

Popular Education

Building a Bridge Between Social Action and Public Policy

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to begin an exploration of the relationship between popular education, or education for social change, and public policy, the means by which social change can be institutionalized. The report relies heavily on the experience of the authors, who have considered this problem in their own work, as well as on the experience and knowledge of others engaged in education for social change.

What is a Popular Educator?

This report remains a preliminary exploration. Popular education is a diverse practice that offers many debates and may be practiced by those who do not call it popular education. The field includes self-conscious practitioners, such as Paulo Freire, who call their work popular education and themselves popular educators and have developed particular methodologies and practices. There are also organic practitioners who may not call themselves educators or see their work as education, yet have built entire movements which have dramatically altered public policy by bringing together people in struggle to share their experiences and democratically build collective solutions. They learn from each other, research and find resources about what they need to know, and reach out to learn from and teach others who are like themselves. There are also policy advocates who are deeply committed to democracy and who practice grassroots educational approaches to change, yet do not call themselves popular educators. It is not the

intention of the author to limit, but to rather broaden the definition of popular education, in order to include all of these practitioners.

Who Frames the Question?

There are distinct differences between the way in which traditional policy professionals and popular educators frame the questions which constitute the starting point of their work. The story below illustrates how a group of municipal workers framed a question that led them to press for their employer, the City of Santa Fe Springs, to enact policies to protect their health.

Here is how the workers and their union posed the question:

The residue from the Powerine oil refinery next to the Santa Fe Springs maintenance yard where we worked would land on our cars and damage the paint. So, the oil refinery gave us coupons to get our cars washed for free at any of the local car washes and would even sometimes touch up the paint. We were at the funeral of one of the retirees from the Santa Fe Springs maintenance yard. It was the fourth one this year out of six guys that had retired. They had all died of cancer. We started talking and wanted to know what the residue was doing to our health.”¹

Under pressure, the City agreed to do a study, but turned the question away from the workers’ health:

“ The City asked that the study look at all the emissions from all of the plants within a certain radius of the yard. Of course the results were ‘inconclusive’...Eventually the guy from Powerine who used to get our cars washed for free died of cancer, too.”

In the above case, refusing to be diverted from *their* question, the workers continued their own discussions about the issues; found their own resources for research²; conducted their own

¹ Porras, Carlos. Discussion at Highlander Center. New Market, Tennessee. June 29, 1996.

² In this case faculty and students from UCLA’s Urban Planning Department.

study; and analyzed alternative ways in which they could protect themselves. The results of their collective process of inquiry, analysis, and action led to new health and safety contract language, fence line monitoring of emissions from Powerine, and a workforce that was more conscious of health risks and their rights.

Sustaining People to Sustain Movements

When disenfranchised people challenge public policies that hurt them, they take risks that most policy-makers and traditional educators do not, and the greatest risks are taken by ordinary people who begin to do extraordinary things. For example, when Carlos Porras, the President of the Santa Fe Springs Employees Association, generated his own resources to educate and empower his membership around health issues, he was first harassed by management and then fired.³ History testifies to the fact that taking truth to power is not without its costs to the messenger. Serious challenges to existing policy are always met with resistance -- Rosa Parks was arrested for her act of civil disobedience; Paulo Freire's success in empowering Brazilian peasants led to his exile from Brazil; and Myles Horton had to rebuild the Highlander Center after its property was taken on bogus charges and then auctioned off by the State of Tennessee.

Popular education creates safe places for people who take risks and fight for a more just society - places where they can share experiences and information and build strength and inspiration for the long haul.

³ In the process, he also became an environmentalist, and now works as the Southern California Director of Communities for a Better Environment.

This report will begin to explore the hidden history and current role that popular education plays in building people, supporting movements, and creating safe spaces to share experiences, envision the future and plan actions for a more equitable and just society. We begin by placing popular education within the context of movements for social change, establishing some defining characteristics of popular education, and discussing components of a model popular education event, incorporating examples from history and current practice. This will be followed by a brief discussion of how to include the democratic principles embodied in popular education within the structure of organizations that work for social change. Finally, we will summarize the role that popular education plays in bridging social action and public policy.

II. THE PURPOSE OF POPULAR EDUCATION: EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE⁴

We have already introduced the notion of popular education as "education for social change." This definition recognizes the institutionalized barriers in the United States which have historically excluded entire classes of people from social and economic opportunities. Included here are the persistent barriers of race, class and gender which determine, to a large degree, where people will be placed in the society and in the economy. Social change as it is used in this discussion refers to the long-term structural changes that are needed to dismantle these barriers, eliminate oppression, and build a more just society.

⁴ Portions of this section are excerpted from Haas, Gilda. *Building the Economy from Below: Community Economic Development and Social Movements*. Urban Foundation. Johannesburg. 1992.

The starting point of popular education is the experience of people, particularly those who social scientists would call “socio-economically disadvantaged.” Experiences of poverty, discrimination, and hopelessness create powerful obstacles to liberating social change by denying many the confidence, vision and collective enterprise necessary to accomplish it. In the U.S., people who have faced historic barriers to educational achievement, employment, and economic stability often turn their anger inward, blaming themselves for failure. Others who share this isolation include more recent victims of economic dislocation, who now find themselves, perhaps permanently, without a job or a place in society. This self-blame is reinforced by structures which permit or promote the failure of some so that others, and indeed, the system itself, may succeed.

Such conditions, force people, ultimately to act. The nature of these actions may be dictated by opportunities and barriers to participation in problem solving, which when denied, may have explosive results. Thus, in an alternative response, economically and socially disenfranchised people may also turn their frustration and rage outward -- lashing at others, often other disenfranchised people, in acts of chauvinism, racism, or violence. In the U.S., such actions have occurred repeatedly as random and chaotic events -- the urban riots of the 1960's, the present daily warfare of inner city youth gangs, and the rise of hate crimes such as the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin who was beaten to death in Detroit by two unemployed white auto workers who mistook the Chinese American for a Japanese and blamed him for the loss of U.S. auto jobs. The 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles is a more recent example of a system's failure of justice exploding into days of rage. And, it is unlikely that the recent spate of burning black

churches are the result of corporate conspiracy or the actions of those who truly have economic or political power, but rather, again are the results of misplaced rage of relatively powerless people.

Neither of these responses promote improvement in people's lives. To counter these tendencies, people have to somehow learn to think differently about themselves and their circumstances. They must learn to see the value of their being and their potential before they can acquire the self-confidence to act for change. They must also see the commonality between their situation and that of others so that they may join together and act collectively, often building bridges of mutual trust and experience across difficult and historic barriers of race, gender and culture. In addition, their experience must include some vision of what is possible in a better world so that anger, blame, and hatred may eventually drop away and be replaced by the more positive goals of a movement for liberating social change. This is basically the project of popular education.

