

Education is freedom: popular education

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“Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”

Paulo Freire

Changing the story

We all have an understanding of what life is about, what we are able to achieve, what it means to be human. Similarly, every human society is built around a particular story, or narrative. If we don’t change these stories, then humanity’s legacy will be of dominant behaviours that uphold structures of domination, which will then continue to affirm that there is no alternative to the current systems of oppression. For the story to change, we must intervene in how and where it is made, and the best place to challenge the old stories? and to create new ones – is at the individual and community level.

The core of popular education is the development of **critical consciousness** and **creativity**. Popular education was developed from Paulo Freire’s radically different approach to adult education, which helped people ‘to read their reality and write their own history’, and motivated them to action that transformed their life situation – popular education helped them create a new story. When he developed his ideas, Freire was an active educator in marginalised and poor townships across Brazil, where – as in most of Latin American – literacy was a requirement in order to vote and people wanted to challenge the many dictatorships across the continent.

Popular education has nourished social movements all over the world; the Centre for Human Ecology, So We Stand, Abahlali – the South African

Nonviolence

Violence
Nonviolence and power

Strategy

Theories of change
Constructive programme
Mobilising for change: building power in Nepal

Nonviolent actions

Working in groups

Training

River of life – gender lens
Spectrum game
Forum Theatre
Power flower

Strategy

Popular Education is a learning process that:

- begins with the standpoint of the oppressed;
- is inclusive;
- is accessible to people of all educational levels;
- addresses issues people face in their communities;
- supports people moving towards action/nonviolent social change;
- is based on the experiences of those participating in the learning; and
- integrates non-traditional methods of learning.

(From the Voluntown Peace Trust)

Shackdwellers Movement, Centre for Youth Resources Foundation Network (Cryogenic), Mamelani, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) are just some examples of movements that have used popular education to mobilise their communities.

For Freire, popular education is rooted in generative themes. Generative themes are best thought of as powerful images or stories that impact the daily lives of people in a community. Critical consciousness is the product of a process where generative themes are recognised and analysed by members of a community. Exploring these themes speaks to people, allows them to understand their context, and helps end ‘a culture of silence.’

Freire thought those at the grassroots were marginalised by power and profit; it is easy to internalise negative images of ourselves, propagated by the oppressor, but doing this means we become our own worst enemies. If we don’t understand the generative themes in our communities struggles then cultures of silence will continue, and we will become ‘ventriloquists of power’. This means we end up repeating what we are told about ourselves, blaming each other for societies’ ills, instead of challenging the power holders or oppressors.

Banking education

Banking education is the opposite of popular education. Freire uses the term ‘banking education’ to describe the traditional education system; the concept illustrates students as ‘empty containers’ with no capacity for critical thinking, just waiting for educators, who will deposit knowledge into them. For popular education practitioners, ‘banking education’ reinforces systems of oppression and should always be avoided.

An important foundation of popular education is that the ‘students’ already carry all of the knowledge they need; the teacher is simply a facilitator in harnessing this knowledge and experience. This is why tools like the education spiral is useful (see ‘the spiral model’ sidebar for more information); they encourage us to always begin with the experience and knowledge of participants, for it is in understanding the patterns and generative themes within such knowledge and experience that people can begin to understand and respond to the world they live in.

Adult education – the working toward common goals of improving the methods and materials of adult learning, extending the opportunities for adults to learn, and advancing the general level of our culture – becomes popular education when it begins to work for radical transformation. Popular education should get to the root of societies pathologies.

Conscientisation

At the heart of this journey to critical consciousness is **conscientisation** – which helps to build a culture of self-determination among those isolated and affected by inequality. ‘Conscientisation’ refers to a critical positioning (action) in the face of a reality, understood from a continuous process of reflection and questioning (conscience). Conscientisation programmes use different methods

The spiral model

The spiral model encourages us to make sure that our workshops and activities always begin with the experience and knowledge of the participants, ensuring that we do not become reliant on models similar to 'banking education'. The spiral model can be used to create participatory educational processes that are rooted in the experience of the learners, and combines collective analysis to



develop strategies for action for positive change. The spiral is not a one-time journey; as the group develops and grows, facilitators can take the group through multiple turns of the spiral – the fifth stage ('apply what's been learned in the world') can follow back into the first ('start with the experience and knowledge of the participants').

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to engage simultaneously with the 'head' (intellectual arguments), the 'heart' (emotional engagement) and the 'hand' (the action-oriented potential) to create transformation. The tools on p76 can all be used to address the head, heart and hand in workshops or training.

