When asked to reflect back on your education, do we recall the rewards for correct answers, or the struggle to rediscover something long known? The process of learning requires you to first fail and to then extract knowledge from those failures. By doing so, you become truly human in the process of becoming. That being said, the majority of classrooms do not cater to such an agenda. Were your teachers seen as dictators of material or did they actively learn alongside you? Probably both. We remember with greater clarity those instructors that become a part of the class, transforming the classroom to an environment centered on learning rather than mark. These memories and experiences are what dictate our opinion of the educational system, as we have our own unique preconceptions of how it should work.

Perhaps your experiences in the classroom have given you a distaste for a specific style of teaching or the love of another style. Our preconceptions of how education should be done stem from our experiences inside and outside of a formal learning environment. In “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education” Paulo Freire presents us with a detailed analysis of two common styles of teaching: Banking versus problem-posing. The banking style of education is the most common form and—according to Freire—is detrimental to the growth of a student. Freire defines banking education as, “An act of depositing, in which the students are the depositaries and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues
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Banking education asks students to merely memorize and repeat information given by the instructor. Students are not stimulated in these classrooms and do not create knowledge. Students create knowledge when they discover for themselves. The most effective learning occurs when a student is given the opportunity to rediscover a great concept. In these moments, students are truly liberated. Freire defines this as problem-posing education when: “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (8). Freire’s “problem-posing” style of education has teachers participate in the learning process directly alongside the students. The teacher is there to present the door and facilitate academic success as the student experiences the process. In other words, the teacher encourages the students to seek knowledge but also allows the students to reach significant conclusions on their own.

The joint learning dynamic between teacher and student allows for the learning process to truly occur and these are the classrooms we most vividly remember. We leave these classrooms with an understanding of the world and our place in it, with the knowledge that we are evolving. Freire explains this to us as the process of becoming: “Problem-posing education affirms men as beings in the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality… Problem-posing education roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary” (11). This idea of education as a never-ending journey where we recognize ourselves as constantly evolving, gaining knowledge, and changing is an extension of existentialism. Existentialism is a philosophy that says existence precedes essence. The meaning of this definition is outlined by Sartre in his essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism”: “Man first of
all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world— and defines himself afterwards. If man as
the existentialist sees himself as not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will
not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (349). Sartre stresses
the value of humanism in existentialism as we—as beings in the process of becoming— make our
own decisions and create our own reality, thus become what we have chosen to create. Freire’s
ideas about education are very much in line with an existentialist point of view in that the
successfully educated are we who understand that education is infinite and constantly occurring.
This realization brings a sense of liberating freedom joint with great responsibility.

The liberation brought about by problem-posing education attaches a responsibility that
cannot be escaped and as we become educated, we obtain the ability to create a reality which we
are solely responsible for. Freire claims that problem-posing education, “Enables men to
overcome their false perception of reality. The world—no longer something to be described with
deceptive words— becomes the object of that transforming action by men which results in their
humanization” (12). This process of humanization occurs not only through problem-posing
education, but through the desire to become educated and to gain knowledge as the ultimate goal
of education is to liberate oneself from a society designed to simply make us productive rather
than our own legislators. By experiencing this process of becoming— human—we are able to
create the world in our vision as we now exist. As an existentialist, Sartre recognizes that man
has a responsibility once they exist: “Every man, without any support or help whatever, is
condemned at every instant to invent man. As Ponge has written in a very fine article, ‘Man is
the future of man.’ That is exactly true” (353-354). The existentialist believes that man is
responsible for everything that man becomes, thus meaning that we are the only ones responsible
for our reality from the moment we exist. As it is our responsibility to invent ourselves, excuses cannot and do not exist. We are responsible for our own evolution.

While Freire’s essay identifies a fault in many classrooms and presents an effective and ideal solution to banking education, he fails to mention success for individuals without access to problem-posing education. Influential scholars throughout the centuries have not had this method of education available to them and they prevailed regardless because of their desire to become educated and their knowledge of their responsibility as men. Amongst those who accepted no excuse are Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X as both Douglass and X pioneered their own education as seen in their essays, “Learning to Read and Write,” and, “Learning to Read”. Both of these authors were inhibited from any form of education but realized their responsibility to seek educated regardless. Malcolm X would find his education in a prison cell where he chose to dedicate his life to reading and the pursuit of knowledge and ability to understand the world, “I don’t think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did. In fact, prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college” (X 24). X is able to become educated by his own means and actions without the use of a teacher or system of structure. A related process of humanization is referred to by Freire: “Men develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process” (10). This is the sense of achievement experienced by X through his self-education in prison. In Freire’s essay, we are left with much more than a description of two styles of educating: We are brought to understand the overall goal of problem-posing education as a dynamic learning process where men recognize themselves as unfinished.
As we recognize ourselves as unfinished, we come to understand that the greatest tool in the creation of knowledge is the desire to become educated. This desire allows us—at any disadvantage—to surpass the boundaries of society and to succeed in becoming educated.

Sartre’s philosophy of humanist existentialism highlights this desire:

This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realization, that man can realize himself as truly human. (369)

Freire believes that the mark of a successful education is a feeling of liberation. While Freire establishes how this occurs in problem-posing education, he fails to recognize liberation outside his system. As a philosophy, existentialist humanism brings about this realization that we have the ability to rise beyond social limitations and achieve liberation. This philosophy is however in opposition of Freire’s problem-posing style of education where the student requires a teacher, while it is the view of the existentialist that we have the ability to liberate ourselves. Men have historically—without the philosophy of existentialism—proven this to be true with their unique journeys. The journey of Frederick Douglass was that of a poor slave boy who would become a scholar through his own will and perseverance as told in, “Learning to Read and Write”. Douglass would be fortunate enough to be taught the alphabet from his mistress but just as equally unfortunate when the lessons ceased at the command of his master. At this moment however, Douglass was eager to continue his education:

If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book at was at once called give an account of myself. All this, however, was too
late… Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell. (Douglass 10)

From the existential point of view, Douglass had existed in his world and had now found essence, for he had been given his first taste of what it meant to be truly human. Much like Malcolm X, Douglass had realized the freedom granted by reading and writing and understood his responsibility to change his reality and ultimately join the abolitionist movement. It is this sense of responsibility that demonstrates the ability of an individual to surpass disadvantages and we realize that we create our reality. Paulo Freire had stated that students subject to banking education had the potential to succeed to a slight degree, but never acknowledged that those without problem-posing education may still reach liberation by their own means.

The process of becoming liberated through education stems from our desire to become truly human. Paulo Freire would have that society as a whole gain access to problem-posing education rather than resort to the means of Douglass and X, but in order to uniquely create knowledge, that individual desire and sense of responsibility must exist. It is the desire to become educated as we recognize ourselves as unfinished in a dynamic reality where we—as men—dictate that reality. We can see that the philosophy of existentialism houses powerful motives for self-sufficiency that are not limited to the classroom, but expand to the world as a whole while banking education would “alienate human beings from their own decision-making, changing them into objects” (Freire 11). Banking education strips men and women of their humanity by denying them this right of inquiry and the denying them the process to create knowledge.

In the reality that has been created by men—according to Sartre—we have failed to make a system of education about becoming, and thus have only the ability to rely on ourselves
for the process of *becoming*. Upon becoming human we can know that we truly exist in the
world as more than a productive member of society, but as a creator of man. When our lives gain
*essence* we inherit a responsibility to create a reality that we desire. Through this responsibility
we are condemned with freedom, for *we* are responsible for all that becomes reality.
Works Cited


