Under the Radar: Popular Education in North America

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Introduction

During a sabbatical in the spring of 2011 I set out on the goal of learning about the current work of popular educators in North America. My objectives of this project were two-fold. First, I wanted to see what was actually happening on the ground in the world of popular education, since in both the scholarly literature as well as adult education conferences, popular education was noticeably absent. I knew from conversations and experiences there were many folks doing popular education work, but I wanted to find out firsthand what popular educators were doing, and how they conceived of, financed, and organized their work. My second objective was to use the knowledge gathered from the research to develop a start-up plan for a popular education center in the city of Philadelphia where I live and work. I wanted to learn from practitioners, and hopefully build on their insights and avoid some of their mistakes. As a result many of my questions were functional and logistical in nature: Where does funding come from? How do you decide on which issues or which groups to work with? Do you have a board? If so, what are their responsibilities? How do you organize the work? How do you measure success? What do you conceive popular education to be?

In the course of my research I interviewed 25 popular educators either in person or by phone, and perused over 30 websites for popular education-type organizations.[1] Amidst all the insights and analysis below, the results of my study can be summed up this way: Popular education in North America today involves a vast network of highly skilled and dedicated individuals and organizations operating in a variety of settings doing their work tirelessly and without much reward or notice. As Chris Cavanaugh from the Catalyst Centre in Toronto put it, popular education in North America today largely operates "under the radar;" yet if my research is at all accurate, even so popular education is part of a dynamic progressive social movement that is resisting oppression, fighting injustice, and bringing hope to people in communities large and small. What follows is a brief summary of my findings.

What is popular education?

I asked my interviewees to describe what they understood popular education to be. Larry Olds of the *Popular Education News* has collected a number of definitions that can be found on the popular education website; here is a sample of some of the definitions I received in my conversations.

- A participatory peer process that combines people's experiences to develop collective analysis and strategies for change.

- An educational process that starts from the assumption that people who are oppressed can understand the world and the systems that oppress them based on their personal experiences and with the help of others who provide an analysis of those experiences.

- A vehicle for oppressed people to critically explore their lives and think through a process to make decisions that can contribute to their self-determination.

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[1] A list of the individuals interviewed and the organizational websites reviewed can be found at the end of this article.

- A participatory approach to learning in which people identify their own needs in the context of struggle against oppression and the unjust use of power.

- A learning process that starts with the learner's experiences and where the popular educator spends a great deal of time listening and learning about the culture and community concerns of the learners, out of which are developed generative themes and a political analysis.

- Learning by doing.

What came through my interviews was that popular education is simultaneously a philosophy of social learning, a particular approach/method of teaching-learning and a set of exercises or "tools."

Some key characteristics of popular education held by most practitioners are as follows:

- An experiential learning approach

- Collaborative and participatory

- Focused on the struggles of oppressed and marginalized communities

- Contextualized to specific communities

- Focused on collective rather than individual learning

- Engages participants in critical social and political analysis often (but not exclusively) from a Marxist and anti-capitalist framework

- Encourages an action-reflection model of learning

- Tends to involve adults rather than youth

Different Expressions of Popular Education

In my interviews I saw six different organizational expressions of popular education. While these are presented as distinct types, in practice several popular educators incorporated elements from several types. However, I present these six different types as a way of illustrating the different forms popular education work is being conducted.

1. *Folk education* grew out of the Danish folk school movement and tends to focus on individual growth and enhancement over against social or political change. The folk school movement assumes that changed people will in turn change society.

2. *A Train the Trainer approach* equips social change educators to work with their respective communities and organizations as they see fit in what George Lakey calls the "ripple effect."

3. *Community focused work* tends to concentrate its work with people in a clearly defined racial/ethnic community or geographical area, and as such tends to address a range of issues they may deal with changes with the needs and challenges faced by those people.

4. *Neighborhood Leadership development* focuses efforts on developing leaders to work in their local neighborhoods and communities.

5. *University based research centers* seek to carry on the traditional academic functions of teaching and research, while linking it to vital concerns in civil society. As such they are a center of academically oriented participatory action research, and a vital training ground for people who want to link their professional concerns with public needs.

6. *The Set of Tools approach* is used by organizations with an explicit activist orientation. These groups see popular education primarily as a set of the tools for experiential learning, action-reflection, and political analysis as they prepare people for or reflect on specific actions.

I should note that some of the organizations and individuals I studied differentiated themselves from popular education using terms such as "direct education", "community development," "public work" and "folk education." However, I have included them in my study because in a broad sense they still had much in common with the general conception of popular education.

Significant Themes in Popular Education

In my conversations several themes emerged that called for further analysis and discussion.

1. Whether in the context of a workshop or when speaking more generally about their work many interviewees placed a strong emphasis on *developing a sense of community* among people involved. Since popular education emphasizes the importance of dialogue, building a strong sense of connection and openness among participants is central. It is important for persons of privilege to see themselves as allies of the oppressed, rather than leaders and primary actors. As such, community is not developed just for its own sake, but as a means of creating political power among the people.

