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The Freinet Movement: Past and Present

The centenary of the birth of Célestin Freinet (1896-1966) provides a fitting occasion to remember the principal features of his pedagogy. It is also an appropriate moment to question the myths created by his followers and to resituate Freinet within the European New Education movement ("L'Éducation Nouvelle"). This article first appeared in French preceding a bibliography of recent publications in English, German and French and a list of international contacts.

1. Freinet Techniques

Célestin Freinet was born on October 16, 1896 in Gars, a small French village close to the Italian border. Unable to finance his secondary school studies, Freinet graduated with a school-leaving certificate from a junior high school. With this certificate he could go on to qualify as an elementary school teacher but was not eligible for admission to a university. At the age of 18, however, Freinet was conscripted into the army during the First World War. Within three years he had been seriously wounded at the front. A lengthy convalescence meant that Freinet did not start his career as a teacher until 1921 in Le Bar-sur-Loup, a little village in the coastal Alps near the Mediterranean.

Freinet joined the anarcho-sindicalist teachers' union of the time, where he was an activist in the oppositional group associated with the communist party. It was probably at the urgings of his wife Elise that he became a member of the French Communist Party in 1927.

His publications constitute a radical critique of the traditional public education system. Freinet's approach was not only theoretical and political but also very practical since he integrated his ideas into his daily work in the classroom.

In October 1924 Freinet introduced the technique of **Learning Printing Technique**. This meant that the children used a printing press to reproduce texts that they had composed freely. The pupils wrote down their own personal adventures, the incidents that they had experienced inside and outside the classroom, and so on. Usually these texts were then presented to the class, discussed, corrected and edited by the class as a whole before being finally printed by the children themselves working together. Freinet called this approach **Free Writing** (“Texte libre”). Later these texts would be assembled to create a **Class Journal** (“Livre de vie”) and a **School Newspaper** (“Journal scolaire”).

From 1926 on, the productions of his class, particularly the School Newspapers, were regularly exchanged with other elementary school classes in France, whose teachers were also involved in innovative teaching. Freinet calls this the technique of **School Correspondence** (“Correspondance scolaire”). Later, this correspondence would spread throughout the world.

The French teachers who used Learner Printing and others who were beginning to make and use movies and sound recordings with their classes came together in 1928 and founded the Public Educators’ Co-operative (Coopérative de l’Enseignement Laïc, C.E.L.), soon to be known as “Freinet Pedagogy” or the “Freinet Movement”. From 1932 they edited a magazine “The Proletarian Educator” (*L’Educateur Prolétarien*).

Since the thirties, the Public Educators’ Co-operative has produced booklets based on pupils’ research projects as documents for classroom use by others, because these teachers considered traditional school-books to be old-fashioned, academic and out of touch with reality. This collection of booklets is called the **Working Library** (*Bibliothèque de Travail*) and can be added to the **Class Library** (“Bibliothèque de classe”) along with other documents, files and books.

But Freinet also encouraged children to conduct their own **Field Investigations** (“sortie-enquête”) and research. This meant that his pupils regularly left the classroom in order to observe and to study both their natural environment and their local community. Back in the class, they presented their results, printed out texts, produced a journal and then sent all this material to their counterparts in other schools.

These opportunities for child-centred learning and independent enquiry are organized according to a **Work Schedule** (“Plan de travail”) in which the students set out their plan of work for a certain period. The Work Schedule is discussed and evaluated together with the teacher.

Working Schedule used by the Freinet School in Vence (1960)¹

Nom Pascal Perot Ecole Freinet

PLAN DE TRAVAIL N° 21
de 11 mai au 18 mai

Orthographe								
Grammaire	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	

Calcul mécanique (Fichiers auto-correctifs)	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59
	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67
	68	69	70					

