

# The Act of Study

*Paulo Freire*

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**I**n compiling any bibliography, there is one intrinsic purpose: focusing or stimulating a desire in a potential reader to learn more.<sup>1</sup> If a bibliography does not fulfill this purpose, if it seems to be missing something or does not challenge those who read it, the motive to read it is undermined.

A bibliography then becomes useless, lost among other things in desk drawers.

In developing a bibliography, there are three categories of audience: the people it addresses, the authors cited, and other bibliographic writers in general. A bibliographic list cannot be compiled merely by haphazardly copying titles or through hearsay. Further, a bibliography shouldn't prescribe readings dogmatically; it should offer a challenge to those reading it. This challenge becomes more concrete as one begins studying the works cited, not merely superficially or simply scanning pages.

Indeed, studying is a difficult task that requires a systematic critical attitude and intellectual discipline acquired only through practice. This critical attitude is precisely what "banking education" does not engender.<sup>2</sup> Quite the contrary, its focus is fundamentally to kill our curiosity, our inquisitive spirit, and our creativity. A student's discipline becomes a discipline for ingenuity in relation to the text, rather than an essential critique of it.

When readers submit to this ingenuous process, reading becomes purely mechanical and this, among other factors, can explain the readers tuning out on the text and daydreaming about other things. What is required of readers, in essence, is not comprehension of content but memorization. Instead of understanding the text, the challenge becomes its memorization and if readers can do this, they will have responded to the challenge.

In a critical vision, things happen differently: A reader feels challenged by the entire text and the reader's goal is to appropriate its deeper meaning.

Here are some essential criteria for developing a critical posture in the act of study:

(a) *The reader should assume the role of subject of the act.* It's impossible to study seriously if a reader faces a text as though magnetized by the author's word, mesmerized by a magical force; if the reader behaves passively and becomes "domesticated," trying only to memorize the author's ideas; if the reader lets himself or herself be "invaded" by what the author affirms; if the reader is transformed into a "vessel" filled by extracts from an internalized text.

Seriously studying a text calls for an analysis of the study of the one who, through studying, wrote it. It requires an understanding of the sociological-historical conditioning of knowledge. And it requires an understanding of the content under study and of other dimensions of knowledge. Studying is a form of reinventing, re-creating, rewriting; and this is a subject's, not an object's, task. Further, with this approach, a reader cannot separate herself or himself from the text because she or he would be renouncing a critical attitude toward the text.

This critical attitude in studying is the same as that required in dealing with the world (that is, the real world and life in general), an attitude of inward questioning through which increasingly one begins to see the reasons behind facts.

We study more thoroughly the more we strive for a global view and apply this to the text, distinguishing its component dimensions. Re-reading a book to determine these demarcations makes the meaning of its global quality more significant.

In delimiting these central issues that in their interaction constitute the unity of the text, the critical reader will be amazed by the matrix of themes not always explicit in the index of a book. Demarcations of these themes, of course, should also incorporate a subject-reader's frame of reference.

When reading a book, we subject-readers should be receptive to any passage that triggers a deeper reflection on any topic, even if it's not the main subject of the book. Sensing a possible relationship between the read passage and our preoccupation, we as good readers should concentrate on analyzing the text, looking for a connection between the main idea and our own interest. Nonetheless, there is a prerequisite: We must analyze the content of the passage, keeping in mind what comes before and after it, in order not to betray the author's total thinking.

Once we establish the relative point between the passage under study and our own interest, we should make a note of it on a file card with a title that identifies it with the specific study topic. We should take our time pondering this passage since a written text offers us this latitude. Later, we can continue reading, concentrating on whatever other passages invite deeper reflection.

In the final analysis, the serious study of a book, like that of an article, implies not merely critical penetration into its basic content but also penetration into an acute sensibility, a permanent intellectual disquiet, a predisposition to investigation.

(b) *The act of study, in sum, is an attitude toward the world.* Because the act of study is an attitude toward the world, the act of study cannot be reduced to the relationship of reader to book or reader to text.

In fact, a book reflects its author's confrontation with the world. It expresses this confrontation. And even when an author pays no attention to concrete reality, he or she will be expressing his or her own special way of confronting it. Studying is, above all, thinking about experience, and thinking about experience is the best way to think accurately. One who studies should never stop being curious about other people and reality. There are those who ask, those who try to find answers, and those who keep on searching.

Maintaining this curious attitude helps us to be skillfull and to profit from our curiosity. In this way we use what we have already learned in confronting everyday experience and conversation.

Flashes of ideas that often “assault” us as we walk down the street, are, in effect, what Wright Mills calls a file of ideas.<sup>3</sup> These flashes, when filed correctly, are real challenges that we should address. When we transform these flashes into deeper thoughts, they almost always become a means for even deeper reflection while reading a text.

*(c) Studying a specific subject calls for us, whenever possible, to be familiar with a given bibliography, in either a general subject or the area of our ongoing inquiry.*

*(d) The act of study assumes a dialectical relationship between reader and author, whose reflections are found within the themes he treats.*

This dialectic involves the author’s historical-sociological and ideological conditioning, which is usually not the same as that of the reader.

*(e) The act of study demands a sense of modesty.*

If we really assume a modest attitude compatible with a critical attitude, we need not feel foolish when confronted with even great difficulties in trying to discern a deeper meaning from a text. A book isn’t always that easy to understand. Modest and critical, we know that a text can often be beyond our immediate ability to respond because it *is* a challenge.

In this case, what we should recognize is the need to be better equipped, and when we are prepared we should return to the text. Indeed, it won’t help to go on to the next page if the page we are reading isn’t understood. Quite the contrary, we must be committed to unlocking its mysteries. Understanding a text isn’t a gift from someone else. It requires patience and commitment from those who find it problematic.

The act of study should not be measured by the number of pages read in one night or the quantity of books read in a semester.

*To study is not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them.*

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was written in Chile. It served as the introduction to the bibliography which was proposed to the participants of the National Seminar on Education and Agrarian Reform.

<sup>2</sup> On “banking education”, see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>3</sup> Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*.