

Revisioning and Using Popular Education

Popular education is a political, collective learning process based on facilitated dialogue that places the learners' voices and lived experiences at the heart of the learning, weaving in a deeper analysis of power to sharpen critical thinking and link to organized community action. This process, called "critical consciousness-raising," aims to tap into and build upon people's understanding of their world, their sense of self and profound connection to others, and their desire for and ability to affect change. It can be a powerful process for leadership development, organizing and movement-building because it combines critical thinking, visioning, self-empowerment, relationship-building, action, and, when done well, hope and energy.

"Popular education" was originally developed by a Brazilian activist-scholar named Paulo Freire who believed that poverty and oppression were rooted in unequal power structures. In the 1950s and 60s, while working with peasants and poor workers, Freire was struck by how inequality was internalized by socialization, making people feel inferior and powerless. He recognized how knowledge is used to reinforce people's sense of dependence on outsiders for solutions, and how traditional education made people conform rather than challenge the status quo. This realization led Freire to place great importance on creating an empowering educational process tied closely to political organizing and action that helped people develop a critical awareness of their community and society and gain a sense of their collective power for creating change.

Popular education has been widely critiqued and adapted over the years by activists and scholars worldwide. It has spawned a myriad of participatory and interactive learning methods used for many different purposes causing some degree of confusion and debate around its use and value for social justice work. In some instances, popular education has been reduced to a set of interactive learning techniques for fun learning devoid of the raw realities of inequality and conflict, and lacking any connection to a transformative political strategy. In other cases, popular education has been interpreted as an approach for making complex information simple and easy to learn, assuming – often incorrectly -- that information alone will motivate action. There are still other examples where popular education methods have been used to manipulate people ideologically and personally.

In recent years, a desire for more effective ways to build the voice and power of increasingly marginalized communities in the face of ever-more unequal and unjust local to global dynamics has led to a rediscovery and rethinking of popular education as a potentially transformative process for people-centered change.

Freire spoke about popular education as a participatory process of action-reflection-action. The basic process of dialogue, self-awareness and organizing involves problem identification (what's the problem or situation and how does it affect us?), root cause analysis (why is this happening?),

and the pursuit of solutions through collective action. Some of the key principles of popular education described below.¹

The Political Nature of Education

No education is neutral. *How* we learn is linked to *what* we learn. Education can mold people to conform to their social roles and the status quo or it can encourage independent, critical thinking and a desire for change. This is what Freire referred to as “liberation education”. A learning process that validates what people already know from experience yet challenges them to examine their preconceived notions more deeply through new ideas and information, can empower them to think critically and collectively about the inequality and injustice they suffer, seek out information, and act together with others to make a difference.

Start from People’s Experience

People absorb and act on information that is directly related to their daily lives. While many people often assume that “good” information or messages alone will motivate people to act, this is rarely true. People often lack vital information to help them understand and address the problems they experience. That kind of information is rarely gained from a well-framed message or other kinds of top-down communication. In fact, beginning a learning process with facts and analysis, disconnected from peoples’ local realities, concerns and lived experience can sometimes be disempowering and reinforce the paralyzing myth that only experts know what’s “right” for poor communities. Thus, one of the important skills of a popular educator is knowing how and when to weave in new information and ideas into the learning process, and how to engage communities in finding additional facts and analysis themselves.

Linked to Concrete Problem-Solving and Action

Beyond the importance of relevance, adults often learn faster when the information they gain addresses the problems they face directly. By beginning a learning process that affirms personal and community knowledge, popular education can give people confidence in their creative ability to change things and open them to new ideas and experiences. Integrating some form of action in the process – a small or large step toward problem-solving – is vital to sustaining the growth and change initiated by reflection and analysis and building leadership and organizing skills. The action can be as small as seeking out information from an official source or attending a community meeting and over time, potentially larger. The action itself is a learning experience that should be integrated into continuing reflection and analysis over time.

