

DRAFT

A MEMOIR OF MY JOURNEY IN ADULT  
EDUCATION

THE MAKING OF  
A POPULAR EDUCATOR

**BY**

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**SECTION FOUR**

**POPULAR EDUCATION IN THE COLLEGE  
CLASSROOM**



## Chapter 28

### Theory and Popular Education in the College Classroom

It was in my last semester of teaching before I retired that some of my colleagues on the union's Faculty Development Committee asked me to lead a brown bag discussion on a Transformative Model of Education: Popular Education in the College Classroom. I shared some stories that made points related to my analysis and began:

*Have you ever had an uneasiness or a disconnect about the task of writing mission statements or defining goals and objectives as the first step in the educational process? Have you felt it, as I have, as a disconnect from the webs of complexity that are the reality of real educational practice in the classroom with real people? And if the work on mission, goal, and objectives is done with others, then doesn't the process always face the problems of different values and assumptions – that is, different philosophical roots – brought to the task by us who are trying to work together? Is there a disconnect between the competency statements with their often convoluted language, and what you think would be important? Or a disconnect from the transformations in people's lives that happen inseparably from the relationships in the classroom – transformations that result from the treatment of people with dignity and respect as co-learners and co-teachers and as meaning-makers about their society and themselves? Is there a disconnect between the contents of our curriculum as found in the documents we produce about it and what actually happens in our classrooms?*

*In 1948 Ralph Tyler published a little book important in the history of the takeover of most educational practice by technocratic or instrumental rationality. What he said, in a nutshell, was that educators need to define objectives, plan means to carry out those objectives, carry out those means, and evaluate to see if the objectives were accomplished. I have experienced this formula for years as the dominant ideology of educational practice, so pervasive that it is part of the unexamined background of most educational work. It is hegemonic, a good example of what that term means. It is so widely accepted as common practice that it escapes notice.*

*It is a technology of control. It is especially virulent in practices that emphasize competencies or outcome-based strategies. The paradigm that emphasizes competencies or outcomes, its sister movements that demand behavioral objectives, and all such models driven by a technological or instrumental rationality, are but one framework for planning and for engaging in educational endeavor. A complex and serious critique of this*

*practice exists. Habermas suggests that these practices are all part of the technocratic takeover of culture, to be resisted as processes of domination. They are also, as Steve Mann and other curriculum theorists have argued, systems emphasizing “knownendedness,” systems that truncate the debate over what is worth knowing, and thus set back students’ impulse toward emancipation and freedom. The Freirian tradition rejects the treatment of knowledge as a commodity and people as objects. These are the traditions that shape my ideas about educational work, not Ralph Tyler. But this is an esoteric debate for most. I am glad to finally have it before I leave my teaching job in the college classroom. It was stirring in me for all of my 26 years, often – always – put aside for expediency.*

I had been ignored earlier when I tried to raise questions in my division, with the Curriculum Committee, and with others in the college community about issues that derive from a rejection of Tyler’s model and an embrace of alternatives. After all, hegemony means any ideas from outside the dominant model can’t be considered. I began to think I was seen as just being old and out of touch. I resisted the imposition of the dominant model on my work, but often just complied because it was little problem to do so minimally. The imposition usually came in the preparation of course outlines for new or changed courses and had little or nothing to do with what I did in the classrooms

It was the work of John S. Mann – I mentioned him in Chapter 4 in connection with the Radical Caucus of ASCD – that first led me to a critique of the hegemonic model. Other influences mentioned above – Habermas and Freire – were important, too. For the purposes of this story I want to summarize a critique of the hegemonic model. To fully develop the critique would be a major writing project in itself, way beyond what I hope to accomplish here.

Stripped to its essence, the hegemonic model is a four-step process. Educators are to: (1) determine vision, goals, competencies, objectives; (2) select activities, resources, methods; (3) carry out activities; and (2) evaluate/assess in terms of (1) above. This is also the essence of most strategic planning models as well as most organizational development models. It now seems to permeate all spheres of social endeavor.

A summary of my critique of the hegemonic model can be expressed as a set of interlocking and overlapping claims.

- It disconnects from the diverse character of large-scale public institutions, the complexity of real life, the multidimensional tasks of educators, and the political dimension of social life.
- It is so widely accepted as the framework for educational practice that its nature as an ideology, its historic character, and its political purposes go unexamined.
- It requires agreement as the starting point of common work when it is neither possible nor desirable to reach agreement about matters deeply rooted in values, philosophy, and ideology. Asking for this agreement stalemates action and deadlocks the planning process. Resulting goal statements and formulations, e.g. core competencies, reflect either the political imposition of the powerful or are compromises no one believes in, agreed to not because they inspire vision or passions that would fire their implementation, but for expediency.
- It is profoundly conservative with its emphasis on knowledgedness rather than on the unfolding creation of knowledges.
- It treats knowledge as a commodity, de-emphasizing popular, traditional, and non-instrumental knowledges and supporting the arrogance of expertise and technocratic knowledge.
- It treats people as objects, denying their humanity as acting subjects in the world and as meaning-makers.
- It is based on a static view of human needs, wants, and goals, assuming that they can be known separate from contexts of action and that they are fixed like lumps inside a person.
- It reduces all appropriate action to instrumental action.
- It has a political function of putting boundaries on political discourses and political action by masking political power in our cultural institutions.
- It is an authoritarian rather than a democratic structure, with an overarching value of control.
- It is a good illustration of how the enemy has outposts in our own heads.

In one way, the critique is mostly about the hegemonic model as a planning and managerial model. Little criteria are given by the model for shaping the kinds of activities we would employ in our educational work. This suggests that the hegemonic model and the transformative model that I characterize below may be apples and oranges. That is precisely correct. One model is about control, the other about empowerment; one is about the status quo, the other is about change; one is authoritarian, the other is democratic; one submerges political issues, the other brings politics and power to the fore; one is about existing knowledge, the other

is about creating new knowledge; one is for the elites, one is for the oppressed; one privileges attention to the ends we know, the other privileges attention to the paths we walk.

What I am calling the transformative model is a popular education model. I will turn to its main features and how it provides alternative ways to work and act as an educator in the college or university classroom.

At the beginning, I did not come to my practice in the community college with the ideas that follow, certainly not with a repertoire of practice fully formed. The repertoire is not static in any case. Even now, after I have left college teaching behind, my popular education experiences doing workshops and conferences with non-profit peace and justice groups add to the repertoire new practices I might have used in my classroom teaching.

On the preceding pages I have traced many of the experiences that led to the development of the ideas I have now. I do see in this tracing, however, that many of the theoretical underpinnings in this work had been long in place. My twenty-six years of teaching moved me from theory to practice.

My basic principles for popular education in the college classroom – the tasks in a transformative model – again interlocking and overlapping:

1. Helping people name their world, tell the stories of their experience, speak and find their voice at the educational event.
2. Using tools of social analysis that help people connect their experience to a broader understanding of that experience, to an understanding of the historical, political and other social connections.
3. Using the arts, music, theater, dance, and other such creative modes as a different kind of voice and way of knowing in the process of naming, understanding, and transforming our world.
4. Advocating a people/community-centered versus a banking approach to knowledge – in other words, a participant-centered process of knowledge creation rather than a podium-centered process of knowledge distribution.



5. Addressing the teacher/learner-learner/teacher issues of power and relationships.
6. Linking education and action, linking reflection and action.
7. Addressing race, class, gender, culture and other issues of privilege and oppression.