Social Movements and Popular Education

Social movement theorists and popular educators have used various terms to put forward these fundamental elements of transformation. Lawrence Goodwyn sees these elements of empowerment as sequential and cumulative prerequisites to building a democratic people's movement. In his words, "individual self-respect and collective self-confidence constitute the cultural building blocks of mass democratic politics."⁵ To Antonio Gramsci, "counter-

⁵ Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment*. Oxford University Press. New York. 1978.

hegemonic movements must put forth a concrete vision of the future which must be preceded by a historical transformation of people's consciousness.⁶ He describes a progression that begins with people's "common sense" acceptance of oppression and moves to their initial expressions of discontent which are grounded in "negative consciousness." Gramsci's next stage is the "catharsis" which comes from reflecting upon experiences generated by militant action, and which generates "class consciousness." Paulo Freire developed a "pedagogy of the oppressed" to help people grapple with the elements of a mythicized "thematic universe" and help develop a "critical consciousness" which would allow them to be subjects (rather than objects) in the world.⁷

These theorists all ground their work in their experience or analysis of real movements which combine political and social struggles with the development of economic and social institutions. These institutions help sustain the movement and are also prefigurative of what a more just society will be like. Gramsci, a founding leader of the Italian Communist Party was also the intellectual force behind the movement to establish factory or worker councils, intended to both democratize the industrial workplace and to serve as the cultural and educational building blocks of a future socialist state. Freire, used literacy as a basis for political empowerment in his native Brazil, for the Chilean Agrarian Reform Corporation, revolutionary Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, and Tanzania where he and others set up literacy circles as the safe spaces in

⁶ Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers. New York. 1971.

⁷ Freire, Paul. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Seabury Press. New York. 1968.

which people could share experiences, learn, and analyze their circumstances in ways that were appropriate to these diverse cultures and historical moments.

Learning from the Civil Rights Movement

People who are in the “official” business of making public policy from “above” -- policy makers, analysts, advocates and academics -- generally do not acknowledge or respect that the policy proposal on their desk is often the result of years of organizing, educating, and struggle by grassroots leaders and their constituencies. And, they almost never recognize the *intellectual* contributions that these people can and do make in the policy process.

In the United States, the most powerful example of the links between popular education, social movements and public policy reside in the work of philosophers and educators of the civil rights movement. These people, who include Ella Baker, the “Fundis”⁸ who helped support the independence and development of the young militants in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) while transferring ideas and knowledge of older more experienced activists; Septima Clark⁹, who built the Citizenship Schools which taught literacy in buses, backrooms, and homes throughout the South accompanying and building the historic civil rights movement;

⁸ On Ella Baker, see *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker*. First Run Films. New York. 1981. videocassette.

⁹ Good sources on the life of Septima Clark is Brown, Cynthia, ed., *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*. Wild Trees Press. Navarro, CA. 1986 and Clark, Septima. *Echo in My Soul*. Dutton. New York. 1962.

and Myles Horton¹⁰, co-founder of the Highlander Center, conceived as a school for the poor of Appalachia, “dedicated to developing its students capacities for both individual and collective self determination.”

The contribution of these historic American popular educators is well described by author

Charles M. Payne¹¹:

“The safest thing to say is that all of them had an expansive sense of the possibilities of democracy -- an unrealistic sense of the possibilities, their critics would say. Highlanders’ statement of purpose, drafted by Mrs. Clark, speaks of “broadening the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepening the concept to include every relationship.” Including everyone in democracy meant that the common assumption that poor people had to be led by their social betters was anathema. All three espoused a non-bureaucratic style of work, focused on local problems, sensitive to the social structure of local communities, appreciative of the culture of those communities.”

A New Wave of Popular Education Centers and Folk Schools

It is important to note that throughout the United States, this history is now being reclaimed and recognized by an emerging movement to create a new wave of “folk schools” and popular education centers that meet the needs of different people, regions, and moments. Some have begun to honor the names of historical precedents:

¹⁰ Regarding the life of Myles Horton and the history of the Highlander Center, see: Adams, Frank. *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*; Horton, Myles. *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*. New York: Doubleday, 1990; and, Bell, Brenda, Gaventa, John, and Peters, John eds. *Myles Horton and Paulo Freire: We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Temple University Press. Philadelphia. 1990.

¹¹ Payne, Charles M. *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. University of California Press. Berkeley. 1995.

- Dr. Liz Peavey's establishment of the *Septima Clark Urban Literacy Center* to meet the needs of African Americans in Columbus Ohio;
- Marion Wright Edelman's initiatives to establish the *Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute* and the *Advocacy/Service Freedom School* as outgrowths of the Children's Defense Fund;
- Five diverse emerging popular education centers formed the *Marrowbone La Mazorca*¹² cooperative whose name honors the *Marrowbone Folk School* of eastern Kentucky and the *La Mazorca popular* theater group of El Salvador, while acknowledging the diverse cultures and interests of the people they serve.

¹² The five folk schools include: *Camp Sister Spirit* (Ovett, Mississippi); *Escuela Popular Norteña* (national, based in Valdez, New Mexico); *Instituto Paz en las Americas* (Silver City New Mexico); *Connecticut Valley Folk School*; *Pine Tree Folk School* (Carmel, Maine). *Marrowbone Folk School* was founded in 1967 by Edith and Jake Easterling in a garage across the road from their home near the Marrowbone Creek in eastern Kentucky. The Easterlings brought other coal mining families like themselves together to discuss and decide what they could do about strip-mining, polluted water and better school. *La Mazorca*, a popular theater group in El Salvador used mime as a means of political education. *La Mazorca's* actors exposed the different facets of oppression experienced by rural poor people. Three of the four founders of the theater were slain or disappeared in 1989.

III. VALUES AND PRINCIPLES OF POPULAR EDUCATION

It is useful here to lay out some basic values and principles of popular education. Examples are inserted from practice to assist the reader by giving life to these ideas. However, it is important to understand that the presentation of the examples actually detracts from their real life by freezing them in time. The real context of these stories are people's struggles which are supported by popular educators and popular education events over time --weeks, months, and usually, years. With this cautionary note in mind, the values and principles discussed below, include:

- **Self-Determination**
- **Collective and Democratic Process**
- **Critical Analysis**
- **Learning as a Creative Process**
- **Commitment to Action**

Self-Determination

Charles M. Payne reflects:

“Part of the legacy of people like Ella Baker and Septima Clark is a faith that ordinary people who learn to believe in themselves are capable of extraordinary acts, or better, of acts that seem extraordinary to us precisely because we have such an impoverished sense of the capabilities of ordinary people.”¹³

This belief is fundamental to democratic practice and yet is unfortunately almost counter-cultural to how “democracy” is practiced -- in schools, workplaces, organizations, and government -- in

¹³ Payne, Charles M. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. University of California Press. Berkeley. 1995.

everyday life in America. A basic principle of popular education rests in the belief that education can serve the interests of oppressed people; that they can name their problems themselves; and that they are the most capable of designing solutions to address them. In the best practice, this affects who the participants will be in any particular popular education event or series of events. In short, it is primarily the people affected by the problem -- for example, tenants discussing housing conditions, rents, and evictions to devise housing policy strategies (as opposed to tenant organizers, housing advocates, and policy “wonks”).