"When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus or resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture."

bell hooks

Education is political

Steve Biko's practice of popular education resonates with this process of conscientisation. He says

"Key to Friere's methodology is the recognition that teaching should be a political act directly related to production, health, social conditions... to be able to submerge themselves in the context of the learners' life experience, primarily to be able to listen while encouraging learners to unveil and 'unpackage their lives and problems.'"

Alternative education and health programmes are therefore imperative for our survival. To bring these to life we must understand the dominant values, beliefs, and myths of our society, which means critical questioning and the necessary action to combat structural and cultural violence (see 'violence', p27). This questioning to discover the 'possibility of all possibilities' leads to emancipation, as Freire states, 'human beings must become active agents in their own history and their own models of development'.

The skills within popular education – of deep listening, unpacking power, overcoming fear, generating love, celebrating our powers, truth-telling, and creating alternatives to obedience – all provide avenues on the road to freedom and collaboration.

Tools used in popular education

There are many popular education tools which utilise the 'head, heart, hand' approach, and which help us to reflect and act on the world around us. First we start with the 'head' – knowledge and the experience of the participants to identify patterns. This adds new information and theory. Moving on to the 'heart', we explore what people's emotional reactions are; how do they feel about their experience of the world? This leads to the 'hand' – practising skills and planning for action to apply what's been learned in the world. The exercises below can all incorporate different degrees of 'head', 'heart' and 'hand'.

The spectrum

(For a full description of using spectrums and cross spectrums to analyse a situation, see p215.)

A spectrum exercise uses examples to generate 'critical thought' on violence and oppression that surrounds us, and ideas of how we can change these. Spectrums help a group get a sense of the complexity of an issue or problem, and the breadth of feeling towards it.

The river of life

(For a more thorough description of how to put the 'river of life' into practise, and how it can be used to explore experiences of gender, see p22)

We can build dialogue and understand about how we became conscious about the need for change in our communities by drawing our lives as a river. Bridges can symbolise people who have helped us cross hard times, rapids when time has been stressful, tributaries or streams when we have had choices to make about what direction to go in. This helps us to gather, from our own lives, an understanding of the deep psychological blocks in people who have been affected by injustice. What has brought us to how we look at the world? What has shaped and influenced our world-view?

The wheel of fundamental human needs

'The 'wheel of fundamental human needs' is a framework that can be used at different levels – from grassroots to national policy making – as a tool for

raising awareness and developing a common vision of the type of society we wish to create. The wheel helps us to analyse how we ensure that all of the various needs of our community are being met, and whether some are being met at the expense of others.

The wheel also shows how no one problem can be dealt with in isolation from another. A common sense of vision and purpose can help to gather the energies of a community, helping them to focus on a proactive process of development, and not merely a reactive responses to one crisis after another.

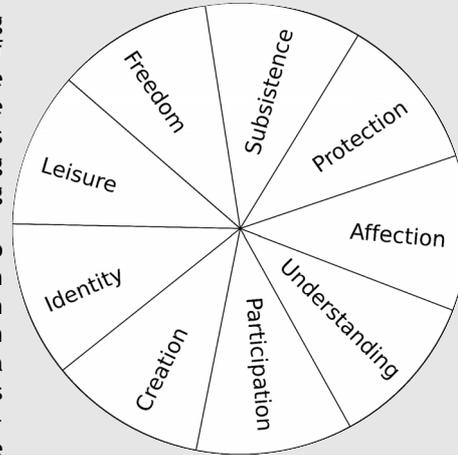
The wheel can be used to diagnose the most pressing needs of a local community or of wider society, and provide a foundation from which to start planning a holistic, integrated development programme or campaign. It can show the destructive ways in which a society attempts to satisfy a particular need, or blocks the satisfaction of several other needs. We can also use the wheel of fundamental human needs to analyse the participants needs in their community struggle and how that has changed over time.

One useful way of using the wheel is to split each segment in half. For each 'need', participants use one half to draw a line, which symbolises how well they feel a particular need is being met for them. On the other half, they draw another line, to illustrate to what degree the previous generation would feel each need has been met. Use the results to help 'diagnose' the problems the community faces, how they have changed over time and how it can meet it's needs.

Listening surveys

By looking at the local environment around us, we will begin to understand how to deeply question the racial, social, economic and environmental injustice around us and organise for new alternatives. 'Listening surveys' help us to lift the spirits of our communities and reach new levels of empowerment and consciousness. Through exploring how to meet our communities 'fundamental human needs' we will understand how we can build self-reliant responses to all forms of injustice. These conversations will ignite an understanding of how sharing our lived experiences and visions for justice is powerful. We will understand how these conversations can ensure action against oppression that has a deep and long term commitment to social justice, with a strong sense of responsibility and accountability to the communities whom we serve.

For more information, see <http://www.listeningproject.info/>



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