I have come to see these interlocking principles as building blocks in an educational planning process that differs from the hegemonic model. Some corollaries derived from the principles above:

- Seek agreement about actions to be taken together. To do so will require a clarification of values and philosophy. We can rarely know goals, purposes, visions separate from specific action contexts.
- Keep in the forefront of the analysis the developmental nature of purposes, goals, and needs, all of which develop and transform through experience. Do not relegate their developmental nature to the background.
- Remember that these are interlocking principles; in planning there are interlocking tasks. There is no one preferred starting point.
- Make room for action other than instrumental action – action as an instrument to achieve goals. Other kind of action could be reactive action, spontaneous action, expressive action, exploratory action, and intuitive action.
- Acknowledge the humanity of people as subjects, not objects. To do this, include philosophical and valuing activities in which people can act as subjects.
- Start with the experience of the participants: Create an environment in which people have a variety of ways to identify (to name) their experience and to have new experiences from which they can learn. The experiences can include reading, writing, viewing, discussing, community service, political participation, interviews, charrettes, simulations, and other classroom activities. There are many tools for the task in addition to traditional ones. A key point is to make the participants in the class and their experience the center.
- Find ways to use the arts. The arts have a special place in popular education but find their way with difficulty into the college classroom. College teachers do not often know they can be artists too.

- Use a full range of reflection activities. Reflection is different from evaluation or assessment. Reflection is a broader concept. In reflection people systematize experience: deconstruct; problem-pose; identify next steps; examine changes and transformations in goals, objectives, needs, values; name commitments; examine feelings; and identify hopes. Reflection is also about evaluation. It is important in educational work to build in activities and processes of reflection, evaluation among them.

(Within hegemonic practice evaluation has most often been a process of defining measures to determine whether objectives were achieved. The claim above that the hegemonic model privileges knowledgedness is a recognition that in that model, evaluation is conducted in terms of what was known at the beginning. Since this clearly is not adequate to describe what goes on in education, evaluators talk of “formative evaluation processes” as well. My own short career as an evaluator of alternative education programs in the 1970s ended as the concept of formative evaluation was being put forward in the evaluation field. I took the introduction of the idea of formative evaluation to be an adjustment to the limitations of the hegemonic model, an adjustment necessitated by the complexity of real human educational activity. Of course it makes sense to attend to what else was learned in addition to what the objectives define.)

In taking the advice of dian marino to “Be passionately aware that you may be completely wrong,” (advice I mention in the following chapter, “Professing”) I have been working to frame some of the critical questions about this transformative model. I ask: What are characteristics of an environment that puts students as subjects at the center? Can instrumental rationalities, e.g. the dominant model, be utilized inside a broader framework for educational work? Why can’t I write goals for achieving the kinds of things that happen in the transformative model? If we create adult relationships of reciprocity with our co-learners, and if we disclose our objectives, even dialogue and negotiate over them, can we mitigate the problems of control? Recognizing diversity and the dynamics of political struggle over which ideas will be dominant in our times, what happens with the classroom’s complex interactions if all are

subjects, and respect and trust are present? What use should be made of the teacher's head full of deposits of knowledge and understandings?

There are some factors (Freire might have called them limit-situations) that impact practice in college teaching. I have listed some that come to mind as I write now. I am sure that when college teachers gather and talk about their practice, the list will grow.

- *The length of the term:* We have a time-limited relationship with students but trust, respect, voice develop over time.
- *Power differences in the classroom:* It is our responsibility to make the power in the classroom transparent – including propaganda analysis.
- *The gatekeeper's dilemma:* Which is the greater risk, letting dead minds or some of the undeserving through the gates?
- *Bearing responsibility for influencing others:* How do we profess and present a point of view, knowing we will be influencing others whether we acknowledge our point of view or not?
- *Difficulties constructing experience from which learning happens:* Among these are the classrooms themselves, length of teaching experiences, complex and busy lives of students, and levels of communication skills.
- *The task is making sense of the world:* Which ways of ways of understanding, which of the worlds multiple knowledges does one bring to bear? (Are they tools or constraints?)

The essays that follow provide many illustrations of these interlocking principles and points. The essays are meant to form a collage from which I hope the reader can find useful ideas for both their theory and practice. I hope, too, the essays will be provocative and challenging. If I don't spark some anger and defensiveness in college teachers, I have not done my job. Occasionally, as well, I hope for empathy with the joys, excitements, and privileges I have experienced on the journey. I have walked many paths on this journey, and hope that my feet have helped to make some paths as well.



## Chapter 29

### Risks

When I was a young man, before I even knew that I someday wanted to be a college teacher, the Great Gatekeeper of Western Civilization somehow heard about me. I guess he knew the path I would someday be on and thought it was never too early to get someone on the straight and narrow. Not wanting to leave too much to chance, he appeared in my dreams to begin to teach me what I was going to need to know in the future career I didn't even know I was going to have. At that point I could just as easily have been a block layer like my father – I learned the skill and there was good money in it, or been in the slammer if I had ever gotten caught. Oh yes, maybe I was destined to be a college teacher. In the school bus on the way home from high school games I used to joke about starting Gudvik U on the big hill that rises up about 20 feet above the rest of the bog just south of the Canadian border a few miles from Baudette. We always named the institution after the only nickname I was ever given. I was really Gudvik Jr. My brother, a year older, was the real Gudvig, short for “goddamn vagabond goon,” which really fit him better than me. I don't know how the “g” at the end got changed to a “k.” But after he went off to the University of Minnesota to try to be a 180-lb lineman on the football team, the name was pretty much left to me.

But back to my encounter with the Great Gatekeeper of Western Civilization. This figure appeared in my dreams several times to be sure I got the message. He was tall and fit, broad-

shouldered and strong, sort of like my image of a successful corporate executive or head of HRD right off the pages of *Forbes* or *Fortune*. In my dream I was made to go up to the blackboard and write over and over, “Don’t risk the mistake of letting the unworthy through the gates.” After each repetition as I stepped back to start the next I was made to shout, “Standards, standards, standards.”

Now it wasn’t one of those dreams that woke me up in the night in a cold sweat – that dream is always about some other figure demanding to know what I am going to do with my life to make it better for those who follow. That is really scary. Besides, I don’t really pay much attention to dreams. The whole thing with the Gatekeeper just sat there in my memory until I had my first college class and had to decide what to do.

I have to tell you some other things about myself, too. I had the good fortune to not ever be properly qualified for the college teaching jobs I got. I didn’t have credentials, and you might say I was never properly socialized for my jobs. I happened to live in a window in history when such things were possible, where ability and a little luck were all you needed to get in. I did finally get qualified on paper, but not with the degrees any proper search committee would want today. As I said, it was a window in history.

I was always looking for other perspectives and other ways of doing things. I don’t think I learned that on the school bus. I did have a teammate who knew all the lyrics to all of Harry Belafonte’s songs and would sing them on the bus. I tried to learn them, too, but never got beyond “Oh the man peabba, and the woman peabba...” As I never did very well in high school with this boy-girl, man-woman stuff, I was always hoping that I could have the experience and learn what the song was about. I got stuck on that lyric and didn’t even learn the rest of the songs.

I had gone off traveling after college, and fooled around with my life for quite a few years. I went to Africa, and you know I went to see the Bohdi Tree where the Buddha sat and was enlightened, and I saw all that sexually explicit decoration on temples in Nepal. A United States embassy guy in Thailand once wanted to know how that would help my career. He called me in because they wanted to know about some questionable stuff I was up to having lost my traveler's checks several times. I guess he had a point about the career.

What I wanted to tell you about was one of the teachers I met in my travels. One wouldn't know she was a teacher at first. She never told anyone what to do or made anyone do mind deadening activities like writing on the board. All she seemed to do was ask questions, listen to people's stories, and get them talking to each other when they came in the room. She was always asking people to go off and look at things or try things out and asking people for help solving problems she was wondering about. She even asked people to try out different ways of being democratic while they were at her place. There was always a big hullabaloo around her and she seemed interested in just about everything. People around her were always writing songs and poetry and plays, drawing pictures, playing with cameras in ways that both posed and solved the problems everybody was talking about. It was pretty impressive. It made one just want to hang around and be part of it all.

People came and went all the time. By this time I was pretty sure I wanted to be an educator, so I got pretty curious when I realized that she was giving everyone who left a master's certificate. I didn't seem to ever find quite the right moment to ask her about it. As the weeks passed and I began to realize that I missed my family and the Minnesota winter, I just had to go. She walked me down the path to her gate. On the way down the path, even before she handed me my master's certificate, I finally got to ask her the question that had been burning inside of

me for weeks. “Why,” I asked, “do you risk giving your masters certificate to the unworthy by giving it to everyone? Shouldn’t everyone have to demonstrate they earned it?” She just smiled softly and said gently, “I would rather risk that I give it to the unworthy, than risk letting dead minds out of my gate.” She gave me a hug and a kiss and I was on my way.