The juxtaposition of tenants vs. housing advocates in the example is not intended to present rigid rules about inclusion or exclusion from any particular event, but rather to demonstrate that the tables are now turned. Housing advocates and “experts” who usually dominate discussions about housing policy and strategy (even in a room full of tenants) are generally deprived of the knowledge that can be provided by people most affected by the issue. In a democratic education setting, they are now subordinate in number and are provided with a context in which to make a real contribution to a tenants’ rights movement. The process also allows grassroots activists with a more thoughtful way to make use of the resources that an “expert” can provide. The intention here is not to be exclusive (no experts here), but rather, inclusive (bring the tenants into the room to share their experience with each other, identify problems, and devise solutions). The experience and insight of those directly engaged in struggles carries the same (or more) weight as those who observe it.

L.A. Public Housing: New Ways of Working Together

In the 1980's, Legal Aid attorneys in Los Angeles had a lot of experience working with individual public housing tenants. In 1986 they started a Community Economic Development Unit as a means to have more impact by serving organized groups of poor people rather than just individuals. This required new ways of working.

The project started by pooling the relationships that individual attorneys had with public housing tenant leaders. Lawyers went out to talk to tenants in the individual developments (there are about 20 public housing developments in L.A.), often outnumbering the leaders in a meeting, dominated discussions, and were disappointed in the tenants' commitment to follow-up from meetings. After several debriefings it was also revealed that these tenant leaders from around the City met together as part of a city-wide tenants' advisory council run by the Housing Authority, who controlled the meeting agendas, provided no or entirely inadequate Spanish language translation for elected monolingual Latino leaders, and used Housing Authority vans and staff to transport tenants to and from the meetings.

The Legal Aid Unit decided to help build relationships with and between the tenant organizations by employing popular education techniques to turn this situation on its head. They helped Claudia Moore, a public housing leader who was respected by people throughout the various developments call a meeting of other public housing leaders in a neutral spot -- a church in central Los Angeles. The Unit helped distribute the invitations, secured the spot, provided professional Spanish/English interpretation, and individual attorneys provided rides to the meetings. The meeting was chaired by Ms. Moore, who ran a simple agenda where participants identified themselves, where they lived before they lived in their development, how long they had been living in the development, and what they liked about living there. The attorneys present were able to experience public housing as a community for the first time, with issues and concerns, in some ways, not unlike their own. The tenants were able to experience each other's intelligence, experience, and humor across language barriers -- a division which had historically prevented them from achieving the unity required for building a movement around their common needs and concerns around the City. Having control over the meeting agenda, the tenant leader ran with it and began planning follow-up activities.

After this first meeting, David Etezadi, a legal aid attorney at the time, reflected on an immediate change in his relationship with the tenants that he drove to the meeting.

"On the way to the meeting, they were polite, but the ride was pretty quiet. They basically didn't talk in the car. On the way home they were really excited and

talked the whole way home -- they talked about the Housing Authority, and talked to me..."¹⁴

The meeting modeled what was possible in terms of relations between tenants and attorneys, between Latino and African American tenant leaders, and initiated a practice of posing questions, and democratic dialogue that made it difficult to return to old ways. The tenants' first follow-up action was to elect Ms. Moore to be the president of the official Tenant Advisory Committee and African-American leaders were the first to demand better Spanish/English translation and interpretation services at those meetings. With the support of their new collaborators -- the Legal Aid attorneys -- tenant leadership moved from this first meeting to longer residential retreats which resulted in joint learning and follow-up action including in raising public housing conditions as an issue for the first time in a Mayoral election, the firing of an recalcitrant Housing Authority Director who refused to support serious tenant participation, preventing the demolition and sale of public housing, and gradual changes in Housing Authority policies. These policies -- involving tenant organizations in management, requiring training and hiring of tenants by Housing Authority contractors, the development of tenant contracting enterprises -- were a direct result of a process that placed tenants at the center of devising them.

¹⁴ Conversation between David Etezadi and the author, who was the founding Director of the Legal Aid Community Economic Development Unit, following the meeting.

Collective and Democratic Process

Popular education begins by pooling the experience, knowledge, and resources of people who are trying to find more power within and among themselves, to improve their lives, communities, and opportunities. It is a process by which people can build a collective picture of their knowledge, develop common goals to solve common problems, and identify gaps in knowledge that need to be filled to build an effective strategy. This principle also situates the role of the “expert,” as someone whose knowledge can help fill “gaps” that simply aren’t part of the group’s experience; as someone who can participate equally in a process that respects different forms of expertise; and as someone who has a different form of experience to contribute to a collective picture.

**California State Employees Association:
Building a Collective Picture of What We Know**

In the Spring of 1996, the California State Employees Association and SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy), an L.A. based popular education center, co-sponsored a series of workshops on economic policy, centering on the issue of "privatization" for 40-50 public employee union activists who worked in diverse sectors of state employment -- the Employment Development Department, the Department of Motor Vehicles, Fair Housing and Employment, the Lottery, the State Compensation Insurance Fund, to name a few. Three highly participatory and animated workshops which looked at where privatization fit into the U.S. economy, the international economy, and in tax and budget planning were lead by Just Economics trainers which helped give the diverse workers a common language, a value-based point of departure from which to discuss policy, and a more global framework in which to place their experience. It also provided them with three occasions to spend three hours together, learn and laugh together, and see each other as a group.

A fourth session was held to pool knowledge about what they knew about the State. A facilitator had each participant describe what kind of work their unit did, what classification of workers (clerical, technical, social worker, etc.) worked there, and what impact privatization policies were having on their unit. As the process moved around the circle, one participant said "I don't know anything, I'm only a secretary." "Then you probably know everything," said the facilitator who, along with other participants, cajoled her into simply answering the questions, which she was able to complete as easily as higher level staff who preceded her in the circle. In about one and a half hours an enormously full picture of the State public sector economy, its labor base, employment policies and strategies covered the wall, including a lot of information that the union organizers and officials had never heard. The group was able to identify areas that they need to know more about, dispatched research tasks for the next session to be held in a month, and began a preliminary discussion of how they might reorganize the way in which they work as a union to better take advantage of each others knowledge and strengths.

