enough to prepare young students for life. The evident failure of the current school is certainly due, in large part, to this error of educators, who believed for a long time in the omnipotence of their word and of their classes taught to students “with their arms crossed”. It is no longer necessary to criticize this conception. But it is necessary at least to find new practices that will take us out of the routine (FREINET, 1979, p. 63, our translation).

We come, then, to the question of work in Freinet pedagogy. It is not possible to follow, however, without first expressing the Marxist orientation followed by Célestin Freinet in which, therefore, work is the dialectical relationship of the human being with the world, modifying it and being modified by it. To work, in this sense, is to carry out an intentional activity, oriented towards an end. Or going further, as Boleiz Júnior (2015, p. 61, our translation) has well explained, work “effectively fulfills the condition of the human being as a plural being, at the same time it grants the condition of humanity to those who perform it in their world-changing activities”.

Thus, taking up the previous quote by Élise Freinet (1979), the criticism is evident: in the old-but-still-present school, the teacher is almost always the one who works. The students

have to wait their turn to carry out the tasks under the teacher's command. That is why those who think that the supposedly innovative “active methodologies” are the secret of the school revolution are wrong, because nothing is innovative: they return to the hypothetical idea of learning by doing, but they are almost always guided by the official curriculum and under the command of the teacher. .

Deeper criticism of the false idea that we are living a fad called active methodologies, through its pretentiously new techniques, has already been made elsewhere (HERRÁN; FORTUNATO, 2017). But, to make the criticism clearer, we take what José Manuel Moran (2012, p. 19, our translation) said about active methodologies: “learning takes place from real problems and situations; the same that students will experience later in their professional life, in advance, during the course”. That is, something quite old is called anew, at the same time that a hypothetical future is falsified (how is it possible to know which “real” situations will be experienced in the future time?). Furthermore, what is sought to be achieved in education today, with the imposition of digital technologies on education, Freinet did a hundred years ago with walking lessons, free texts, a manual press, dialogue and common sense.

It was recorded, in his own writings and in the texts of others about his pedagogy, that Célestin Freinet was always faithful to his banners raised against scholasticism. He noted, for example, that “apparently scientific and objective education from abroad is still nothing more than a sham. It is in the individual himself that we will seek the foundations and lines of our action” (FREINET, 1998, p. 143, emphasis added, our translation). Having lived the perverse effects of the world when fighting in the First World War, Freinet dedicated himself, through school education, to seeking other forms of social and political life.

Education from outside separates students and educators from everyday life, making mastery of curricular content essential and excellence in results being its only goal. In this way, this school education formula becomes vicious, causing teachers and students to dedicate time and energy just to solve the problems created by the school itself. Whether the world is at war, bombs or money, technological or chemical, axiological or viral... it doesn't matter. In other words: if the scores obtained in the evaluations are good, the school is fulfilling its role, even if, on the outside, rights are alienated and lives are at risk.

The criticisms made by Célestin Freinet are blunt – and very pertinent –. Furthermore (and worse), these criticized elements are still present in formal education. This is evidenced, among others, in the teachers' complaints about indiscipline and lack of attention in classrooms, or in the lack of elementary knowledge of reading, writing and basic arithmetic operations that their students present. It is also evident in the different moments when



students ask the classic questions “what is it for?” or “where am I going to use this information” or even “why do I need to know this?”, restless with the imposition of knowledge, either because it is in the didactic material and/or because the teacher brought it as indispensable knowledge... it is indicative that what is being taught is not inscribed in life.

Another evidence of school redundancy is in the answers to these same questions asked by disinterested students, as they usually use a hypothetical example, if not abstract, and/or something about a future that may also happen in a certain occupation. hypothetical. On this school-serving-itself thing, Freinet (1998), through his character Mathieu the pastor, told teachers:

You convince children that they must learn this and that, the usefulness of which they do not perceive. They train them to recite summaries, to solve problems; they train them to recite summaries, to solve problems of more or less dubious logic, which continue to be most of the time, if not always, specifically school problems; they fill them with words and notions, whose intimate relationships you are not even aware of, which remain for them as if arbitrarily juxtaposed elements. You never leave them the possibility to reflect, to judge, to choose, to decide... So always in such a hurry to “see” the whole program! And they claim that, in this way, their students are better prepared to understand, reflect, choose and judge! (FREINET, 1998, p. 128, our translation).

When the “program” (menu, curriculum, content, plan... whatever it is called) is the most important element of education, it does not matter much what the name given to the teaching formats is, because the underlying method is that of scholastic. Either through the exclusive use of lectures or pedagogical circuses (in reference to feeling himself to be a Freinet clown, already mentioned here), or through writing on the blackboard or through the use of modern digital whiteboards and other gadgets, or prescribing the pages to be read and the list of exercises to be completed or by the assignment of “active” tasks... it doesn't matter: when the “program” is the organizing element of the teaching process, the educational work falls on the teacher. – DOWN TO CLASSES!