You maybe can guess which risks I came to take in my college classroom.



## Chapter 30

### A Circle of Chairs

The chairs were arranged in a circle, about thirty-five of them filled on the first day of class. One by one around the circle people were saying their name and something about themselves that would help others remember their name. I hadn't looked carefully at the faces, just cruising along doing my familiar activity with which I began all of my classes. The voice halfway around the circle across the room from me said, "I'm John Elliot." The name startled me out of my routine. I looked more carefully at the face and replied, "Yes you are." John had been a classmate of my oldest son Andy in the Spanish immersion program they had begun in kindergarten at Wilder School near our home in South Minneapolis. His younger brother, Aaron, had been in my second son's class. John and his brother had had a period of friendship with my sons and had been at our house frequently. They also played on the soccer teams I coached at Powderhorn Park during our short soccer dynasty fueled by my superstar sons and some of their friends. Aaron had been one of the stars of our second city championship for 12-and-under players. I was disappointed when he decided to switch from soccer to football. John had quit soccer earlier, and by then our children were in a different school, so I hadn't seen him for some time when he showed up in my class as a 22-year-old.

One of the small pleasures of being a faculty member at the only urban community college in the Twin Cities was the chance to work with students with whom I had some prior

connection: friends or classmates of my sons at South High School or earlier grades, people from the world of soccer and hockey, sons and daughters of acquaintances and friends from my activist world, sons and daughters of former students – I am sure there are categories I miss.

John was an outstanding student. I am sure it helped that he was keenly interested in the content of the class, World Politics, confirming as it did some of the ways he had begun to understand the world. He was also the son of teachers; it was not surprising that he had the skills necessary to succeed at academic work. He was an especially good writer. But he came to our college from unsuccessful attempts at other colleges. He came to us at 22, not at 18. I often wondered whether he would have done as well had he come at 18 to a place where he was treated differently than he had been in the typical classrooms of his first experience at college. I would like to think so, but I cannot be sure. In any case John was one of many students coming back to college to try again after failed experiences elsewhere and a disenchantment with the work opportunities available to them. I recall this group as mostly young men, not women. Some of the young men, like John, were outstanding students. More frequently it was the many late-entry women with whom I worked who had the awesome talents. John gets two points in the standings for students I most enjoyed, one for his prior connections and one for being one of the bright returning male students.

Thinking about John and our reunion in the classroom reminds me of why the thirty-five chairs were in the circle with the rest pushed off into the corners. I don't know who decided that classes should have fifty people in them, thus fifty chairs – or who decided that the chairs should all be lined up in rows. I rarely had a full class, never wanted one, either. I always fought to keep the maximum class size at thirty-five in the College for Working Adults. I conceded in the increase from thirty to thirty-five that administrators wanted because the classes were not filling

up at thirty, since five more wouldn't make a practical difference. When I took over the political science classes after Art Hill retired, his political science classes, like all in the social science division, had a class size of fifty. It didn't make any difference to Art, he just lectured anyway. It would have made a difference to me with my style of working in the classroom. Although fifty was the upper limit, fortunately I rarely had more than thirty-five.

Thinking about Art reminds me of his connections to Myles Horton, and thinking about Myles reminds me of experiences with him and circles of chairs. It was interesting to get to know Art in the years we shared on the faculty. He was one of the only African-American members of the faculty. Art had connections to Highlander; his dissertation research in history included the county where Monteagle, Tennessee, was located, Highlander's first home. He knew Myles and he knew stories about Myles from his own family. One thing he knew from his uncle who worked at the train station near Monteagle where Myles often waited for trains, was that the Black people knew who Myles was. They knew Myles was an ally in the fight to end discrimination. They couldn't talk to him, but they were looking out to see that no one bothered him. Art was always my best ally in arranging for Myles' visits to our campus in the 1980s. By the last visit in the spring of 1989, Art had retired, he was about 70 by then. He died shortly after retirement.

I put the chairs in a circle when Myles came. He always insisted that the sessions would be dialogues, the sessions would be about hearing what everyone had to say. Then Myles would talk the whole time telling stories, perhaps pausing long enough for a question or a comment that would remind him of another story. No one minded – he was a good storyteller. But dialogue it was not. Over the years I heard a lot of the stories, many more than once. Herb and Judy Kohl

did a terrific job in capturing those stories and more in *The Long Haul*, the autobiography they helped Myles write.

I was with Myles at workshops with adult educators at Highlander a few times too. There he didn't talk much. He sat back rocking in his chair and listened, only occasionally speaking up with some sharp and clear intervention. I always took the fact that Myles had two kinds of behavior to mean that at Highlander he was working, and guest speaking was something different. It also suggests that sometimes you don't need circles.

Back to the first day of class: I was doing my opening activity, learning people's names and asking them to learn each other's names. I always did this activity unless the class was bigger than thirty-five, when I used some other technique rather than the circle. Speaking to say your name and something about yourself – the exact question varied with my mood and whim, the question being less important than the process – was an important part of establishing an environment where people were subjects, not objects. Facilitating people knowing each other's names was just another step in the process.

I would begin the process with my name, Larry, and model the statement I wanted from them, and add that I would come back to say more about myself. I would also come back to explain why introductions were first, before the syllabus that provided the framework for the class, but didn't think it was important to explain it at that point. I asked people to say the name they wanted others in the room to call them and to answer the question or make the statement I had asked for. I always went around the room to the left. When everyone had spoken, I would go around the room and try to name everyone. Then I would ask them to do it. The process continued until everyone had named everyone else in the room. With thirty-five people it takes about half an hour.

In the process of facilitating the name learning there were several other things I did. When people spoke softly I asked them to repeat what they had said. After four or five names were given, I would say each of the names to provide an ongoing review. Before I went around for the first time to try to name everyone, I established the protocol that if I didn't remember a person's name after a second or two, they would say it. I then went around the circle, making sure I missed a few names, establishing that it was ok to miss, that we could laugh nervously and carry on. Sometimes I would ask for volunteers to go around and name everyone. The first volunteer would usually be someone who got every name right, upping the standard from my deliberate bungling. If I started with volunteers, I would continue until the volunteers were exhausted, then go around to get the remaining people to participate. Sometimes, rather than asking for volunteers, I would just go around the room, going to my left of course, and have everyone give it a try. In all the years I did this activity there were fewer than a handful who would not take part in saying the names of others. Occasionally someone would be too shy, or lacking in confidence to try.

International students were often the biggest challenge, both because they frequently had unfamiliar names for the other students and because the American names were unfamiliar to them. Also they sometimes either had been schooled into silence or were from a cultural background in which they didn't speak up with traditional authority figures like a faculty member in the room.

This opening activity may have caused people to drop out of the class; I have no idea whether it did or didn't. It certainly signaled that this was not a class where one could sit quietly in the back, take notes, show up for a midterm and a final, and get the credits. I make no apologies for not participating in that process.



## Chapter 31

### Professing

Long ago my friend, Tom O’Connell, either in some speech in our early alternative school days, or when we worked together on the College for Working Adults ten years later, quoted Paul Goodman. Goodman, Tom said, advocated that professors be about professing, that is, about taking sides, about taking positions on the issues of our times. I knew a right idea when I heard one and embraced the position. But I wasn’t a professor in spite of students often calling me that. Our faculty union contract did not have any categories of academic rank. For a long time our contract designated us as “Instructors,” but when people began to feel that was somehow an inferior title, we became “Faculty Members.” I liked that. It was descriptive. The union also passed a resolution that Faculty Members could call themselves professors if they wanted to. Of course some seized the opportunity. I always felt I could be an instructor or a faculty member, it didn’t much matter. I could still profess.