2. Many people I talked with used the language of *providing or creating space* for trust and dialogue. Space was discussed in the sense of literal, physical space such as a center or a room, as well as metaphorically as an emotional environment of trust and openness. While some used the language of creating a "safe space," others talked of an "open space" in the understanding that specific spaces are not equally safe for all people. When popular educators create space for people, they are offering an opportunity for those persons and groups to go through a transformational experience from feelings of powerlessness to an awareness of power, from confusion to vision, and from fear to courage.

3. In conjunction with building community and creating space, *dialogue* was seen as a key component in the learning process. Dialogue takes many forms: weekly/monthly forums, workshops, writing groups and one-to-one conversations.

4. Building on Freire's idea that everyone in a popular education setting is a teacher and a learner, *the role of the educator/facilitator* was key. The role of the facilitator is to lead the group to structure the group learning process. Individuals and organizations differed to the degree they saw the educator as an active participant in the learning process or a more removed facilitator of the process.

5. A commitment to *building a more truly democratic society* was an assumed matter of faith with nearly everyone with whom I spoke. For many popular educators democracy appears to be both a means to and an end of the educational work, embodying principles such as equality, participatory decision-making, struggle, and liberation. The goal of democracy is to create

environments where individuals and communities can flourish and develop to their fullest potential.

Logistical Issues: How the work gets done and is sustained

In my search for popular education centers, I found that the landscape is littered with programs that once did good work, but no longer are in operation. So, a significant portion of my interviews focused on the logistical issues underlying popular education work. I was interested to learn how one supported and sustained the work of popular education in the face of significant economic, political and cultural pressures.

Funding

Dylan Rodriguez writes: "Perhaps never before has the struggle to mount viable movements of radical social transformation in the United States been more desperate, urgent or difficult." Many of the people I interviewed would resonate with this statement; in fact several referred to the book from whence it came, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded.* In this book the authors point out that government and foundation funding generally is too restrictive or controlling for groups wanting to do social justice or social change work. Therefore the predominant means of funding used by most organizations was through individual donors, especially persons who had been directly affected by an organization's work. Other means of funding mentioned were as follows:

- House parties

- Sliding scale fees for workshops

- Small membership fees

- Social justice-oriented foundations such as Headwaters (Minnesota) and Bread and Roses (Philadelphia)

- Writing oneself into a grant being secured by an organization to which you are providing training

- Profit making business (provides jobs for community members and support for the organization)

A few organizations that had developed long standing relationships with local communities were able to get targeted foundation and government funding for specific programs. Also, Canadian organizations still receive some government funding but it is dwindling. However, what impressed me the most was the financial sacrifice most popular educators make in order to do this important work. Most did not draw their primary income from popular education, but from other jobs such as consultants, teachers, and professors or from their personal savings and retirement pensions.

Governance

The nature and work of the boards varied in terms of membership and roles. While in many ways the governing structures of these organizations were similar to the systems used by numerous other non-profit organizations, what stood out to me in most cases, was the fact the boards, be they advisory or otherwise, were comprised of people who were close to the work. Several of the people I spoke with stressed the importance of their board members being intimately aware of the kind of work that was being done. To help in this several organizations made sure that at least some of the board members had

been direct recipients of the services offered by the organizations. Others populated their board with allies who shared the commitment to social change through education.

Measuring Success

I was curious what keeps these popular educators going. What motivates them to continue in the work? How do they measure success? What metrics do they use to determine if they were having the desired effect on people and their communities? Some of the responses I received were as follows.

- For many people a key factor is the change in the lives and outlook of individuals, particularly in terms of their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

- For still others, it is the process of staying committed to the ongoing process of education and resistance.

- For others, success is measured in the number of people an organization touches in a given period of time.

- Another measure of success are the stories people tell after a training or action is over.

- Finally, there is an intuitive side to the work of popular education. As one looks to many of the indicators discussed above, one should ask questions such as: How are the relationships in the group going? Can we envision the long term effects of our work? Are we improving our process that can eventually lead to better results?

Concluding thoughts

I am grateful for all the people who took time to talk with me about their work as popular educators. When I began this project I had little idea as to how rich the experience would be for me personally, and thus it is difficult for me to summarize all that I learned in the process.

Popular education represents a network of committed academics and community activists who are working sacrificially for progressive social change in their communities, nations, and the world at large. They represent only a fraction of worldwide movement active in parts of Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. They are motivated by an educational philosophy that values the experiences and inherent wisdom of ordinary people, and believes that people can bring about equitable social change once they are organized and given tools to analyze their social, political and economic contexts. Popular education also promotes a particular approach to learning and a set of techniques, exercises and tools for helping people tap into their personal and indigenous knowledge.