Calcul général Les nombres complexes

Histoire La Convention

Géographie Un grand port: Marseille

Sciences Les insectes

Conférences Mon voyage en Grèce

Dictée

Textes **Lettres**

Lecture

Récitation - Chant

Dessin - Peinture - Musique

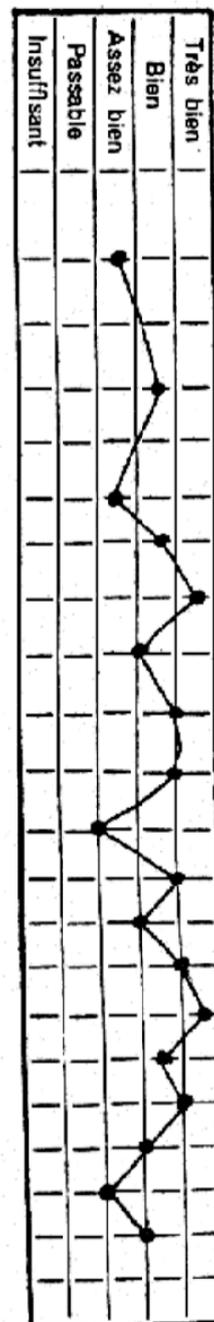
Travail manuel

Imprimerie - Limographe

Ecriture - Soins

Propreté - Ordre

Communauté



L'Institut,
C. Freinet

Les parents,
(voir au dos)
J. Bellin

¹ C. Freinet (1975): *Les techniques Freinet de l'Ecole moderne* (7e édition) Armand Colin, Paris, p. 70.

The Public Educators' Co-operative also initiated **Self-Correcting Files** ("Fichier autocorrectif") including hundreds of worksheets for such fundamental skills as grammar, spelling, math, geography, history, etc. Pupils use these files individually according to their needs and whenever they want to improve their performance.

The overall co-ordination of class activities, and any problems affecting individual children or groups of children are regularly discussed and resolved in the **Classroom Assembly** ("Réunion coopérative", "Conseil") which consists of all the children in the class and the teacher.

Freinet's philosophy of education disturbed the local school authorities of Saint-Paul (his second school) and they tried to have Célestin Freinet moved to another school-district. Freinet refused to be transferred and left the public education system. In 1935 he founded an independent school nearby in Vence. There, Freinet applied and developed his techniques until 1940, when he was sent to an internment camp by the Vichy Government as a political agitator. Later released for compassionate reasons (his weakened state was related to his war wound), he was placed under house arrest in the Alps, where he eventually joined the resistance movement in 1943.

2. The Essential Concepts of Freinet Pedagogy

During his periods of detention at the time of the Second World War Freinet wrote his core works on pedagogy. The most important concepts are the following:

- Pedagogy of Work ("Pédagogie du travail") - meaning that pupils learned by making useful products or providing useful services.
- Co-operative Learning ("Travail coopératif") - based on co-operation in the productive process.
- Enquiry-based Learning ("Tâtonnement expérimental") - trial and error method involving group work.
- The Natural Method ("Methode naturelle") - based on an inductive, global approach.
- Centres of Interest ("Complexe d'intérêt") - based on children's learning interests and curiosity.

Freinet's school reopened in 1945 and his movement underwent a revival culminating in the founding of the **Cooperative Institute of the Modern School** (Institut Coopératif de l'Ecole Moderne - I.C.E.M.) in 1947 whose role is to develop ideas for pedagogical resources and activities. The tasks of the Public Educators' Co-operative were then limited to the production of the actual pedagogical material such as the printing press and accessories, the Self-Correcting Files, the Working Library, etc.

3. The Left Critique of Freinet Pedagogy: 1st Wave

Between 1950 and 1954, Freinet was vigorously attacked by intellectuals of the French Communist Party, who accused him of

- promoting a notion of school based on an outmoded rural ideal,
- downplaying the role of the teacher,
- stressing process rather than content,
- exaggerating the importance of children's spontaneous behaviour thereby reinforcing principles dear to bourgeois individualism.

In other words, the Communists criticized Freinet for creating illusions in teachers' minds, who are being encouraged to believe that they can change the realities of school life in a world dominated by capitalism. Closer scrutiny, however, now suggests that this conflict is better understood as a power struggle between the Freinet Movement and the Communist Party for the allegiance the unionized teachers.

In the 1960s Freinet dwelt mainly on programmed learning and the expansion of his pedagogy to the secondary school level. He died in October 1966 and was buried in the little cemetery of Gars, his birthplace.

4. The Freinet Myth and the Influence of the New Education movement

Freinet educators have subscribed to certain myths about Freinet, some of which were nourished by the accounts of his life written by Elise, his wife and lifelong partner. It is generally believed, for example that Freinet's war wound lay at the root of his efforts to radically change his teaching methods. Since he was unable to keep speaking for very long, he had to invent Co-operative Learning and Child-Centred Techniques.

Some of his followers see him as a pedagogical genius who created all of his techniques out of thin air. The reality, of course is much more complex. Freinet must be seen in the context of the international New Education movement.