Critical Analysis

The practice of popular education is a continuing process that moves with people, their organizations, and struggles over time. It does not consist of a single "learning" event, but rather encourages a participatory process that develops and links people's critical thought, creative expression and collective action. Action is the reference point for the purpose of critical analysis which is to help people organize more effectively for social change. This is accomplished by

reflecting on experience (past action) and what has been learned from it in order to plan more strategic future actions.

To accomplish this, popular educators use methods to facilitate ways for people to identify problems and develop strategies in the context of power relations, history, and an understanding of the economic, political and ideological forces that shape the current moment. Various terms are used for this practice -- critical analysis, conjunctural analysis, power analysis, political analysis for action -- and diverse methods are employed, some of which will be explored later in this paper. An example of how one group of popular educators thinks about structuring critical analysis into their workshops is presented by the Toronto-based *The Moment Project* on the following page.

Naming the Moment: Phases and Questions¹⁵

The process of political analysis for action, or naming the moment moves through four phases:

PHASE 1 - Identifying Ourselves and Our Interests

Who are 'we' and how do we see the world?

How has our view been shaped by our race, gender, class, age, sector, religion, etc.?

How do we define our constituency? Are we of, with, or for the people most affected by the issue(s) we work on?

What do we believe about the current structure of Canada? About what it could be? About how we get there?

PHASE 2 - Naming the Issues/Struggles

What current issue/struggle is most critical to the interests of our group?

What are the opposing interests (contradictions) around the issue?

What are we fighting for in working on this issue -- in the short-term and in the long-term?

What's the history of struggle on this issue? What have been the critical moments of the past?

PHASE 3 - Assessing the Forces

Who's with us and against us on this issue (in economic, political, and ideological terms)?

What are their short-term and long-term interests?

What are their expressed and their real interests?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of both sides?

What about the uncommitted?

What actors do we need more information about?

What's the overall balance of forces?

Who's winning and who's losing and why?

PHASE 4 - Planning for Action

How have the forces shifted from the past to the present?

What future shifts can we anticipate?

What 'free space' do we have to move in?

How do we build on the strengths and address our weaknesses?

Whom should we be forming alliances with? In the short-term and in the long-term?

What actions could we take?

What are the constraints and possibilities of each?

Who will do what and when?

¹⁵ Barndt, Deborah. *Naming the Moment: Political Analysis for Action*. The Moment Project. Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice. Toronto. 1989.

**United Youth on the Move:
Beginning a Critical Analysis of Our Education Experience**

Sixty young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two are facing a large wall that is entirely covered with a five foot high panel of white butcher paper. The facilitator asks who is really good at drawing, and drawing fast. "Abel, Abel!", some call out, "Jose, Jose" call others. The two young men are called up to the front while the facilitator begins to pose questions to the group. "Where do you go to school?" "Belmont High! Garfield High!" "What does your school look like?" "It has a fence around it -- no, not like that it's higher, it's eight feet high." Abel, adjusts the fence. "Draw a hole in the fence where we cut it so we can get out." The hole appears. "What do the people at your school look like?" "They're brown." "Who else is at your school?" "Teachers." "What do they look like?" "They have guns and pepper spray." "Where do people go to school when they get out of Belmont, if they go to college?" The kids name the local junior college, East L.A. College, which quickly appears on the sheet. "What do the people look like there?" "They're brown." "Where do they go after that?" "Nowhere." "How come?" "They don't have money." "They've got to take care of the their kids." "They have to work, they stay at East L.A. for eight or ten years." "I stayed at East L.A. college for eight years," one of the program staff leaders says quietly. "Does anyone go to a four year college from East L.A. College." "Not a lot." "Well, where do they go?" "Cal State L.A.?" "What do the people look like there?" "They're brown."

The facilitator continues posing questions, moving to what other neighborhoods and schools are like, where parents from different neighborhoods work, what their dreams consist of, what blocks them. The paper is full of a picture of the young people's world, and they proceed to draw connections, power relations, identify areas they need to know more about -- basically building an analysis. It is a noisy, thoughtful business, full of gallows humor about the painful realities of class and race in their lives. They agree to meet again to continue.

"Critical analysis" is generally perceived as something that can only be performed by intellectuals, professionals, and professional intellectuals. The above snapshot of youth using an Ah-Ha drawing process to engage in a critical analysis of their circumstances shows a dynamic method designed to draw information out of a group of people and engage them in analysis. The method has been used to record ideas and information across language barriers, across educational experiences, and invites contributions to a collective picture. It allows critical

analysis to occur by any people who are interested in identifying their own problems and collectively devising strategic solutions for change.

Learning as a Creative Process

Popular education sees learning as a creative process rather than a form of intellectual consumption. Here it is understood that learning is most effectively accomplished when people use their whole self -- speaking, feeling, thinking, doing -- as well as listening and seeing, the only methods often used in the conventional classroom. The figure below, borrowed from the *Doris Marshall Institute* is an illustration of how people retain more of what they learn when they use more of their senses and can apply what they are learning. These ideas are not the

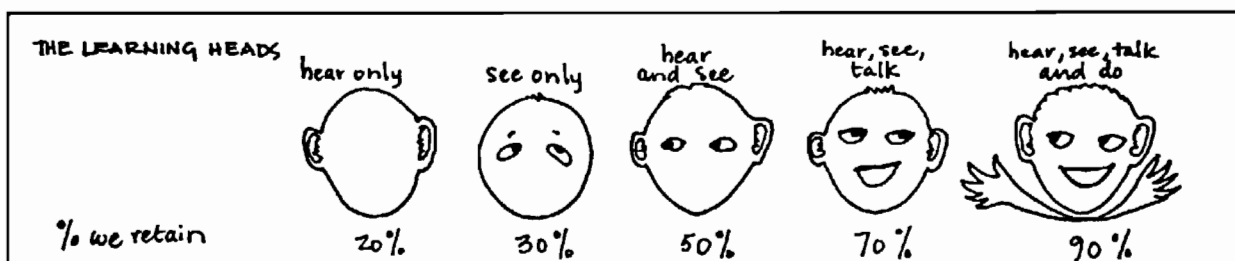


Figure 1 from *Educating for a Change*. Doris Marshall Institute for Education and Action. Toronto. 1991.

exclusive domain of education for social change, but are rather derived from the best practices of adult educators. However, the objectives of inclusion, empowerment, and full democratic participation in learning make these issues particularly important to popular educators.