As I mentioned earlier dian marino put together readings for one of her classes in a book on whose cover, as though it were the book’s title, was the phrase “Be Passionately Aware.” This would have been a good title for a collection by dian, an extraordinary popular educator whose last years were spent in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. She was one who didn’t just make people get outside the box, she made them remake the box, layer it, color it, move its edges, re-orient it, circumvent it, and whatever you could imagine could be

done with it when minds stretched around problems. The second page of her collection of readings completed the title: “That You May Be Completely Wrong.” It is good advice for one doing some professing.

I often asked myself if the participants in my classes felt propagandized. I sometimes asked them that, too. I am quite certain that some did feel that way. I am equally certain that most did not.

Both questions are important: the question of propaganda in the classroom and the question of whether the participants feel propagandized. It is easy for people who are non-critical to confuse professing and propaganda. A good safeguard against the confusion is to help students develop good crap detectors, that wonderful tool that Postman and Weingartner advocated in their alternative school-era book, *Teaching As a Subversive Activity*. Another good safeguard is to treat the participants subjects. This happens not by telling them they are all subjects now, but by giving them voice, creating the opportunities for people to exercise that voice, to put their voices in the center. There are many things that limit voice, that prevent the participants from coming to know themselves as subjects. The experiences they have had with schooling are one, the structures of the classrooms another. I come back to some reflections on voice and icebreakers after a slight detour for an observation about the participants in my classes.

I like showing off for people from out of town, especially my elders whom I like and respect. I got not one but two opportunities when Aimee Horton last came to visit. The first opportunity was in a class where she sat in to see what we were up to; later she talked a little about her experience as an activist both at Highlander and in Chicago. It was a class in which we had a big circle and everyone was reporting on their experiences of active political participation, which was one of the class requirements. As we went around it was clear to me that this was a



typical group for my college. Person after person showed their radical tendencies as they talked of their experience. Even after many years at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, both under that name and earlier permutations, I was often surprised how progressive, how radical, the students were. It caught me up short. It always gave me hope. And I always had to remind myself that it shouldn't be a surprise given the class background and life experiences of most who enrolled. It was a struggle sometimes to protect the space for participants to express conservative views, protect them not from me and the weight of my professing, but from their classmates who were much more radical than they.

My second opportunity to show off for Aimee happened on Sunday afternoon. Aimee and I were sitting together watching In The Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theater's annual pageant in Powderhorn Park. The parade that preceded the pageant had been spectacular and moving as always. As we sat on the edge of the lake watching the puppets perform in the pageant, the forces of winter, darkness and evil had been done in by green and other forces of good, the giant guardian puppets had returned, and the sun had been summoned from the east and arrived by flotilla across the lake to waken the Tree of Life for the final piece of the celebration of returning spring. When the pageant was over, as Aimee and I got up to make the short walk back to my house on the edge of the park, the woman sitting next to Aimee said hello and reminded me that she was a former student. She said that she had finished her BA and MA degrees since leaving the community college but that her classes with me were the best of all she had taken. I think she was someone who valued the professing.

When I was teaching at Teso College Aloit in Northeastern Uganda in the early 1960s, word came to us that the students at Sir Samuel Baker School a couple of hundred miles north had gone on strike. One of the objects of their strike, the rumor went, was a fellow teacher in the

Teachers for East Africa program. The students' complaint about him was that he "taught ferociously but unintelligibly." I often wondered what they meant by that. Does it have anything to do with the problems of a banking approach to knowledge? I don't know the answer, but it is a tantalizing turn of words.

I am trying to find good words to describe the educational paradigm shift that moves the center of educational activity from distribution of knowledge by a presenter to the process of creation of knowledge by the participants. Too often the presenter is the main story when they ought to be simply the means for the participants' processes. I don't think one could teach "ferociously but unintelligibly" if they had made that shift.

Not long ago my friend, a professor of adult education, expressed the desire to learn more techniques that he called "ice-breakers" for the classroom. By that I took him to mean different ways to get the students in his classes to meet each other, to be comfortable in talking, and to break down the teacher-student barriers. It is a laudable desire, but I found myself wondering about his framing of this process as "ice-breakers." This was a term I took to mean something that preceded the real business of the class, something that breaks the icy silences in rooms full of strangers – in many classes strangers still after sitting together for a whole term. I also found the word "ice-breakers" used in a new book on popular education to describe some of the activities it described, so my progressive friend isn't alone in his use of the term.

The term implies activities I associate with a beginning. I think the concept of "ice-breaker" is misleading because it marginalizes the activity rather than placing it at the center. Part of creating the learning place is to establish voice by all the participants, to give people the real experience of being subjects, not objects, in the place. This is not marginal activity for the first few minutes. It is one of the core activities of education. Further, participants must have

experiences in which they can learn that they occupy the center, and that the podium and whoever occupies it can exist to serve them. It is, I found from my teaching years, not something that is learned in the first few minutes of the first class, or even in the first few weeks by the well-schooled people who come to college classes. It takes weeks for many and some never understand it, never overcome their notions that the podium is the center.

I am reminded of those who label one of the steps of the adult education process as “establishing climate.” Is this a term used by Knowles or much more widely among adult educators? I no longer remember such facts. The concern for establishing a proper climate seems to me also to place the activity of establishing voice and the presence of participants as subjects before the “real” education begins, and therefore on the margin. These central activities are reduced to the process of establishing climate. In my thinking they belong not on the margin, but at the core.



## Chapter 32

### Mary

Mary wanted a Bachelor's Degree. She came to the community college with that in mind. She had three children at home, the youngest now 11 so they were able to take care of themselves. She finally kicked out the husband who was always putting her down and ridiculing her interest in going to college. She had grown up poor in the country, hating the town school she had to attend. Getting there took 45 minutes on the bus; then she had to face the scorn of the town kids. She managed to hang on long enough to graduate but then fled the country for the city as soon as she finished high school. Like so many women who found their way into my evening classes, she was very bright – awesomely bright would be more accurate. One of the great pleasures of teaching in the community college was to work with women like Mary, to see their nervousness and lack of confidence wither as they learned over the course of the term that they not only could succeed but they were really good at reading, writing, talking, thinking and the other parts of academic work.

Mary was special, however, because she not only found out that she was a bright and able scholar, but she also saw what I was working to achieve in the class. She came to understand the pedagogy as well as the content of the class. It is she who on the last day of class, as we went around for final evaluative words, gave me my greatest compliment as a teacher. “Never

underestimate what you have done here,” she said. “It was like going up to the window, wiping away the dirt and looking out for the first time.”

Remembering Mary and her story wells up strong emotions in me. Even though it is more than thirty years since I knew Mary, the thought of her, the joy of her words, the profound sense of accomplishment, chokes me up. But more than that, thinking about her and others who made their way through the short interludes in time that were my classes, leads me to one of the most important theoretical points I have to make about the work of educators. Her experience takes me directly to the core of a critique of hegemonic educational practice, to one of the most important pieces of that critique.

Imagine if, when faced with Mary and others like her the first day of class, I would have said to myself, “I need to know what these people need and want.” I could have accomplished that with a needs assessment, maybe a questionnaire, maybe some interviews. I could have then taken what they thought they needed those first days of class, related it to my goals for them, and convinced them there was a connection. I could have taught to meet those identified needs and they would all be on their way to a degree. But what are the chances that Mary knew she needed to wipe away the dirt? Or that she would have experienced my saying, “Mary, you need to learn to wipe away dirt” as any more than one more voice telling her she was inadequate? In any case I couldn’t have said that – I didn’t know that was what she needed. Mary taught me about wiping away dirt, I didn’t teach her. Or, a better way to say it, we were co-learners. We learned it together.

The most important thing about needs is that they are dynamic and develop in action, in experience, over time. They are not lumps in someone’s stomach, or brain, that can be known and thus form the foundation for curriculum. If you need an image for understanding needs,

think of a video animation of a galaxy, a swirling mass of matter and energy, contracting, expanding, moving through space and time. You can take a picture of the swirling galaxy, and learn something of it. But you cannot know and understand it from a single picture. I think the same is true for values, goals, and purposes. They cannot be known in a meaningful way separate from their motion, that is, separate from action. They cannot be known in a meaningful way prior to the beginning of an educational event. It doesn't take very long sitting in a circle listening to others tell of their struggles, their problems, their desires, needs, and wants before people begin to transform their own desires, wants, and needs. I have seen it in my classes, I have read about how it happens at Highlander as folks sit around in that circle of rocking chairs.