Hence a strong provocation brought up again by Freinet (1998, p. 86, our translation) through the character Mathieu: “Have you ever tried to get to know the deep themes of the countless distractions of your students?”. This question goes deep into the secular model of school that we have... from the teacher who wears out his voice demanding silence and attention, or from the one who appeals to the emotional saying he is 'talking to the walls', to the norms that prevent the use of devices cell phones in class, as they get in the way – they get in the way of the program, obviously. These examples, although abstract and quite generic, immediately remind me of several episodes lived in childhood and adolescence inside the

classrooms, as well as bringing several memories of recent experiences in projects articulated with several schools in the city and region, in addition to resonating with several reports of undergraduate students in which I participate, partially, in their initial training, acting as a teacher trainer. Unfortunately, “distractions” are taken as hindrances, rather than being treated as motivators for learning.

But Célestin Freinet, on the contrary, by abolishing the class and the program, creates conditions so that there are no distractions. Its pedagogical practice is developed through what the academy rejects as a means of producing knowledge: empiricism (FORTUNATO, 2018b). Therefore, his teaching techniques invert the traditional logic of the school, which always starts with the theoretical explanation of the thing and then, and only later, allows students to exercise repetition or approximate reproduction. And how is it the other way around? First you try to do it and then, only later, do you look for theoretical explanations. Thus, in the pedagogy proposed by Célestin Freinet, everyone – students and teacher(s) – works!

### **Transitory considerations, woven from the context**

In this text, some of Célestin Freinet's relationship with educational work was discussed under the motto “landmarks” for pedagogical renewal. Maria Villela (1991, p. 53, our translation), when writing about Freinet pedagogy as a “new” approach to an “old” problem, had already noted: “work is the force that moves the human being, that gives meaning and purpose to his life and it is through him that he develops all his potential, personal and social”. The author recovers the Marxist definition of work as a basic principle of human nature, through which “reality is constructed, understood and relationships with other individuals are created” (VILLELA, 1991, p. 53, our translation). And she goes on to explain that, in Célestin Freinet's educational proposal, the work has democratic, community and cooperation objectives, based on concrete experiences. From experience, from learning by doing, to theoretical elaborations. A simple inversion of the thing, but a profound revolution against which scholasticism has resisted for centuries.

In Villela's (1991) writing, the adjectives “new” and “old” stand out. I agree with the “old”, obviously, because as outlined here in this chapter, I still see scholasticism denounced by Freinet as the current model of school education. On the other hand, I regret the qualitative “new” emerging in 1991, as it had been 70 years since Célestin Freinet started his own “experimental groping” disturbing the traditionalism and sedative rigor of school education. No reading and memorizing meaningless texts printed in the manual without first walking

through the community, exploring the world, and writing about what caught the most attention – for each one. That's why I reiterate what I already recorded a few years ago: without Célestin Freinet, school education goes back 500 years – or more!

[...]

And speaking of regressing even further, it is practically impossible to ignore our context lived in the present time and everything we are going through, for more than a year, during the terrible pandemic of covid-19, which causes deaths, isolation, more hunger and more poverty. At this juncture, school education suffers even more, as it becomes compulsorily remote. In this model, it becomes too complicated to escape the aegis of the program, the formal curriculum, the content... Well, if there are ways to do this without equity in equipment and internet access, but mainly without the affections of presence, the stimuli of experience and the provocation of the lived world, I have not yet found them.

In the remote model created by the current health emergency, I don't know what to do. Not everyone can be logged in at the same time, and when they are, not everyone has the resources to interact, or if they do, it's only through monosyllabic responses. There is no way to initiate deep dialogues, how to disperse through the places of a classroom, a campus or a school, nor how to join in smaller groups etc... there is the screen, and that's it. The void created by the mediation of digital technology between me and the students causes me to find only one reaction: to strictly follow the program.

Would he then have regressed in the teaching profession?

Élise Freinet (1978) gathered forces to record, in memoriam, the years of her husband's struggle for a cooperative education, from the people for the people, battling against the scholasticism that separates humanity from humanity itself. It portrays the moment when Célestin Freinet, after four years recovering from war wounds, entered a classroom for the first time, in 1920, in the province of Bar-sur-Loup... it is with the characterization of the first Freinet's contact with the classroom, as a teacher, that I want to close this chapter. I hope that this narrative will resonate with many doubts, reflections and concerns about the school, raising more people to this proposal to revolutionize... Without this hope, there is nothing left for us...

The classroom that Freinet enters for the first time is a traditional classroom in official schools: desks arranged in rows, a pallet for the teacher, hangers nailed to the wall, a blackboard on an easel... the windows [...] are so high that they defy children's curiosity. Along the entire length of the gray walls, some maps [...], murals with the metric system, reading exercises and, in one

corner, an abacus that has already disappeared, the only attraction of this dusty furniture [...] (FREINET, 1978, p. 15-16, our translation).

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