Just Economics uses a variety of participatory and interactive methods -- Ah-Ha! drawings, live illustrations, small group practice arguments -- to engage participants in learning about economic

policy, critically evaluate the relationship between their desire for a more just society and policy choices, and practice talking about policy from the perspective of what they have learned and their values. Ellen Teninty discusses their approach to learning:

“I went to Harvard lectures with 500 people in a class. I can learn that way. The more I do this work, the more clear it is how many more people learn through personal experience. My awareness and respect for that reality has grown every year. We started with the idea that people remember what they say, not what you say -- they remember the part they played in a live illustration...the more involved they are in a training -- even physically involved -- is where they will locate the richest revelations.”¹⁶

On another level, cultural expression -- music, theater, story-telling, games -- is also employed in popular education as it is throughout social movements -- to enliven, engage, and communicate on an emotional level, sustain energy, and perhaps most importantly, to have fun while we work and learn. Candy Carawan, who has been working with cultural and educational programs of the Highlander Center for the past thirty-five years, reflects on her experience:

“Incorporating people’s cultural roots works well with grassroots communities because culture is an important positive aspect of self-identity and self confidence. If you don’t have a lot of education or money, you can remember that you come from a strong history and community -- in our case it was the South. It is powerful to tap into that and to know that I don’t have to be ashamed of who I am or to pretend that I am part of the middle class main stream. So culture is a way to help people understand each other in a deep way. This works best if people are close to their cultures. When people are not, the same activities can be awkward. I’ve been to events where “multi-cultural work” is more like show and tell. What I am talking about is the need to link to struggles around survival issues with our culture -- to link your deepest understanding of what you want in life with the deepest understanding of what you are. Of course, cultural work is a lot of fun. So much is hard now -- there is a lot of strength in humor and singing and dancing that works against all that fear and taps into joy and humor and emotion. People do not organize out of fear -- they organize out of anger and hope.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Telephone Interview. Ellen Teninty. Just Economics. June 6, 1996.

¹⁷ Telephone interview. Candy Carawan. Highlander Center. 1995.

Commitment to Action

Education for social change cannot be separated from the actions that are necessary to make change. In the U.S., this aspect of popular education's definition -- its grounding in experience, commitment to action, and continued reflection and critical review of experience and action inevitably leads to efforts to distinguish popular education from organizing. For this paper, we will acknowledge that a distinction exists and put forth that when education and organizing are both linked to movements for social change, they complement and include each other.

Organizing, at its best, builds people and consciousness as well as organization. And, popular education, at its best, is ultimately measured by the social action it helps produce. The closer popular education work is linked to organizing and struggles for social change, the more likely it will produce social action and change.

Most organizers and popular educators will agree that social action is the most powerful arena for learning, but without strategic, conscious and collective reflection, this arena cannot be fully exploited for its potential in developing grassroots leaders, effective strategy, and change. A clearly framed commitment to action can provide popular educators with some criteria for determining with whom they should be working, where resources should be dispatched, and how to evaluate success. Summarized briefly:

- ***Work primarily with people who have already made a commitment to action:*** .

Participants who are already engaged in a struggle or problem, who are community

“activists” (not necessarily official leaders), who are involved in organization or a local

struggle, and who have demonstrated some level of commitment to it will be able to reinvest what they have learned back into a movement. For example, from its inception, the Highlander Center limited its workshops to people who were already engaged in social action -- through unions, churches, or civil rights organizations or simply through taking a stand against an injustice. For people like Rosa Parks and other less known activists, the experience at Highlander with others who also were fighting for justice renewed their energy and provided more ideas and allies and sometimes, new organizations.

- ***Include planning for follow-up action in workshops:***

Discussing what people are going to do next, using each other as resources to plan, and supporting each others vision of follow-up action is a critical part of popular education.

- ***Include critical analysis of actions in workshops:***

Posing questions and collectively analyzing actions that were taken provides a new level of experience upon which to build education for social change.

- ***Commitment to People and Movements Over the "Long Haul":***

The extent to which popular education adds value to movements for long-term social change is the historic measure of its contribution. Public policies -- such as voting rights for Southern Blacks in the 1940's and 1950's were not attainable through conventional policy advocacy -- but were a long-term vision that sustained a movement for legislative justice. Above all else, perhaps, education for social change stresses a developmental style of politics, one in which the most

important thing is the development of efficacy in those most affected by a problem. Charles M. Payne reflects on the contributions of popular educators Ella Baker, Septima Clarke and Myles Horton within the Mississippi freedom struggle:¹⁸

“Over the long term, whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and capacity to have some say-so in their own lives. Getting people to feel that way requires participatory political and educational activities, in which the people themselves have a part in defining the problems -- ‘Start where the people are’ -- and solving them. Not even organizations founded in the name of the poor can be relied upon. In the end, people have to learn to rely on themselves.”

It is here, perhaps, in short-term tactical moments, that some popular educators and organizers part ways. But in the long-term, what it takes to build a strong movement collapses education, action, and reflection into a single process.

¹⁸ Payne, Charles M. *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. University of California Press. Berkeley. 1995.

IV. THE PRACTICE OF POPULAR EDUCATION: *THE SPIRAL MODEL*

This section will present how one group of popular educators -- the *Doris Marshall Institute* -- applies these principles and values in the principals and values of popular education into the design of their workshops through what they term the “spiral model.” Other models and terms are used by practicing social change educators and activists, and the choice of including the DMI approach in this report is for the following reasons:

- is consistent with the experience of the author
- it encompasses a broad range of popular education ideas and principles
- it has been committed to writing by its practitioners.

As illustrated below, the spiral model assumes that:¹⁹

- learning begins with the experience and knowledge of participants;
- after participants have shared their experience, they look for patterns or analyze that experience, identifying commonalities and differences;
- to avoid being limited by the knowledge and experience of people in the room, new information is added or collectively created;
- participants need to use what they have learned: to practice new skills, to make strategies, and plan for action;
- after the workshop, back in their organizations and daily work, participants apply in action what they’ve learned in the workshop.

¹⁹ *Educating for a Change*. Doris Marshall Institute. Toronto. 1991.