Moreover, as Chris Cavanaugh says, popular education is a movement for social change that is often unrecognized, underfunded and undervalued. By design popular educators seek to "work themselves out of job" so that when they are successful, people no longer need them. Because they work for social change they often find it difficult to fund their work. Tom Heaney has lamented that the field of adult education has in many ways strayed from its original focus on progressive social change; he nonetheless finds hope that this commitment "lingers still in the work of grass-roots popular educators and organizers." I share both Heaney's lament and his hope as a result of the many conversations I was privileged to have. Popular education is a movement with which I am proud to be associated, and to which I hopefully can grow contribute in the years ahead.

Authors Note: I wrote up a much more extensive summary and discussion of the issues mentioned in this paper which is currently being considered for publication. However, any one wishing to receive the "longer version" of this paper, may contact me at dboyd@eastern.edu and I will be glad to send it to you.
- DB

Interviews Conducted

Interviewee

Organization

Location

Organization Web Site

Pancho Arguelles

Colectivo Flatlander

Kyle, TX

http://www.colectivoflatlander.org/en

Chris Cavanaugh, Deborah Konecny

Catalyst Centre

Toronto, ON – Canada

http://www.catalystcentre.ca

Jorge Chapa

Center for Democracy in a Multiracial Society (CDMS)

University of Illinois, Champaign- Urbana, IL

http://cdms.illinois.edu/

Shannon Dennis

Possibilities, Inc

Oklahoma City, OK

http://www.possibilitiesinc.org

Karen Dick, Milan Nadarajah, Deena Ladd

Workers Action Centre

Toronto, ON – Canada

www.workersactioncentre.org

Laura Dumond

La Escuela Popular Nortena (EPN)

Valdez, NM

 Article: http://intersiderale.collectifs.net /article.php3?id_article=322

Alan Furth

Cobscook Learning Center (CCLC)

Lubec, ME

www.thecclc.org

Pru Gell

The Change Agency

Austraila

http://thechangeagency.org

Olga Gladkikh

Coady International Institute

St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS - Canada

http://coady.stfx.ca

Davide Greene

Newark Freedom School

Newark, OH

None

David Haiman

Movement Matters

Washington, DC

http://www.movementmatters.net/

Daniel Hunter

Training for Change (TFC)

Philadelphia, PA

www.trainingforchange.org

Janise Hurtig

AREA Chicago/Popular Education Alliance (PEA)

PRAIRIE Group

Chicago, IL

http://chicagopea.blogspot.com/
http://www.prairiegroup.org/home.html

Alan Kader

ARISE

Chicago, IL

http://arisechicago.org/

Kazembe

Brecht Forum

New York City

www.Brechtforum.org

Maria Lugones

La Escuela Popular Nortena (EPN)

Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Philosophy, Interpretation & Culture

SUNY – Binghamton, Binghamton, NY

&

Valdez, NM

http://cpic.binghamton.edu/contact.html

Article: http://intersiderale.collectifs.net /article.php3?id_article=322

Amy Mondoloch

Grassroots Leadership College (GLC)

Madison, WI

www.grassrootsleadershipcolege.org

Parisa Nourizi

Empower DC

Washington, DC

www.empowerdc.org

Larry Olds

Popular Education News

Minneapolis, MN

http://www.popednews.org/

Erik Skold

Neighborhood Learning Project (NLP)

St. Paul, MN

www.augsburg.edu/cdc/westsidelearning

Chris Spicer

Institute for People's Education (IPE)

Amherst, MA

http://www.peopleseducation.org/

Jeff Winder

Wayside Center for Popular Education

Faber, VA

http://www.waysidecenter.org/

Additional Websites Consulted

Organization

Location

Website

Center for Democracy & Citizenship

Augsburg College, Minneapolis, MN

http://www.augsburg.edu/democracy/

Center for Participatory Change

Asheville, NC

http://www.cpcwnc.org/

Center for Popular Education & Participatory Action Research

University of California – Berkley, Berkley, CA

http://cpepr.wordpress.com/resources/

Center for Popular Research, Education & Policy, Inc. (C-PREP)

Rochester, NY

http://www.c-prep.org/index.php

Freire Institute

Great Britain

http://www.freire.org/

Freire Project

http://freireproject.org/

Highlander Research & Education Center

New Market, TN

http://www.highlandercenter.org /about.asp

Jane Addams School ofr Democracy

St. Paul, MN

http://www.augsburg.edu/cdc/janeaddamsschool /main_home.html

Project South

Atlanta, GA

www.projectsouth.org

Jefferson Center for Education & Research

Portland, OR

www.jeffctr.org

Kotare Trust

New Zealand

http://www.kotare.org.nz/home

Partners for Transformation

Ireland

http://www.trainingfortransformation.ie/

Partnership for Immigrant Leadership and Action (PILA)

San Francisco, CA

www.pilaweb.org

Ruckus Society

Oakland, CA

www.ruckus.org

The Strategy Center

Los Angeles, CA

http://www.thestrategycenter.org

Trapese Popular Education Collective

Great Britain

http://www.trapese.org

Social Justice Foundations consulted

Foundation	Location	Website
Bread and Roses Community Fund	Philadelphia, PA	www.breadrosesfund.org
Headwaters Foundation for Justice	Minneapolis, MN	www.headwatersfoundation.org