I have heard Stephen Brookfield tell a story about whitewater rafting that makes a point that I need to bring to the surface of this consideration. Imagine, the story goes, that you are about to set off on your first whitewater rafting experience. Would you prefer as your whitewater rafting instructor George, a quiet, obviously sensitive man who gets everyone to sit in a circle and then asks the group, none of whom have ever before gone through a narrow canyon of swirling rapids, "What do you want to know about whitewater rafting? I've read a lot about whitewater rafting so if we all talk about it, we can figure out what we need to know to get down the river." Or would you rather have Sven, tall blond and rough-talking, who says, "Come over here and listen up. I've been down this river over 70 times. This is what you'll need to know to get safely through the canyons. Listen and do what I tell you."

If that was our choice, most of us would prefer Sven. But the choice between George and Sven is a false choice. We shouldn't have to choose one or the other. I would prefer to have them both. I want someone like George, with his skills of keeping the conversation centered on creating the knowledge in the participants. And I want someone like Sven, with his broad and

deep experience of the river and the dangers. Sven to share what he knows. George to build trust, maintain dialogue, preserve the openness to allow any questions, and the ability to see that everyone's questions are heard. Sven could have George in him, or George, Sven. We have far too often accepted Sven by himself as the model of an educator.



## Chapter 33

### Seeing

I was riding along in the passenger seat of Nikki's Volvo. Al was driving as we headed for the Everglades for a boat trip to see the birds and, we hoped, dolphins and other wildlife of Southern Florida. Rose and Nikki were in the back seat. I was looking out at yet another golf course surrounded by giant luxury homes. The large stone signs at the gated entrances announced "Sunshine Golf Community" or "Isla Sandel Golf Community." Ironically the stonework that held the signs was of the kind that my father might have made late in his life as a mason. His last job before he died, was a large stone sign outside the office of Marvin's Windows in Warroad, that northern Minnesota town that holds some of the connections to his roots. His stonework was every bit as nice as the ones we were passing.

I asked Al what he saw when he looked at the scene we were passing. Then, not waiting for an answer, I told him some of what I saw. I saw mono-cropped grass growing because it was heavily fertilized by oil-based chemicals, herbicides sprayed every few months to kill the errant and unwanted vegetation that would surely try to join the grass, and non-organic pesticides to kill every insect that might annoy the golfers who could afford to live in such a place. Behind the scene of chemicals came a row of women with breast cancer, men with prostate cancer, and a whole room full of children struggling to breathe, periodically using the asthma inhalers they all held in their hand. Then in my mind's eye I saw all the other green expanses of golf pastures

sucking up a desert's scarce water just down the road from the dry fields of farmers too poor to buy water to irrigate their crops so they might have a livelihood. As that old image from my travels across Turkey to India came into my mind, an image of a million people huddled under one blanket, I turned off the mental pictures. With a kind of laugh to cover the realization that I might have gone too far -- I really didn't know Nikki's friends Al and Rose very well -- I said that I could see an attractiveness in the scene, too. Al didn't say anything. We went on to have a very nice day on the boat ride. The dolphins did come to play in the wake of our boat and entertain us all as we traveled out through the islands of the Everglades to the edge of the Gulf of Mexico.

The whole episode set me thinking about seeing and not seeing -- about how much of my work as an educator has been about helping people see, and how much of the political work we face is about both helping people see and seeing with them.

One of the times in my work life when I used a related metaphor, I was teaching Personal and Career Development, one of the entry-level courses required by the Chemical Dependency Specialist Training Program. I often spoke of that experience as being one of holding up different mirrors to help people look at themselves. I had begun by then to use mirrors -- activities and assignments that helped people see class, race and gender factors, their privilege or lack of it, and their relationship to schooling. I did psychological profiles, learning styles, and other liberal and individualistic stuff in those classes, too. Today I would use more mirrors that would reflect people's place in communities, help them understand who they were in relation to others, show them the social side of themselves. But what I did in those early classes was a pretty good start in dealing with important issues. I always got plenty of feedback from the participants in the class that made me feel like what I did was a success. After all, I was finally

actually doing adult education. Perhaps it was this course and my struggles as a teacher that helped me clarify that people are both social beings and individuals, that who we are as individuals is deeply and dialectically connected to who we are as social beings. It helped me see how far out of balance our culture is, with its pathological emphasis on the individual side of our nature.

In his book *Maeler's Regard*, Michael Newman constructs an example to illustrate Freire's idea about how the naming of the world can be revolutionary:

...if an educator works with a group of shanty-town dwellers in order to help them see, that is, really take note of, the water flowing down the center of the street, they will name the water as dirty and therefore undesirable. If they rename it as sewage, now it is not only undesirable but evidence of the bureaucratic neglect of the district. If they rename it as a feature of the district that the authorities would never let happen in wealthier suburbs, it becomes an example of injustice. In this process of naming and renaming, the learners come to see the world not in terms of givens to be uncritically accepted but in terms of problems to be addressed.

The process described was not unlike my seeing of the golf community.

There is a lovely mural on East Lake Street in South Minneapolis not far from my home and not far from the Lake Street bridge crossing the Mississippi River. The river divides the city at that point although, contrary to popular knowledge – how people in other parts of the country see our cities – the river is not, in general, the dividing line between Minneapolis and St. Paul. A big part of Minneapolis is east of the river. The mural is called *The Language of Hope*. I heard the story of the mural in early 2000 from Marilyn Lindstrom, the mural artist who accompanied me to Uganda to help facilitate the workshop we did there on Mural-Making and Popular Environmental Adult Education. Marilyn is an educator who facilitated the making of the mural on East Lake Street with a multi-racial group of teenagers.

On the ceiling of the downtown Minneapolis campus of the University of St. Thomas is a group of frescoes created by Minneapolis artist Mark Balma. The frescoes depict the seven

virtues identified by St. Thomas Aquinas from his study of the Apostle Paul, virtues at the core of the Catholic tradition. After a documentary video called “Fresco” was made of the project, the producer and writer, Deborah Boldt, according to an article in the Minneapolis StarTribune (September 5, 1999, p.B1) “..decided to see if the film “Fresco” could be used as a springboard to get young people to think about the fresco’s virtues and values in their lives.” One group to whom the frescoes were shown were teenage mural artists being mentored by Marilyn Lindstrom. Boldt was, according to Marilyn, “blown away” by the reaction of the young people who were ages 15- 19, both young men and women, African American, Native American, Latino(a), Hmong, Vietnamese and White. She was unprepared for their criticism that came from their seeing with the eyes of youth, gender consciousness, and diverse cultures. According to Lindstrom, many of the symbols and images in the frescoes contradicted the youths’ perspective of their own cultural symbolism and imagery. To her credit, Boldt recovered from the shock of their criticisms and helped raise the money for the young artists to create a mural showing their answer to the question, “What does it take to cultivate a human being?” – their view of virtues in these modern times. *The Language of Hope* was the result.

There is another illustration of seeing in the story. When the mural was created in the summer of 1999, the view of the wall on the side of the non-profit Migizi Communications where it was being painted was disrupted by large steel girders that held up a large billboard. The young artists just did their work behind those girders, and I’m sure, tried not to pay much attention to the advertisements overhead. The billboard loomed over the completed mural and distracted the eye. Fortunately someone could see what would be left when the girders and billboard were gone as they are now. It is also important to be able to see beyond what is.