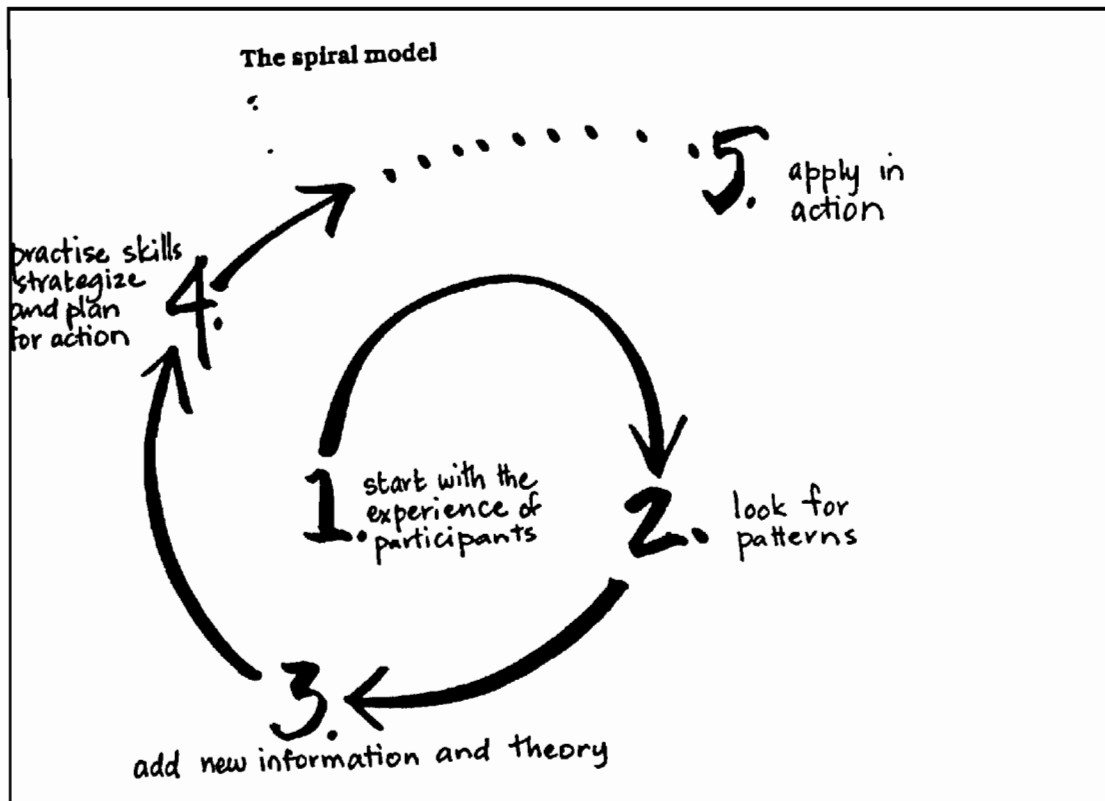


Figure 2 The spiral model, from: *Educating for a Change*. Doris Marshall Institute. Toronto. 1991.

Start with the Experience and Knowledge of Participants

There are many techniques for building a collective picture of participants experience and some have been describe earlier, such as the examples of public service workers and public housing tenants sharing their knowledge in a circle, responding to questions designed to draw out what they know. The snapshot of youth engaged in the Ah-Ha! drawing method showed them building a mural of their experience upon which layers of further analysis, including what questions could not be answered by their experience alone, can be added. What is important here is that the model values the knowledge and experience of participants as much, or usually more, than that of outside experts. This first step of valuing people's knowledge allows

participants to learn from each other. “In the spiral model, everyone teaches and everyone learns in a collective process of creating new knowledge, rather than only the teacher teaching and the students learning.”²⁰

Look for Patterns

Making collective sense out of a collection of individual experiences is the next step in the model. One of the most frequently used strategies for doing this in popular education workshops, perhaps ironically, is to break into small groups. The purpose here is to assure that all voices are heard, and the process proceeds by bringing those voices back in some form -- a report-back from a selected speaker, a dramatization, a drawing -- to the whole group. The whole group can then look for patterns in common and important differences.

When people begin to see patterns, a frequent response is self-affirming -- “I thought I was the only one.” “I didn’t know that other people were going through the same thing,” are common responses to the process. The process of collectivizing knowledge and experience allows people to learn from each other and see how much they already know, as a group.

Add New Information and Theory

A lot of attention in this paper has been focussed on methods which respect and maximize people’s knowledge and experience. This emphasis is needed because it flies in the face of how

²⁰ *Educating for a Change.*

experiential knowledge is underused, disregarded, and disrespected in educational institutions, public policy arenas, and workplaces. By no means should it be construed that all information in popular education has to come from the participants themselves. The point of popular education is to “validate participant experience and knowledge... not to romanticize it.”²¹

Providing people with information that they need to build their own strategies, obtaining outside resources and research to address questions they cannot answer themselves, and bringing in outside experience to help give people a vision of what is possible are all aspects of the popular education project. In fact, popular education workshops, centers, and educators are often the only resources willing to provide people with strategic information on their own terms and frequently serve as brokers between “outside” knowledge and people’s own experience and questions. This type of contribution is particularly important in strategies to build policy agendas from the grassroots. Some examples are provided below.

Participatory research

According to Muhammad Anisur Rahman, former professor of economics at the University of Dacca, Bangladesh, participatory research “...returns to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems, as fully scientific, and the right to use this knowledge -- including any other knowledge, but not dictated by it -- as a guide in their own action.”²² A primary component of participatory research is the

²¹ *Educating for a Change*.

²² Hurst, John. “Popular Education.” *Educator*. Spring. 1995.

extent to which people affected by a problem frame the research question, participate in the analysis, and use the results. Examples from practice include:

- In the case of the *Santa Fe Springs workers* who wanted to know the impact of refinery emissions on their health, graduate students and faculty from UCLA's Urban Planning Department helped workers obtain Air Quality Management District data which identified the chemicals in Powerine's emissions. They provided health data on the risks that those chemicals posed to human health. They collected contract language from other unions who had already negotiated protections. They presented the results along with union leadership to the membership who were then prepared to enter into contract negotiations in the weeks that followed.
- When L.A. *Nickerson Gardens* public housing tenants wanted to know how they could get more jobs, Legal Aid staff collaborated with tenant leaders to design a survey of what tenants had to offer the labor market. They raised funds to train and pay tenants to administer and implement the survey, and helped construct a data base and analysis of the 1200 results. It was the first survey in L.A. public housing that looked at the skills and assets that tenants could bring to the economy, rather than the more common "expert" accounting of their problems and deficits.