Dialogue and Mutual Learning

By promoting a more equal educator/learner relationship, dialogue involves joint discovery and helps learners to gain confidence in their own ability to sort things out. It also enables people to see that they are not alone, or “to blame” for their predicament and opens them up to a deeper analysis of the social forces shaping injustice. While the educator/learner relationship is more equal, the facilitator plays an important and distinct role in guiding analysis and questioning, and

¹ Adapted from *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*, VeneKlasen, Lisa with Valerie Miller, World Neighbors, Oklahoma: 2002.

creating a safe, structured space that allows people to go beyond their comfort zone and probe prejudices and difficult questions about power.

Recognizes Differences among People While Seeking Common Ground

The same power imbalances that generate conflict in society are present in groups brought together to learn, plan, and act. Surfacing, naming and understanding how socialization around race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, etc. underpin the personal and political structures shaping inequality is a vital element of empowerment, and must be handled carefully. This approach contrasts with the tendency to see disadvantaged “communities” as homogenous, and to ignore or smooth over the power differences between educators/organizers and “the community.” To ensure that everyone is engaged in the process, facilitators may need to wait through silence to give space for those who are less confident in public settings. Finding common ground with respect for differences does not mean consensus. Instead, it is important to create space to surface and deal constructively with conflict, including respect for disagreement. In this way, the popular education process seeks to create the experience and practice of inclusive, participatory democracy to develop new kinds of leaders and ideals.

Problem-posing and Open-ended Learning for Critical Thinking

One of the facilitator’s roles is to ask questions that assist learners to examine their own situation more closely and deepen their understanding of the different forms of power they face and perpetuate. The facilitator also introduces new ideas and information to supplement and broaden the analysis and, by so doing, strengthens critical thinking skills and strategies for change.

An Iterative, Structured Process without Predictable Steps and Outcomes

Although participatory learning methods use a certain techniques, the process is not linear. Because the facilitator cannot anticipate how learners will think and interact, he or she must listen carefully and engage in the process as it unfolds. There are no mechanical formulas for developing an inclusive, empowering education process by encouraging dialogue and debate although the steps below help to ensure that people and their experience are the starting point, and that action is always part of the learning and leadership development process.

Moves from the Concrete to the Abstract and Back

Traditional education, especially at higher levels, usually begins with theory and then tests the theory against reality. When educators start with a concept, they can derail the empowering effect of analyzing and discovering things for oneself. At the same time, new ideas and information – handled well – are vital to enable leaders and communities to develop and self-organize with a long-term agenda for change.

Head and Heart

People are energized and transformed by experiences that tap into how they feel as much as how they think. Learning processes need to integrate moments for dreaming, laughter and sadness into the reflection and analysis to respond to and reinforce people’s whole being and sense of community. This is why songs, drawing, poetry and personal sharing are vital. However, to avoid becoming solely a “feel good” personal experience – which is a real risk of many consciousness-raising approaches -- it is critical that these forms of learning and connecting are combined with analysis and strategizing.

The Dialogue Process

Some educators refer to this problem-posing in participatory learning as the “but why?” method. The facilitator’s questions encourage learners to ask *what* their situation looks like and *why* problems exist in order to probe the social, economic, cultural, political and historical roots of injustice. As this questioning evolves over time (beyond one single workshop!), the facilitator helps name power dynamics with the introduction of new language, ideas and information.

Stimulating discussion with adults who are not used to speaking up in public can be difficult. Even people who are more comfortable speaking may not have much experience with critical questioning. The problems people face may be so threatening or emotional – especially when they involve loss and a sense of failure -- that they find it impossible to talk about them. For this reason, it may be helpful to begin discussion with relevant examples, in the form of skits, stories or movies, rather than asking directly about problems. Some distance allows people to get comfortable with a topic before they can relate the analysis to their own lives more easily. These examples are called “codes” in popular education.