## Chapter 34

### Tools for Collecting Experience, Collecting Knowledge

Charley thought that the cause of world hunger was overpopulation. He wrote that on the sheet I distributed for a five-minute write as we began the topic of food and development in my class on World Politics. He was not alone with this idea, as he soon found out. It was shared by many in the class. When he took home the interview sheet I gave out next and began to make notes on the answers to the same question by his friends, family, coworkers, and other contacts – people not in the class, the instructions read – he found that many others outside the class thought the same thing. As the second step of this learning process he had to compare his own answer from the five-minute write to those he gathered from others he interviewed. Finally, in the last step of the process, Charley and the others in the class presented papers with their analysis of the cause of world hunger. I hoped he knew by this time what was wrong with his answer. He didn't have to accept the analysis that would unfold in the class activities during the few weeks between the five-minute write and the due date for the paper. He didn't have to accept that world hunger is the result of a lack of democracy or, alternately, lack of control over land and lack of jobs. But in his final paper he had to account for that analysis. The course activities included videos, small group discussions, readings, case studies, and presentations. The process was both good methodology and good content.

Charley came back for another class with me. This time, in Introduction to Political Science, I had him do three interview activities, not at the same time, but with a similar idea about the power of educational tools that help people gather up their own knowledge and put it into a framework that helps them find connections and analyze it.

The first sheet I gave the students on the first day of the course contained instructions for an in-class activity called a Charrette. I prepared copies of six to eight similar interview sheets, each with a different question at the top. In this course some of the questions were general ones about politics, and some were questions which people with different ideas and different experiences might answer differently. Since I used this tool in many courses, the questions varied from course to course to reflect the topics and content of each course. We rearranged the chairs into banks of twelve, six on each side facing each other. Chairs were added or taken away from some the banks to make them ten or fourteen to adjust to the actual number of people in the class. One of the keys in arranging the chairs was to have a distinct inside and outside to each bank of chairs because the people sitting on only one side would move as the activity progressed. One of the challenges of the activity for the person conducting it is to systematically distribute the questions. The interview sheets with the questions were distributed so that a different question went to each person on one side of a bank, the same questions but distributed in the opposite order on the other side of the bank. It sometimes felt like chaos for a few minutes but, as in so many participatory activities, the room soon settled down. Everybody had a sheet with a question and was sitting opposite someone with a different question. Now they were ready to begin the interviews.

With the admonition that each person was to read their question to the other person, not hand the sheet to them to read it themselves, the interviews began. Five minutes were allowed

for the persons on each side of the bank to ask and answer the questions, two and a half minutes each. The instructions were to make notes, not to write sentences or to try to record the person's exact words. At the end of the five minutes the people on one side of each bank of chairs moved over one seat, with the person on the end going around to the empty seat at the other end of the bank. After the second interview the same people who moved the first time would do so again, the other side remaining stationary. For the remaining rounds of interviews, the time is reduced to four minutes. Usually the activity involved six interviews. Each person answered every question, including the one on their own interview sheet as would happen when the person opposite them had the same question as they did. The final step was for each, in the two or three minutes allotted, to identify in the space at the bottom of the form any generalizations or patterns they noticed in the responses to their question. Each then shared their generalizations briefly or, if time was short, I would sometimes put together a report on the generalizations to be distributed to everyone at a later class.

In my experience, this is a very engaging activity. It enlivens the room with energy. Everyone gets the experience of talking about politics. Everyone gets to know some of the other people better. It produces data about what people think.

Teacher boredom is one of the problems with participant-centered activities like this one in the classroom. The teacher only has something to do for about 30 seconds every four or five minutes when people are told to move. I often used the time to learn people's names while they were interviewing each other. I looked over shoulders at the interview sheets to see their names then practice them silently to myself until I could name everyone in the room.

The second sheet I handed out to Charley and his classmates came later in the term. Its purpose was to collect the notes he made from interviewing other people in his real life about

their political ideology – again, as in the other class, not people who were currently or had been members of the class. People worked in small groups to develop the questions to ask, questions that would be useful to reveal differences between conservatives, liberals, and socialists (and more sophisticated categories for those interested in a more finely tuned analysis). The questions were listed on the top of the interview sheets and then used by participants in their interviews. As one might imagine, the activities in the course – small groups, readings, a blackboard full of charts, diagrams, and lists, and other presentations – were a resource for creating the questions and for the analysis to come.

A third set of sheets I used in that course were not for personal interviews but were designed to interrogate alternative political publications. Each person examined four different periodicals that were not newspapers. Three of the publications had to be from varying ideological perspectives, the fourth could be whatever they chose. Of course, the questions provided a framework for analyzing the publications, including an analysis of its point of view. People were organized in groups for the activity. Each person in the group had to choose a different publication for each of the four rounds and each round included a small group meeting for participants to share what they found and make recommendations to their classmates. If anyone missed the sharing sessions they either had to get their group to re-convene outside of class time, or write a two-page review of the publication.

I gave them lists of the various publications identifying socialist, progressive, mainstream, liberal, and conservative choices.

One might ask, “What was learned from the activity?” I would answer informally that students liked the activity. They came to recognize the richness of the possibilities and the excitement that accompanied (for most) the discovery of publications and points of view of



which they had never heard. And they learned a whole variety of things from the publications they reviewed.

Often in my teaching I also wondered whether it might be more rewarding to know what was learned systematically as well as informally – to have done some “classroom research” to validate my impressions and hunches. (Classroom Research was one of the teaching improvement activities in which some of my colleagues were engaged.) On the one hand I endorsed the idea of collecting systematic information but on the other, pled that I did not have time. With a teaching load of five classes I had to learn to be content with informally knowing.

It is sometimes messy teaching this way. For one thing you have large amounts of time when people in the class are busy talking to each other, and there you are as the teacher with nothing to do but wait. You don’t know – you can’t know – what is being talked about in all those groups. It changes the dynamics in the group if you sit in. Not that the teacher shouldn’t sit in, but you have to mediate the dynamics if you do. Finally, your ego can get a little raw if it is the kind that likes to be the center of attention, that gets off on being listened to.

The ideas and practices I have been describing sound good. They were done in the college classroom. Why would you call it popular education? Simple. The tools these activities use give voice to the people, let them speak and engage and be present as subjects, not objects. They honor and support the gathering up of people’s knowledge. They broaden, deepen, and connect people’s knowledge, and help them to analyze and understand it. The questions and contents of the interview sheets in my classes addressed issues of privilege and oppression. The tools require activity by the participants, they draw their power as tools from the nexus of action-reflection.

Finally, regarding the use of the arts: It is intriguing to begin to imagine how I might have used the arts more extensively. For example, one might be asked to draw or illustrate the patterns or generalizations from the interviews. Or maybe all who had the same question in the charrette process might work together to write a verse for a song that expresses the collected opinions from their interviews.

Next time I'm teaching in the college classroom I think I'll push popular education a little further.

## Chapter 35

### Objectives, Grading, and Lecturing

This chapter combines stories and short comments on three aspects of working in the college classroom.

#### Objectives

Kelila was hot. She came early to class and sat her intensity in the second row. The whole quarter I fought the temptation to stare at her, to give her more than her share of attention. She, like Mary, was bright, awesomely bright. She read everything, wrote in a way that made me envious, was focused on knowing everything she could about World Politics. It was either all of these things or that she was able to read me and see what I cared about and do that. She asked me to write a recommendation for her application to a program for mature women at an elite East Coast women's college. I remember it as the most glowing recommendation I ever wrote. She got in with a big scholarship.

Where were the lessons about my work as an educator in her story? I am reminded of the problems of objectives. Kelila had already wiped away the dirt. What should be the course objectives for her?

I am reminded that it was always a question whether or not I even had objectives for the participants in the class. Do I have an answer to the question, "What knowledge, understandings, and skill do I want them to have?" They say if you don't know where you are

going, anywhere will do. Well, I want to embrace the “anywhere” in which we might find ourselves. As I make that embrace I want to point to the importance of also seeing where we are, and who is there with us.

As I came to doubt that we should privilege instrumental action over other kinds of action, it didn't make sense that in educational work it was more important to decide objectives before deciding what to do. The question is: Should “what” come before “why?” Or “why” before “what?” The sensible thing in planning is to make the decisions about “what” and “why” together. Practice provides a caveat: you can't know purposes separate from contexts of action. This argument just leads me back to the idea of action-reflection-action. We are back to one of the interlocking principles of popular education.