Participatory trainings

When bringing in information that is outside people's experience, it is particularly important to keep in mind how people learn -- trying to engage as many of the senses -- hearing, seeing, talking, doing, thinking -- as possible. Ellen Teninty, a founder of *Just Economics*, describes her motivations for getting involved in teaching economic policy:

"I was an employment activist, having worked for the Plant Closures Project -- jobs interested me. In the organizing we were always lagging behind the decision-making -- even our wins were modified concessions -- there was no yielding of ideological ground or an advance in our ability to make decisions. I knew I needed to know more ...and at that time, in 1985, tax reform was happening. Through that I could see a lot a learned a lot more about the economic causes that affected people's jobs. At the same time, in the 1980's about 20 religious dominations wrote statements about the economy, and I knew a lot of them from the plant closures work. I could see that they had no way to say anything about policy. They could assert that there was an increase in poverty, but

couldn't connect that to an increase in the minimum wage. We needed to figure out how to get justice into economic policy, and I decided to develop a training program."²³

Just Economics pays a lot of attention not only to how people learn, but what motivates people. The workshops deal with Tax and Budget Policy, Money and Banking, the International Economy and other topics that frame the economic roots of social problems are geared towards people who "believe that we can do better and make a more just world, but don't have the economic analysis or strategy to do that." Participants are moving around, talking, analyzing, looking at charts and "live" illustrations throughout the workshop, and quickly begin to understand the role that policy has in their lives:

"The reason that grassroots people don't know a lot about economy policy is not because they are too stupid -- what people can learn is grossly underestimated... It is amazing how fast people move, from ground zero with lots of false ideas to being able to talk well about trade policy or the need for regulation in currency markets after a two and a half hour session -- that's everybody, not divided by education. If you respect the fact that they can do it, they will. Our role is to show people that 'things that concern you usually come from systems, from policies.. This is good news, because we can change policies.' And then the organizations have to do that work..."²⁴

Helping people to connect policy information to their values is a primary objective of *Just Economics*' work, a mission that has to be continually revisited by the trainers:

"In ten years I have become extremely knowledgeable about economics. Yet I have to constantly be reminded by our participants that the thing that was most powerful to them is that the economy is a human creation and the way in which people's personal values and beliefs are the foundation of economic policies. Sometimes I want to cur out values to give more information, but that's not what the message is or what moves people -- economics is about values. That takes the authority away from the experts."²⁵

²³ Telephone interview with Ellen Teninty. June 6, 1996.

²⁴ Telephone interview with Ellen Teninty. June 6, 1996.

²⁵ Telephone interview with Ellen Teninty. June 6, 1996.

Seeking Out and Bringing in Outside Expertise

The use of experts whose knowledge is outside the realm of participants' experience is almost always useful in a "spiral model" popular education process. Sometimes these experts have official recognition in their field, and are invited to help participants round out their analysis.

For example:

- At a 1987 retreat of forty L.A. public housing residents, Frank Wilkenson, who was the assistant Director of the Housing Authority in 1950, made a presentation. At first some tenants chastised the Legal Aid staff for his inclusion in the agenda, asking what an "old white man" might have to offer their struggles. But as he told his story of an earlier L.A. Housing Authority that was at the forefront of a movement to integrate housing in the City, of policies that required public housing managers like himself to live with their families in the "projects," and how, during the McCarthy era he was fired and blacklisted from any employment for several years simply for defending decent, integrated housing, tenants embraced his contribution, adding it to their understanding of the forces that surrounded their current efforts for change.
- To help diverse community activists understand the role of banking in their lives and the value and use of the Community Reinvestment Act, a popular educator identified a multi-ethnic group of CRA activists from other cities who had similar motivations and goals to local workshop participants, had won some victories, and were able to educate about banking laws and regulations within the context of their own experience and had them lead a workshop. Participants identified with the workshop leaders a lot more than they had with CRA experts and professional advocates, and could see themselves doing similar work. Workshop participants formed the core of a local coalition (*Communities for Accountable Reinvestment*) which filed their first CRA challenge within a month, and over a period of years initiated local policies, participated in national policy forums, developed a credit union and negotiated new community-serving credit programs with bank officials.
- Sue Williams from the Highlander Center explains how a group of Tennessee workers sought out the experience of workers across the border to help place their experience in the context of a global economy:

"Union and non-union workers and community members in Tennessee began to meet at Highlander to see what they could teach each other about combating plant closures and economic dislocation that had hit their plants and communities. They put together a manual based on what they had shared and learned together

about the economics of plant closures. More people were brought into the process, including resource people, which was important to give people a sense of how to follow through. After about a year, the group formed TIRN (Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network).

After a while the international and global nature of the economy became important in the discussions and people wanted to develop a position on trade policy. We made connections with Mexican workers and went to Mexico with a group to visit the maquilas and then realized that what we saw in Mexico and in Tennessee was the same thing. We were then able to make connections between capital flight and the experience of Mexican workers and then got very involved in policy debates and discussions around NAFTA.”

- Part of an investigation of the L.A. tourism industry by labor and community leaders enrolled in UCLA’s *Community Scholars Program* included research into how other cities used policy to make the benefits of a booming tourist industry more broadly distributed to minority and ethnic communities and local workers. The program brought Richard Selden, who at that time ran the Tourism Management Program of the New School for Social Research in New York to a grassroots community/labor forum to discuss examples of community-based tourism from around the country. These policy ideas were included in the Scholars’ final report entitled “Accidental Tourism” which became the blueprint for the Tourism Industry Development Council, a community/labor advocacy organization which has been able to build a constituency for more equitable tourism policy in the city. As a result, some of these ideas have been incorporated into how L.A.’s Visitors and Convention Bureau now markets the City to travelers.²⁶

Practice Skills, Strategize and Plan for Action

After sharing and analyzing experiences and deepening understanding through the input of new information and theory, workshop participants are usually ready to act on what they’ve learned.

If we revisit the Doris Marshall Institute’s “learning heads,” you can see that most learning occurs when people get to do something with what they’ve learned. A workshop setting is a much less threatening place to try something out than a public hearing, press conference, or

²⁶ Telephone interview with Sue Williams. Highlander Center. June 1996.

community meeting and it is a chance to get feedback.²⁷ Or, as Ellen Teninty sometimes tells participants, “The first time you do this is the hardest time, and by the time you leave this workshop, you will have already done it.”

In a *Just Economics* workshop, participants break into small groups and practice talking about economic policy using what they have learned. Each group is given a set of statements to respond to, the kind that may come up in any ordinary discussion. For example, on affirmative action:

“What would you say if someone said to you: ‘Affirmative Action is just another form of discrimination. This time it is against white men.’”

Or, on money and banking:

“What would you say if someone said to you: ‘Banks shouldn’t be regulated -- they’re are just like any other business.’”

The small groups collectively discuss what they believe, use what they have learned in building their arguments (and argue with each other), and collectively come up with a response which they report back to the larger group. They receive feedback from the other participants and the trainer on other arguments they could have used to make their points, inconsistencies within their arguments, and support for well framed reports. They are neither given a “right” answer, or told that their response is “wrong,” but rather encouraged to consciously and systematically make the

²⁷ Since a lot of participants are anxious presenting in front of a group it is often useful to have participants develop guidelines for giving feedback to each other -- deciding what is useful and acceptable and what is not.

connections between what they learned about economic policy and what they believe is the right thing to do.

