A Report on PFI Summer Program

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The Focus of the Paulo Freire Institute

The Paulo Freire Institute (PFI) at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) was inaugurated in 2002 to commemorate the legacy of renowned Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Its mission is to build a community of scholars committed to social justice and empowering the oppressed through education.

The main activity of the PFI is the Paulo Freire Institute Summer Program (PFISP), which consists of many workshops and has been taking place every summer for some years now. This last summer the program that was held from July 17 to August 13, and included two formal courses, “Special Topics on Emerging Issues in Sociology of Education” and “Politics & Education and Special Topics in Comparative Education: The Dialectics of the Global and the Local”. There were six main research foci (PFI pillars): popular education, teacher education, immigration, ecopedagogy, race and social justice & education and globalization. The program worked a buffet filled with rich appetizing food for thought, promoting participants to share their diverse backgrounds and expanding their research interests. It was an honor for us as AUC GSE students to be the first students from Egypt to be enrolled into the program.

The PFISP is coordinated and organized by Professor Carlos Torres, current president of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), which is a leading organization in the field of Comparative and International education worldwide.

Professors of diverse educational specializations from all over the world facilitated the different sessions. They were:

- **Dr. Carlos Torres** (Founder and Director, PFI UCLA): Lectures on Globalisations and neoliberalism, world-class universities and global universities, and Paulo Freire.
- **Dr. Pedro Noguero** (New York University): Lecture on Education, the State and its goals.
- **Dr. Marcella Milana** (Aarhus University, Denmark): Lecture on the role of inter-states institutions involved in the governance of education.
- **Dr. Lauren Misiaszek** (Beijing Normal University, China): Lecture on engaged pedagogy and self-actualization
- **Dr. Greg Misiaszek** (Beijing Normal University, China): Lecture on educational models of development as well as ecopedagogy.
- **Dr. Massimiliano Tarozzi** (University of Bologna, Italy): Lectures on social justice multicultural education and teacher education practice.
· **Dr. Penny Jane Burke** (University of Roehampton, London): Lectures on Social Justice in Higher Education: Access, Equity and Participation and gendered inequalities.

· **Dr. Aly Juma** (Director of Happy Land Preschool & Co-founder & Associate Director of PFI, UCLA) Lecture on how to apply Freirian methods in teaching.

· **Dr. Dr. Ana Elvira Steinbach Silva Raposo Torres** (Federal University of Paraiba, Brazil and UCLA) Lecture on heterosexual schools and homosexual families.

· **Dr. Chitra Golestani** (Antioch University & Co-Founder, PFI UCLA): Lectures on how education can be utilized to equip teachers and students with the consciousness not only participate "successfully" in the market economy but to apply their intellect, vision, and talents to become "solutionaries" for positive social change.

· **Dr. Chuen-Min Huang** (National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan): Lecture on Multi-cultural education on Taiwan

### The Strengths of the Program and Our Experience

The single most important feature of the PFISP that makes it relevant to us GSE students who are pursuing the MA in International and Comparative Education lies in the fact that the content material is deeply embedded in the courses we study, such as social foundations of education, introduction to comparative and international education and other courses that deal with educational policy and educational reform. To be clear, these topics are core elements of our Master’s program, and every other optional course that is offered at GSE dwells vastly on the ideas of education for development, educational reform in Egypt and in the MENA region, and issues related to citizenship, democracy and globalization. The PFISP is therefore a very useful reservoir of knowledge and expertise in the topics that are most relevant to our MA in ICE.

Secondly, as already pointed out in the introduction, the PFISP gathers researchers and scholars coming from a very broad array of universities from all over the world, mainly from the USA, Europe and Asia. The diversity and the plurality of experiences that are brought together in this academic endeavor are hard to overestimate, as both facilitators and organizers come from many different countries and are engaged in many more different branches of comparative education.

Besides the facilitators, the encounter with the organizers was also extremely useful to us: since they are all PhD researchers in UCLA, the level of their research work provided us with a high-quality modeling of how world-class research is carried out. It should not be underestimated the well-known fact that UCLA is one of the best-ranking universities in the USA and in the World, and possibly one of the top in terms of multicultural makeup and international outreach.
Thirdly, our group benefitted a lot from the cultural exposure to extra-academic activities. Some of them were provided by the PFISP itself, such as the visit to the Getty Center and the Hammer Museum of modern arts, or the visit to Happy Land Kindergarten, where very young children are educated to a culture of peace. We also had two on-campus workshop on the theatre of the oppressed, which is a model for social engagement and cooperative thinking which was elaborated in Brazil (by Augusto Boal, among others) and which is deeply connected to the experience of Paulo Freire and the tradition of critical pedagogy.

On top of these structured cultural experiences, we all benefited from the exposure to a multi-cultural and culture-rich environment such as the city of Los Angeles, which is well known for its considerable number of museums and cultural sites, as well as its being a kaleidoscope of world cultures and languages.

As a group coming from AUC, we realized that our participation to the program was significantly appreciated both by the organizers and the fellow-participant, mainly because we enriched the program with a wide spectrum of experiences and cultures. The “Egyptian team”, as we were known, was the most diverse, both in terms of nationalities and of professional and academic interests (varying from K-12 to higher education, and from formal to informal education). Also, our participation to debates and collective reflection was largely seen as positive, as we made sure that debates would keep alive, and rich of different points of view (with regard to this, we kept faithful to AUC standards of critical thinking and openness to dialogue and interaction).