Codes: Opening Discussion on Tough Problems

A “code” can be a drawing, role play, game, skit, song, or story that presents a familiar problem in a concrete way without providing explanations, answers, or morals. It simply depicts a familiar situation that then becomes the focus of dialogue and analysis. A code is especially helpful for dealing with personally sensitive problems such as rape, domestic violence and other crimes, and HIV/AIDS. The development of a suitable code by an outside educator requires observation and consultation. Often, learners themselves are the best code-creators. They can be asked to invent a skit or role play to illustrate the problem on the spot. This can get people directly involved from the beginning and brings the heart and often, humor, into the process immediately.

Discussing Codes

The steps listed below can help facilitators to guide dialogue around codes. They do not always follow a predictable sequence. Rather, the facilitator is responsible for guiding the spiraling process that takes people from the personal to the concrete to the abstract and back again, and from connection to description to analysis to action.

Steps in the Dialogue Process

Introductory Step: Self-Analysis and Affirmation

Dialogue requires confidence, ease and trust-building between people. If participants have not developed a sense of group solidarity, encourage them to introduce themselves and get to know each other. Responding to questions like “What inspires me?” or “What are my hopes for myself, my family, my community?” or “One thing that changed me forever!” can affirm the importance of everyone’s contribution and begin to build connections. The idea of beginning the dialogue process with personal affirmation was added to Freire’s original methodology by

activists working with women. This is an important step because the personal is at the core of our values and self-esteem, and is central to the way we learn and interact with the world.

Step 1: What is happening? What does it look like? (skit, code, etc.)

Ask participants to either create a skit or drawing about a problem they face in their community (or the issue your group is working on if it's relevant) or present a story that depicts a familiar situation. Then, encourage participants to carefully describe what is happening in the story or skit—something that may be a daily occurrence for them. Often more schooled people use shorthand terminology to describe situations, such as “gender violence” or “conflict” or “immigration rights.” This step in the dialogue process tries to avoid this kind of abstraction by enabling people to talk about the concrete details of injustice. Often, performing a skit to illustrate a situation is the most effective way for people to reflect on the complex details of inequality. This is also when people recognize how much they have in common with others and begin to link individual to collective awareness.

Step 2: First Analysis—Why is this happening?

Begin to ask why people are doing what they are doing in the picture or skit, or simply, why this particular problem exists. Keep asking why so that participants question as well as describe. A skit or story can be especially helpful because people may feel more comfortable probing a situation that is slightly removed from their own lives. It is useful for the facilitator to know enough about the issue to be able to formulate questions that help people analyze and challenge myths, stereotypes, prejudices, etc. This is just the beginning of the analysis process.

Step 3: Real Life Comparison—Does this happen in your community? In your life?

Encourage people to give examples of how the situation described happens in their lives so that they can feel and think more deeply about it. Often, this step in the process unearths anger or other negative emotions that can be challenging but also constructive for the learning process.

Step 4: Related Problems—What problems does this lead to?

This step looks at the consequences of the problem. Again in this step, the facilitator can provide additional information to supplement what participants contribute to offer a broader analysis.

Step 5: Deeper Analysis—What are the root causes of these problems?

This step encourages learners to probe more deeply into the roots causes shaping a problem. Why does this happen? It's critical at this stage to look at how power and interests shape the structures of society as well as socialization and ideology. In exploring these invisible power dynamics, the question is how each one of us perpetuates a problem and conversely, resists it.

Tips for Popular Educators & Facilitators

- If you're not from the community or group you're working with, be sure to take time to get to know them through research, conversation and observation. In the learning process, use familiar examples to stimulate discussion and build trust.
- Political analysis involves making connections between the past and the present as well as examining how privilege, power, and disadvantage mold reality today. Remembering history can remind us how power is dynamic and people have always pushed back and made a difference.
- Give people ample time to discuss a thorny topic with each other. A participant, rather than the facilitator, can sometimes more easily challenge misinformation or stereotypes.

Once learners have had sufficient time, the facilitator can expand with additional information and challenge simplistic explanations and prejudices.

Step 6: Alternatives and Action—What can we do about it?