Moving from Reflection to Action

The goal of popular education is to strengthen people, their organizations, and their ability to act. It is imperative to build a follow-up strategy and plan for action in the “spiral” of popular education activity. The Doris Marshall Institute suggests the following considerations in this area for workshop planners:²⁸

- ***Consider the organizational context:*** What are the possibilities for action and application within the organization(s) represented by the participants.
- ***Find out where and with whom people will be exerting influence:*** In action planning, facilitators often consider the use of caucuses -- that is, whether it is useful to divide participants by their location in an organization. For example, placing shop stewards in one group and union officials in another in the context of a union planning session.
- ***Consider both collective and individual action:*** To really have an impact, it is important to emphasize collective action and to spend most of the workshop time discussing group strategies. It is also important to give individuals time to focus on their roles, responsibilities, and commitment to follow-up actions.
- ***Leave time to identify the next steps for whatever action is called for:*** Here, some “next steps” are identified along with structures, such as a follow-up committee.
- ***Identify how you will evaluate the proposed action:*** How will participants know if they have been successful, when and how will you critically review the action and see that new strategies are called for?

²⁸ *Educating for a Change.*

V. LIVING DEMOCRACY THROUGH POPULAR EDUCATION

Effective popular education institutions and approaches should themselves strive to be models of democratic practice and accountability. For example, Antonio Gramsci's purpose in developing worker's councils in Italy was to build the organization and human capacity and democratic skills that would be needed in a more democratic society in the future. Some more recent examples with which the author is most familiar include:

- ***Marrowbone La Mazorca***: Emerging popular education centers identified common technical assistance and support needs to help them become sustainable organizations. They decided to invest in each other and purchased shares in their own democratically governed technical assistance cooperative whose primary purpose is to meet their needs.
- ***Liberty Hill Foundation***: Since its inception, the Liberty Hill Foundation, which provides grants to local social change organizing efforts in Los Angeles, has used a Community Funding Board, comprised of local organizers and activists to make decisions regarding grant awards. The Funding Board is a separate entity from the Foundation Board which devotes itself to fundraising and fiscal management of the organization.
- ***Just Economics***: The trainers who comprise Just Economics are democratically organized into a cooperative structure. The team consists of a diverse group of women from different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. "Our group is made up of people who show some community leadership and don't have economics backgrounds. Then they learn and become economics trainers. This 'least likely image' of who can become an expert in economics is part of the message of our trainings."²⁹

The EZ/EC Learning Initiative described below is one example of how democratic objectives can be incorporated into the design and structure of a public policy program.

²⁹ Interview with Ellen Teninty. Just Economics. June 6, 1996.

The EZ/EC Learning Initiative

The National EZ/EC Learning Initiative was designed to monitor and measure the impact of the 33 rural Empowerment Zone/Enterprise Community programs administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as well as to document the lessons to be learned from it for community development. The initiative is a participatory research and evaluation program, coordinated by the Community Partnership Center at the University of Tennessee, with a team of researchers based in different regions across the country also providing assistance.³⁰

A pilot program created citizen evaluation teams in ten EZ/EC communities, each comprised of eight to ten grassroots evaluators. Researchers work with each team, train them, and bring them together to share experiences and learn from each other. The teams are also provided with their own staff, a "local coordinator" from the community. The argument to the USDA for supporting the approach was that since the empowerment program was intended to apply a "bottom up" approach to development, the evaluation process should also incorporate that philosophy.³¹

Learning Team members understand that their responsibilities are to:

- Meet with regional and national researchers to discuss the most appropriate ways to evaluate the progress and success of the EZ/EC program;
- Gather information locally to help assess what progress has been made towards meeting the program's goals in their community. Identify successes and barriers to success for the program.
- Identify lessons from the community's experience that should be shared with others.
- Participate in workshops to share those lessons with other communities and program leaders.
- Share the findings with others in their own community through follow-up learning and educational activities.

³⁰ *The EZ/EC Learning Initiative*. University of Tennessee. 1996.

³¹ Telephone interview with John Gaventa. Community Outreach Partnership Center. University of Tennessee. May 28, 1996.

VI. POPULAR EDUCATION: BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN SOCIAL ACTION AND PUBLIC POLICY

For people struggling against toxics in their communities, slum housing, or plant closures in their communities it is a powerful thing go to a safe place where your knowledge and experience is respected, where you can share and learn from struggles of other activists, where time and resources are provided for collective reflection, analysis, and planning:

“When Rosa Parks was asked by the eminent talk show host, Studs Terkel, what the Highlander Research and Education Center had to do with the fact that she chose not to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama on that fateful day in early December 1955, she answered quite simply, ‘Everything.’”³²

Bill Moyers, in an interview with Myles Horton asked, “Was it a coincidence that the trigger of all this (the Montgomery bus boycott), Rosa Parks on the bus, happened two months after she was at Highlander?” Horton responded:³³

“No, not according to Rosa...Rosa said that the connection between those two things was that at Highlander it was the first time in her life she had met white people she could trust, fully trust. And what Rosa -- Rosa had known some wonderful white people who were full of social equality and -- but, what she was saying was she had never been in a place where you could demonstrate by everything that happened that you believed in social equality. You know, that Highlander was -- anywhere you went, you know, it was -- everybody was equal. There was no, you know, there was no way -- I always said we were too small and too poor to discriminate...Rosa just saw a total way of living she'd never seen before, she just couldn't believe that that would...happen. She didn't go back with any plans or anything, she went back with a different spirit.”

The growing needs of grassroots activists and organizers to take their place in framing the policies that affect their communities and country has motivated a new wave of popular

³² Hurst, John. “Popular Education.” *Educator*. Spring. 1995.

³³ Moyers, Bill. “The Adventures of a Radical Hillbilly: An Interview with Myles Horton.” *Appalachian Journal*. Summer. 1982.

education centers throughout the U.S. There are many leaders today with the commitment and vision of a Rosa Parks. Most of them fight the uphill battle of having little or no resources to think, reflect, and plan the actions necessary to become serious players in the public policy arena. Funders are reluctant to invest in these activities because:

- they have difficulty seeing short-term demonstrable results;
- they are not familiar with the integral role that popular education plays in building people's movements; and,
- they lack confidence in the ability of ordinary people's ability to bring about major changes in public policies.

To build this understanding and confidence, they have only to revisit the history and relationships between the Highlander Center, the civil rights movement and the Voting Rights Act and familiarize themselves with the growing number of initiatives striving to connect popular education, social action, and public policy. It is hoped that this report has made some contribution to this objective.