I always saw answering the question “What is it we need to know?” as problematic. Investigating the answers to the question should always be part of what we are doing in a learning context.

I wanted people to learn a lot about world politics, for example, but more importantly I wanted them to begin their own journey to that learning, to see that the journey is connected to who they are together with others, and as part of others. I focused not on objectives that define posts or gates along the journey, but on getting onto the road, and, as I used to say, on opening doors – now I might say, opening gates. I trusted that overall they would get far enough along the path, and some would be way out there by the time the term ended. Kelila, Mary, John, and others I have mentioned were way out along the path, and I remember them as special because they also saw the path.

Some people may say, “Oh, I understand – you wanted them to learn to learn.” No, I wanted them to learn about world politics, about our unjust and unfair world, about privilege and

oppression, about the problems we face, about who are their allies and enemies, about which side they are on. I know that any particular amount of learning about these things that can happen in our short time together is a beginning. From any particular post or gate it's possible to see many, many more places to go. The further you go, the further you can see, you can see how much you don't know. There is value in an ignorance-based outlook. Not because if you think you already know all you need to know, you are ignorant – although that statement has a resonance with the truth – but because we need to keep in mind how little we know. Another question I ask is, “How do we get people down the road as far as possible?” (The road being made of knowledge, understanding, and skill.) Do you control their steps, or trust them to walk? Are they objects or subjects? Is knowledge a commodity to be possessed, or something we create ourselves? For me, it was a question of which risks to take.

Is it contradictory, then, to give grades?

### Grading

Marilee earned the “B” she got in my class. It was the only blemish on her two-year record of “A’s” in the community college. She was a bright student, a delight to know and work with, one of those older re-entry women who were such a pleasure to have in the classroom. She tried hard to get a better grade. She would say later that my class was one in which she learned the most; she said it with sincerity. There were things about politics, a new terrain to her, she did not understand in time to answer properly on the tests. It was frustrating for us both, but my systems for grades didn't leave me the discretion to override the grades that came from the class grading formula that had been given in the course syllabus. To allow that element of arbitrariness would, I thought, be unfair and unjust.

Grading was one of the problems that I never satisfactorily solved. I approached it differently in different contexts.

When I was working with teachers in training, I asked students to grade themselves. I also made them develop a rationale for their grade, and spent some time in discussions about grading as a process. Grading would be an important issue in their lives in schools. We consequently spent quite a bit of time on the issue. When I began to teach in the community college, however, grading was not going to be an aspect of the lives for which people in my classes were preparing. I set up a system for determining grades, defined it precisely in the syllabus and implemented the system to determine the grades.

In the Free School context, as well as in the Folk School tradition from the Scandinavian countries, grades are anathema – maybe, too, in the lives of a majority of students worldwide. In the college context in the United States tradition they are a given. I thought of them as limiting situations and a reality with which we must deal. I accepted that good grades were a good thing for the class participants. I did my best to set up transparent systems so that it was clear what was needed to succeed, and hoped the system also allowed the worthy through the gate. I also struggled to devise a grading system that did not limit what might be learned.

I often wondered if my courses were too much work for students. I built complex systems of assignments that required ongoing preparation. The systems always required much more than studying for a midterm and a final. Participatory processes in the classroom depended on preparation by the participants. For example, people could not come unprepared to a class session built around a Reading Circle. Prep sheets for the discussions were required and it was required that they be turned in. I was the prep sheet police too: To be caught working on the sheets during the group session meant I didn't accept the prep sheets and required an alternative

assignment. The policing, however, never felt right to the libertarian elements of my spirit.

What mediated my discomfort about it was its transparency and that, as a limiting situation in the classroom, we could talk about it.

### Lecturing

A shifting of the burden of work from the faculty member to the student takes place when you stop lecturing and shift the focus to participant-centered knowledge creation. Some of my colleagues could lecture endlessly with little preparation – they seemed to know everything, so it was no problem to talk. Lectures always took me a lot of time to prepare. But so did the preparation to shift the burden.

One problem that I came to understand only late in my college classroom experience resulted from one of the ways I chose to present my considerations. I would use question-and-answer formats, responding to questions from the class members, to introduce and explain ideas. In the course of a session of questioning I might well present a whole lecture's worth of information. In many cases I would have notes in the classroom with me outlining the ideas. What I found was that at first participants didn't necessarily pay attention to the answers to other people's questions. They particularly didn't pay much attention to answers given by other members of the class, even though the class was structured for the participants to produce and share knowledge. The response to my method got better when I deconstructed the dynamic and began to describe it in class, and when we talked more about the theory of the methodology I was using. It got better, but the problem never was completely solved.





## Chapter 36

### Circles

I don't remember when I first heard of study circles. Long before I did hear of them, however, I had experienced the power of group work and had made small groups a part of my teaching repertoire. My early experience in the teacher training co-teaching with a person from Psychological Foundations, as well as our Laurel House encounter group-styled intentional community meeting practices, two experiences I describe in an earlier part of this book, contributed to my knowledge of groups as educational tools and my embracing of group work in my practice. The idea of learning circles grew over time. There are a half-dozen or more types of learning circles I find useful.

I first visited the Nordic countries in 1982 to attend the Meeting In Finland at a folk high school. Study circles were a major activity in the folk high school, but that could not have been when I heard about them first. I remember that I had been called on to talk about study circles during some of my coursework in my formal training as an adult educator in the late 1970s. I also knew before my trip to Sweden that thousands of Swedes had participated in study circles on the book, *Dig Where You Stand* by Sven Lindquist, a guidebook to help workers look into the history of the place where they stood at work, that is to help workers do histories of their workplaces. I developed an activity for my own classes based on the idea of *Dig Where You Stand* when I was teaching in our Work and Society block as part of the early days of the College

for Working Adults. And I was in touch with someone who was working to get the book translated into English and published in the United States in the early 1980s.

It was, however, during the summer of 1983, following my return to the Meeting In Finland, that I spent more time in Sweden and visited Hans Burgman, who at that time was still on the faculty of Linskoeping University training folk high school teachers. While in Sweden I also made a small tour of folk high schools. It was then I understood the scope of the methodology of study circles in Swedish adult education. I am not prepared to describe that understanding now. Len Oliver in *Study Circles: Coming Together for Personal Growth and Social Change* has written the story of study circles in Sweden; I'm sure Hans Burgman's book about the history of Swedish adult education as a force in the democratization movements in his country also discusses the story. Unfortunately Han's book has not been translated from the Swedish.

For me the study circle methodology itself has been less important than the evolution of my knowledge of circle methods more broadly conceived. I now advocate the use of not only study circles but also dialogue circles, discussion circles, question circles, reading circles, action circles, jigsaw circles, and culture circles. These are all variations on the central idea and together expand the tool box we need.

As I write in the winter of 2003, I have just been introduced to a new distinction between discussion circles and dialogue circles by reading Michael Newman's fine book, *Defining the Enemy: Adult Education in Social Action*. Newman thinks with more theoretical precision about adult educational practice than I. In his analysis of the work of Paula Allman I find the following helpful insight and language to distinguish between two types of circles – dialogue circles and discussion circles. Newman points out that Allman, in a discussion of Freire,

develops a challenging view of the meaning and use of dialogue. According to Newman she compares dialogue with discussion. Although discussion is a widely used and admired mode of encounter in adult education, it is an essentially an uncreative mode of group communication.

Discussion, according to Allman, is a process

...in which participants engage in a sharing of monologues. These monologues are composed of pre-existing ideas, knowledge or questions arising which participants offer to the group.

Dialogue, on the other hand, is a process in which

...participants undertake a critical analysis of their reality and formulate explanations capable of challenging conventional ones (1987, p.122)

In a nutshell she, and Newman quoting her, is saying that discussion circles are about individualistic sharing, dialogue circles are about critically building knowledge together.

I describe below some of the types of circles I advocate in quite a bit of detail, particularly those that were used at conferences. I think these types of circles are powerful tools to make conferences better.