Here, for example, are some of the pedagogical practices that were already known before Freinet:

- School printing to reproduce pupil's texts were used by several teachers in the 19th century (Dumas in Paris, 1730; Oberlin in the Vosges c. 1800 and Robin at Cempuis, c. 1900).
- Already in 1921 the Polish pedagogue Janus Korczak was using School Newspaper as an educational tool.

The pedagogical concepts which Freinet referred to and which he studied thoroughly are the following (brief summary):

- The Centres of Interest arose from a critical dispute between the Belgian psychologist Ovide Decroly and the U.S. philosopher John Dewey with his Project Method.
- Freinet's Co-operative Learning techniques were partly inspired by the studies of Ovide Decroly and the Swiss psychologist Edouard Claparède.
- Enquiry-based Learning method was related to the Functional Pedagogy of Edouard Claparède and the Genetic Psychology of Jean Piaget (i.e. the construction of learning through experience).
- The Work Schedule is close to the Dalton-Plan developed by the U.S. teacher Helen Parkhurst.
- Self-Correcting Files came about after an encounter with the Winnetka-method pioneered by U.S. school-inspector Carl Washburne. Indeed, the first math files of the Freinet Movement are an adaptation of Washburne's Self-Correcting math programs.

Freinet's pedagogical theory is not only based on the above mentioned practical techniques, but may also be seen in a larger philosophical and political context still, in the crucible of the New Education movement.

Pedagogy of Work

Freinet's approach to Learning through Work may be contrasted with the concept of the German Georg Kerschensteiner, the Russian Pavel Petrovic Blonskij and the Swiss educator Adolphe Ferrière.

Kerschensteiner wanted to educate working-class children with manual work because he believed that a more abstract approach to learning would not fulfill the socially relevant virtues of behaviour and performance.

While Blonskij tried to integrate school into factories in order to enable children to deal with a modern industrial culture, Ferrière placed greater emphasis on a spiritual approach through which the child's energies should be channelled and nourished.

Freinet's concept of Learning through Work focuses on work as the process of spontaneous re-organization of life in school and society. According to him, work is the basis of every human activity, indeed of the very development of a human being. Therefore productive work is an ongoing principle of teaching and learning. While the children are developing their texts with the techniques of Learner Printing, and producing their journals, exhibitions, and so on, they are in a constant learning process. This concept also distinguishes Freinet from the proponents of creative pedagogy popular in the USA.

Co-operative Learning

Freinet's emphasis on Co-operative Learning was rooted in his own experiences as a founder of agricultural co-operatives. He was also aware of British experiments with school communities. At the same time he participated in debates about the French organization called Central Office of School Co-operatives (Office central de la Coopérative scolaire à l'Ecole), founded by B. Profit in 1923, and which still exists.

Natural Method

The Natural Method is a general learning theory based on the empirical tradition of sensational and associational psychology in the 19th century. It is also influenced by German "Gestalt-Psychologie". This method implies an intuitive and direct perception of the learning object, which activates the basic sensorial functions. Therefore, this deductive procedure allows us to integrate abstract notions. The Natural Method is applied to reading, writing, and basic math. In this context, printing is an appropriate technique for a global as well as an analytical approach to the development of language.

The conclusion is that the real genius of Freinet lies not so much in the creation of the above techniques but in the synthesis and articulation of these

various approaches and procedures. Most of the well-known educators of the New Movement wrote their most influential expository works between 1900 and 1930, and the foundation of their experimental schools dates back to the period before the First World War. Freinet was a late comer to the New Education scene. He founded his own school in 1935 and wrote his core works during the Second World War. However, the scientific epistemologist Thomas Kuhn believes that newcomers like Freinet, often have the opportunity to stimulate paradigm shifts and create new theories.

This may also explain why Freinet is less well-known than the major figures of the New Education Movement. He published his major works at a time when the impetus of New Education was slowing down.

