

Erin Schmidt

Dr. Kort

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“Banking” on Desire

Often when we are so focused on reaching the end, we lack mindfulness and forget the importance of the journey itself. Richard Rodriguez is one of the many who refused to stop and smell the roses in his great pursuit. In his essay, “The Achievement of Desire,” Rodriguez tells the story of his struggle to find his own identity while balancing the demands of school with the values of his Mexican home-life. Due to his great desire to become highly educated, he not only distanced himself from his family, but also lost his sense of spontaneity and creativity. While he eventually became a more passionate, reflective person later on, for most of his schooling he was a mere robot filled with knowledge. If read alongside Paulo Freire’s essay, “The “Banking” Concept of Education,” one could reasonably argue that the style of education Rodriguez grew up with was controlling and heavily influenced his persona. However, given how he approached his education, Rodriguez is mainly to blame, rather than the education system itself, for the sense of loss he experienced for most of his young adult years.

There is evidence to suggest that “Banking” education shaped Rodriguez’s schooling, however it is presented in a subtle manor. Rodriguez mostly reveals the existence of this learning and teaching style through his use of third person to compare himself to the traditional “scholarship boy.” For example, he explains that, “at school, the instruction bids him to trust lonely reason primarily...he is enormously obedient to the

dictates of the world of school” (Rodriguez 340). This connects to how with “Banking” education, students “accept their ignorance” and confide in that “the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing” (Freire 217). Later in the essay as well, he goes on to say that the scholarship boy “is the great mimic; a collector of thoughts, not a thinker” (Rodriguez 352). Scholarship boys such as Rodriguez are victims to “Banking” education as they have been turned, “into “receptacles,” to be “filled” by the teacher” (Freire 216). The strong diction Freire utilizes in his essay, such as when he compares students to be “alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic,” suggests that this style of education is gravely controlling (Freire 217). However, the fact that Rodriguez refers to his experience and feelings in the third-person point of view gives a non-accusatory tone which suggests the school environment itself was not nearly as restraining and responsible for the lack of a “reflective life” he later achieved (Rodriguez 355).

While there is an extensive use of third-person examples, which suggest Rodriguez was not constrained by “Banking” education in the general sense that Freire warns against, Rodriguez does offer his own personal reflection of his relationships with his teachers. He explains for example that he urgently began, “using their diction, trusting their every direction. The very first facts they dispensed, I grasped with awe. Any book they told me to read, I read—then waited for them to tell me which books I enjoyed” (Rodriguez 342). Taken out of cultural context, in Freire’s eyes, Rodriguez would be, to no fault of his own, an “empty mind” and the teacher had been, “regulat[ing] the way the world “enters into” [him]” (Freire 219). It would seem that Rodriguez is not responsible for the way he yields to his teacher’s authority. However, Rodriguez’s case differs from the typical student because he “lack[ed] self-assurance” from the very

beginning (Rodriguez 352). This self-consciousness stemmed from his parents, who had very little education and could not help him with his homework or authentically praise him because they never could understand what “[his] achievements entailed” (Rodriguez 352). Due to his insecurity, he makes the conscious choice to “[rely] on his teacher, [depend] on all that he hears in the classroom” (Rodriguez 352). “Problem-posing” education, in which both students and teachers learn from each other and are considered equals, probably would not have affected Rodriguez. Most likely, he would have submitted to his teachers, regardless of who they were or their teaching methods because they would automatically have more power and academic stature and would provide him with more security than his parents could provide.

Rodriguez’s early attitude, as well as his approach to education further suggests that he would still have been a similar student even if a “problem-posing” style of education had been implemented at his school. When he was scared of reading on his own in Elementary school for example, the nun said he should read because it could “open up whole new worlds,” “open doors,” and “introduce [him] to people and show [him] places [he] never knew existed (Rodriguez 348). In a sense, the nun was encouraging him to read to discover his own humanity. She was presenting him with the problem-posing education goal in which, “people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world” (Freire 224). Rodriguez, however, was not influenced by her words and saw books rather as a way to make him “educated” (Rodriguez 348). He read hundreds of books in his early education, none of which were assigned to him, for the “core purpose” of “memoriz[ing]” their “major idea or theme it contained” (Rodriguez 349). In a way, he was forcing “Banking” education upon himself

because he was the one forcing himself to memorize the information. He never took the initiative himself to critically analyze the text and understand its fuller meaning because he was so focused on fighting “his profound lack of self-confidence” (Rodriguez 351) by “vacuum[ing] books...to fill the hollow within [him] and make [him] feel educated” (Rodriguez 350). Though Rodriguez couldn’t control his home environment that contributed to his self-conscious feelings, he is still responsible for his actions and again made conscious decisions that led him to become “so little of the person” he once was (Rodriguez 351). In some ways, he is like Heinrich Himmler in Susan Griffin’s essay “Our Secret.” Similar to Rodriguez, Himmler had no control over his home environment that contributed to his great insecurity. As well, he couldn’t escape the controlling propaganda of Nazi ideals. Both paths were clearly difficult to come out with a sense of pride and self-confidence. However, their situations did not determine their fates. Himmler chose to become a ruthless killer and Rodriguez chose to become a “scholarship boy.”

Though we will never have complete autonomy of our environment, we will always have the freedom to control how we react and interpret the world around us. While Rodriguez could not avoid the education system that helped to shape his early demeanor, he still had a choice. Yes, the odds were turned against him. The academic and social environments certainly encouraged him to become an uncreative being. However, his actions were deliberate. He is ultimately responsible for the original path he chose as a young scholar.

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