At the individual level, we all feel we were enriched from the human and cultural point of view, as the enormous opportunity of crossing cultural and geographical borders has enriched our way of thinking and added some valuable connections with people we would never have thought to meet. Right now, we are keeping in contact with newly-made friends from three different continents, which is a long-term enrichment we cannot underestimate.

As far as the financing of the whole experience is concerned, we all acknowledge that GSE made a wise choice in adopting the philosophy of cost-sharing, which is a strategy which combines higher rates of feasibility with deepest levels of motivation: having substantially contributed to our own expenses, we were all keener in making the best of this one-in-a-lifetime experience.
The Weaknesses and Challenges

On the other hand, there were some weaknesses that we have perceived and actively tried to overcome. The English proficiency of some participants made it challenging for them to be active participants in discussions in class. However, they tried their best to voice their ideas on the online blog. Secondly, some professors mainly lectured with little room for critical reflection and/or discussion. We draw attention to that; and some professors created more space for reflection and/or activities.

Still from the methodological point of view, the online blog discussions could be more efficient. Professors could become active participants by commenting and giving feedback on the threads. Emphasis should be placed on the quality not the quantity of contributions: the effectiveness of the blog as a platform for dialogue was left to the participants’ discretion. As GSE students we felt that one “Theater of the Oppressed” workshop was insufficient. Hence, we requested an additional more in-depth workshop, which was granted and appreciated. One final note is that the composition of students was imbalanced. There was one nationality that outnumbered the rest of the groups; maybe it would be better if the program accepted smaller groups of students from different countries in a more balanced manner.

The Opportunities That Resulted from the Experience

Participating in a course offered at UCLA means to be on an arena where major world universities and institutions are gathered. For AUC and for anyone else, this is like showing up at a privileged appointment. It allows us to come to know people and institutions that are extremely influential in the academic discourses and our interacting with them is a way for us to reach out to the whole world, as our ideas and points of view get a chance to be heard. There is a lot that can be built on the premises of this experience of coming to know other players, and for the good of GSE and AUC at large, we hope that steps are taken so that proper follow up is made.

As a matter of fact, our participation to the PFISP represented an institutional opportunity as well as a personal one. From the institutional point of view, it is clear that participating into the global discourse on educational reform is in line with AUC’s mission and role of think-tank in Egypt and the MENA region at large. Participating into the wider arena of comparative international education is one of the best ways in which AUC can contribute to the development of more meaningful and more humanizing forms of education, which are direly needed in Egypt today. There is a huge need for critical pedagogy and (using Freire’s words) humanizing forms of education, and we need to become more familiar with ways of defining education and development that have turned out extremely beneficial in other developing countries. At the same time though, while it
can be said that Paulo Freire is needed in our region, it is also evident to all comparative educationalist the fact that there are very few avenues for his thought to be accessed and elaborated with depth. UCLA offers such an avenue, and we hope that AUC never misses the chance of keeping this channel open.

By coming to deepen our reflection on themes such as global citizenship, democracy, transformative literacy, environmental education, human rights education and peace pedagogy we are already addressing a vast array of questions that call for AUC to feed this region with ideas and projects for implementation. We can work as a privileged channel for change, and our capability compels us: when it comes to positive transformation, what can be done must be done.

There are different ways in which we can make the best of uses of our experiences at the PFSI: publishing papers, designing programs, giving workshops or creating web-based resources are just some of the possibilities. By being knowledge producers we can both raise AUC rankings and address the social issues that are at stake in the Arab region. Perhaps, this whole reflection might contribute to the outreach strategic vision that AUC and GSE have, which is at the foundation of the professional development program. MA students who come back from an experience of exposure to critical pedagogy could be a valuable resource in the improvement and/or redesign of PED courses. If the PED initiative is meant to promote educational reform from below, the insights provided by the experience of Paulo Freire and the tradition of critical pedagogy ought to be made use more and more in such endeavor, both in terms of methodology (participatory approach to social analysis and training) as well as in terms of content (promoting active citizenship, democracy, human right and environment-sensitive education).

Beside addressing the needs that are proper to our region, our presence in a course like the PFISP is also a way for AUC to fulfil its responsibility to the global academia. Our experience showed to us that there is a lot of interest in what is happening in Egypt and in the MENA region, yet there are few who are knowledgeable in the field. Our presence in UCLA provided a very much appreciated feed-in of insights to the international scholars and researchers. This fits with AUC’s role of representative for Egypt in the global world.

On a more personal level, this program was for each one of us an eye opener for PhD research and research opportunities. We learnt a lot both in terms of research topics
and research methodology, and this should be seen as asset not only to our personal research interests, but also to the quality of research making in GSE and in AUC at large.

**Conclusion**

The PFSI was a very intense and rich academic experience. Not only we believe that it enriched us personally, professionally and academically, but more so we think that it represented an enormously valuable asset to the GSE and to AUC, as it proved to be the kind of reflection and research that is extremely needed in Egypt. By sharing into the consumption of such a rich academic buffet, we think that AUC is fulfilling its role as a beam for innovative research in the field of educational reform, both locally and regionally.

We strongly and wholeheartedly recommend that such an experience (or any other of this same kind) be made possible to other fellow students in the years to come.