Spécialists of the New Education Paradigm

Born/Died	Name	Ctry	Main Works	Important Moments in Career
1854-1832	G. KERSCHENSTEINER	Ger	1899-1920	Inspector: 1895
1859-1952	J. DEWEY	USA	1900-1916	University professor 1884
1859-1909	F. FERRER	Spain	1900-1912	School founded: 1901
1859-1933	B. OTTO	Ger	1901-1914	School founded: 1906
1860-1923	H. GAUDIG	Ger	1904-1923	University professor: 1923
1861-1925	R. STEINER	Ger	1919-1924	School founded: 1919
1868-1919	H. LIETZ	Ger	1911-1917	School founded: 1898
1870-1961	P. GEHEEB	Ger		Schools founded: 1906-1910
1870-1952	M. MONTESSORI	Italy	1910-1930	Children's house: 1907
1871-1932	O. DECROLY	Belg	1914-1930	Medical Institute: 1901
1873-1940	E. CLAPAREDE	Switz	1909	
1875-1961	G. WYNEKEN	Ger	1913	School founded: 1910
1879-1960	A. FERRIERE	Switz	1920-1928	
1984-1952	P. PETERSEN	Ger	1927	University professor: 1923
1888-1939	A. S. MAKARENKO	USSR	1933-1935	Camp: 1920
1889-1968	C. WASHBURNE	USA	1926-1932	School programs: 1925-30
1896-1966	C. FREINET	Franc	1946-1950	School founded: 1935
		e		
	<u>Specialists of other paradigms</u>			
1904-1990	B. F. SKINNER	USA	1938-1957	
1896-1980	J. PIAGET	Switz	1947-1953	
1879-1962	H. WALLON	Franc	1934-1942	
		e		

A Child-Centred Pedagogy

The New Education has to be seen in the Romantic tradition of the philosophy of education. These educators recommended a return to the origins of childhood which is regarded as “innocent” and full of promise. The effort to adapt the child to modern, industrial society through school is essentially an act of corruption. Only “natural education” offers a way to resolve these problems by introducing community-based activities such as manual labour and craft work. They are considered as more healthy and formative.

Freinet’s pedagogy stands in this tradition when he praises manual work and puts children’s needs and desires above all. This concept stopped him from taking into account the studies on childhood which were realized in the 1920s, such as those discussed in the German review *Zeitschrift für psychoanalytische Pädagogik* (Review of Psychoanalytical Pedagogy). This apparent ignorance of new developments in educational thought led to a severe crisis within the Freinet Movement during the 1960s. On two separate occasions, in 1964 and 1966, Freinet was to expel members of the Paris branch of his movement.

5 Conclusion

Nevertheless, Freinet’s commitment to a radical political philosophy meant that he did not drift into the reactionary tendencies that typified many of his contemporaries inside the New Education movement. From the beginning of his professional life, his main interest always was to improve the social and cultural situation of working-class children. Instead of waiting for a broader revolution he believed that changes are possible in classroom right now.

Nowadays Freinet pedagogy is still a very strong, international movement covering the whole range of school levels from kindergarten to university and adult education. The numerous celebrations of the centenary of Freinet’s birth bear eloquent testimony to the enduring relevance of his pedagogy in today’s troubled times.

Addresses

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18, rue Saracen
F-44000 NANNIES
Tel.: 0033-2.40.89.47.50, Fax: 0033-2.40.47.16.91
- 2° Publications de l'Ecole moderne française (P.E.M.F.)
F-06376 MOUANS-SARTOUX Cedex
Tel.: 0033-4.92.92.17.57, Fax: 0033-4.92.92.18.04
Magazine: *Le Nouvel Educateur*
- 3° Secteur Langues / I.C.E.M.
Département de Langues
Bât. 336
Université de Paris-Sud XI
F-91405 ORSAY Cedex
Tel.: 0033-1.69.15.73.09, Fax: 0033-1.69.15.73.85
Magazine: *Tracer*

Germany

- 4° Pädagogik-Kooperative e.V.
Goebenstr. 8
D-28209 Bremen
Tel.: 0049-421-34.49.29
Magazine: *Fragen und Versuche*
- 5° Arbeitskreis Schuldrückerei
(Deutsche Gruppe der Freinet-Pädagogik in der F.I.M.E.M.)
c/o Eberhard Dettinger
Rathenastr. 21
D-70191 Stuttgart
Tel.: 0711-256.81.82
Magazine: *AKS - Information*

6° Internet

- Website of the French Freinet Movement
<http://www.u-psud.fr/association/icem>
- Website of the International Freinet Movement F.I.M.E.M. (Fédération Internationale du Movement de l'Ecole Moderne):
<http://www.interpc.fr/freinet>

- Website of the French Freinet Movement in Brasilia:
<http://www.rio.com.br/~eric/fre.htm>
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