Linking education to action is essential for empowerment and social change. How will people use their new knowledge to alter their situation? In this step, information about policies, law reform, budgets, and basic rights can assist people in defining what they can do. This moment in the process builds on people’s own experiences of resistance to build collective responses: “What can we do to address this problem here in our community?” and “What are the political, policy and institutional ways to begin getting the resources or rights the system should provide?” Local solutions, such as setting up community meeting or monitoring which schools have books and toilets, are an important piece of larger solutions at the national or international levels. This step can serve as an initial brainstorming for a group that then can lead to further analysis and organizing. Information about human rights can be both enlightening and a powerful tool for defining change strategies.

Notes on Being a Popular Educator

Popular education originally envisioned the role of the facilitator as creating a process where learners could affirm their own knowledge, analyze problems and discover answers for themselves. The facilitator was discouraged from intervening or using their knowledge to direct the process.

Political organizing and movement-building changes this role. Given the vast amount of disinformation, misinformation and prejudice that all of us absorb daily, a facilitator does much more than facilitate. He/she is part of the process, not a supposed objective outsider. In this central role, he or she has to recognize and deal with power imbalances between him/herself and the participants among other realities. For example, the facilitator often has access to information and ideas that others may be lacking, and it’s to question perspectives that are based on poor information and stereotypes. The challenge is *how* and *when* to offer *what kinds* of additional information and ideas so as not to derail an empowering process that affirms what people have lived and know from experience. Facilitators need to use information and encourage people to search for information that promotes critical thinking and an alternative vision. In the context of fast-paced globalization, gathering accurate information becomes both easier and more difficult. While the internet offers endless facts, analysis and sources, sorting through these for accurate, digestible, and relevant nuggets can be difficult. In this age of the technical fix, don’t forget out ideas as the sources of inspiration – concepts like racism, feminism, democracy, citizenship, and oppression among others must be explored and debated for value-centered alternatives to emerge.

Another crucial responsibility of a popular educator involves recognizing difference among the participants, and creating a process where understanding those differences becomes part of the learning process in search of mutual respect and constructive ways of dealing with real conflict.

Finding common ground in a way that acknowledges and negotiates differences is central to building strong organizations and movements for change.

Critical Consciousness

Developing critical consciousness is the central goal of popular education. It is believed that critical consciousness sustains people’s active involvement and capacity to self-organize in response to injustice.

Gaining a critical political awareness is about learning to question and challenge the explanations for why things are the way they are and what is “normal” – perpetually seeking a deeper understanding of power and inequality from the personal to public realm. A group of rights’ activists from Latin America developed the following chart in an effort unravel and be more sensitive to the complexities of consciousness-raising in their work.

Levels of Consciousness		
From <i>Passive</i> to <i>Questioning</i> Consciousness	From <i>Questioning</i> to <i>Analytical</i> Consciousness	From <i>Analytical</i> to <i>Active</i> <i>Critical</i> Consciousness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You assume class status, race dynamics and gender roles-duties are "natural" You believe you are to blame for poverty, economic and social problems You are not familiar with other perspectives about what’s wrong and why; if you are, you find them threatening and you criticize them You begin to have access to information and experiences different from what is familiar to you You begin to question aspects of your life and to search for answers to your problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You begin to name and analyze situations that you have lived You begin to confront and place blame; you feel angry You begin to discover how your predicament as a worker, mother, young man, (race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.) is a social, cultural, economic and political construction; not a predetermined role incapable of change You reaffirm your self-worth and potential for change You connect with others who share similar problems and interests to explore how to resist and change things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You develop your critical analysis, question yourself and your world; you seek out more information to explain things You begin to be a more active part of a group or community You take political actions You face the interpersonal and social conflict that your changes and political view generate You create spaces to negotiate fundamental areas of life - work home, family, and related changes You become increasingly involved in organizing for political change

This chart may be helpful for educators, but it’s important to remember that political awareness is a messy, lifelong project – far from the neat boxes above. In reality, all of us have different levels of consciousness about different aspects of our lives and our world simultaneously and there is no absolute political “nirvana”. The key is to keep questioning and taking action.