### **Dialogue Circles – Critically Building Knowledge Together**

What I in the past have called Dialogue Circles probably fall under Allman's definition of a discussion circle. Here is how I have defined this type of circle in the past, in this case as part of a Music Dialogue Circle.

*The Dialogue Circle is a popular education methodology for sharing and reflecting on the experience of the Circle participants. In the Music/Popular Education Dialogue Circle some participants are musicians, some are not. All are people who wish to make better use of music in their educational work for democratic social change.*

*Each participant should bring a song to share, a song that they used or experienced as part of social change movements, actions, or education events. Musicians should bring musical instruments if they need them.*

Although these Music Dialogue Circles begin with sharing, they can continue with reflection. What Newman's discussion of Allman contributes is to make me more conscious of designing the reflection to have a critical and collective knowledge-building character.

In another example of my use of Dialogue Circles, we moved at least part of the way to that goal. We used the name Dialogue Circles for what we planned at the North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education's 1999 *Commonfire Conference: Coming Together Across Borders and Issues for Economic, Environmental and Social Justice*. The process created for those circles, however, went well beyond just individualistic discussion. Some of the Dialogue Circles at the conference seemed to fizzle. Perhaps they were merely discussions and not dialogues.

The Commonfire Conference began with Dialogue Circles – an opportunity for everyone to use their voice before sitting through presentations and workshops. I was determined to insure a different level of participation than is typical at conferences. I wrote the following note about Dialogue Circles for the conference program:

*The Dialogue Circle is a popular education methodology for sharing and reflecting on the experience of the Circle participants. Its key idea is to "share and share the time." The idea of sharing and sharing the time comes from experience, particularly in conference settings, where some folks – usually self-appointed – talk most of the time and others are silent. Both the talkers and the silent ones need to take responsibility for altering their behavior to achieve a more democratic group process. Participants are encouraged to take responsibility for sharing what is on their mind as well as listening to and encouraging others.*

The Dialogue Circles met four times during the three conference days – starting the conference with dialogue, having dialogue in the middle, and ending with dialogue. Participants chose their dialogue circle, from among 13 that had been proposed, based on a kernel of common interest.

*Dialogue Circles* are planned to be of **groups 12-20 persons**, small enough so that everyone has the opportunity to begin the conference experience with dialogue - meeting and talking rather than listening to presentations – and listening and talking with others who have a kernel of common interest. Some groups are based on issues and others on the constituencies with whom we work. **One additional goal of the Dialogue Circle format** is to create the basis for ongoing Networks. It is hoped that the last session of the Dialogue Circle process will turn to the future and action planning.

We described the process as facilitated and flexible and presented the groups with some models for their group process.

*Convening facilitators and co-facilitators may continue in that role or not depending on the circle's process. We anticipate that people will share experiences and stories, problems and successes, visions and hopes. Some of the alternative models for the group to consider are:*

1. **The “time shared equally every time” model:** Everyone talks during the session and tells more of their “story” and experiences, or a new aspect of their story and their experience. Each person, for example, could share one popular or folk education technique that worked for them, or the time could be used to process the conference experience and share reactions and information on the conference itself.
2. **The panel model:** Several members of the Circle are identified each session to talk more about their projects.
3. **The artistic creation model:** members of the circle work together on cultural productions – writing poetry, producing songs, displays, photo collages, to share with the conference as the members choose. (Via the Communication Wall or at the participants' celebration on Sunday night.)
4. **The anarchy model:**
5. **Other models created by the group:**

Facilitators for the Dialogues Circles were volunteers. We met with them on the eve of the conference to share ideas about what the circles might be, but we did not attempt to control how the facilitators worked or how the groups developed.

One of the hopes for these Dialogue Circles was that they might lead to actions or common future work by their participants. At a minimum we hoped that networks among people with a common kernel of interest would be strengthened. Would it have been better to have called them Action Circles, since that was our hoped for final outcome? A similar structure for a

similar purpose took on the name Action Circles at a conference in which I was involved three years later.

### **Action Circles – Leading to Plans For What We Can Do Together**

At the *ReVisioning: Building Community for a Sustainable Future Conference* in spring 2002, a central feature of the program was **Action Circles**. They were similar to the Dialogue Circles used at the earlier Commonfire Conference. After the opening plenary we launched the first session of these action circles. The conference program said of Action Circles:

Action Circles (small groups) are an essential part of the conference format. The Action Circles will give participants an opportunity to share their wisdom and to build community. The circles will be small enough so that everyone can participate. The conference planners believe that the agenda of “Revisioning” can be the impetus for developing strategies to build a sustainable future. The actions of individuals are best supported and enhanced by working with others engaged in similar endeavors.

We provided people with a choice of topics for action circles and the possibility to organize on their own topic. Action Circles were proposed on fifteen topics: The Arts, Cooperatives, Collectives and Other Economic Alternatives, The Criminal Justice System, Demilitarization/Antiwar/Nonviolence, Alternative Energy/Transportation, Forestry, Water/Conservation, Sustainable Agriculture and Food, Affordable Housing, Welfare, Health Care, Education, Labor, The Media, The Political System, and Spirituality/Religious Structures. A number of the suggested groups did not have enough members to be viable. In those cases groups combined or disbanded. An Action Circle on one additional topic was suggested: Challenging Corporate Power. It was also one of the most successful. Most people in that circle came to all three of the Action Circles sessions, and the participants created an action plan that has resulted in an organization forming to carry on the challenge to corporate power. As of this writing, almost two years later, the group was still meeting and acting.

The conference planners decided that action circles would have no more than 16 people, although from pre-registration information we knew that some topics, Demilitarization/Antiwar/Nonviolence, for example, were likely to be quite popular. For those we were prepared with multiple circles on the same topic. When they registered, people attending the conference selected their Action Circle and were given a slip of the following type. I reproduce it not only as a model to help in the organizing of similar structures at conferences, but to illustrate the mode of reporting we used for sharing the results of the circles. Unlike the often deadly “group report-backs” part of conferences, the reporting session that resulted was full of life and creativity. I’ve had similar results using this technique other times. The final paragraph on the form describes the reporting process.

<b>YOU HAVE REGISTERED FOR AN <u>ACTION CIRCLE</u> ON THE THEME</b>	
<b>Environmental Issues</b>	
<b>You will meet in Campus Center Room 214</b>	
Action Circles meet	<b>Friday, 9:50 - 10:50 a.m.</b> <b>Saturday, 1:15 - 2:10 p.m.</b> <b>Sunday, 1:30 – 2:30 p.m. and at the Grand Circle 2:45 - 3:15 pm in Kagin Commons</b>
<b>Action Circles are for you to have an opportunity meet others with whom you have a common interest and to dialogue about the conference. It is hoped that the groups will achieve these objectives:</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a small group setting for dialogue and mutual support</li> <li>• Facilitate a way to listen to and to learn from each other</li> <li>• Create a basis for ongoing networks</li> <li>• Offer opportunities to act for systemic transformation</li> </ul>
<b>Please help the facilitators see that everyone gets to speak.</b>	
At the Grand Circle Sunday 2:30 – 3:00 pm your Action Circle spokesperson(s) will have one minute to share your action plans. Those who share with poetry, song, theater, visual art, or other creative means will be given a couple extra minutes.	

Participants rose to the challenge and we had a wonderful final session in which all but one group found some creative means to express what they had done – songs, skits, dances and

humor. It was important that we organized the chairs for the Grand Circle into concentric circles and had microphones to amplify the sound. I also added a dimension of fun by teaching everyone the use of claps that I had learned from colleagues in the Philippines and Uganda. (See “Technology of Claps,” p.192)

In the beginning of the Action Circle process, as I knew from my experience with the similar process at the Commonfire Conference, there would be a few minutes of seeming chaos as people found their way to their first meeting of the Action Circle. Some would not have registered or perhaps would have bypassed the table at which the Action Circle information slips were handed out. As groups met and found they were not viable, or were too large and needed to divide, more chaos would reign for a while. In a few minutes, however, those issues got settled. We had enough people at the coordinating table to quickly help when it was needed. The groups meeting in various parts of the large hall and in other rooms became intently engaged, busy at the task of getting to know one another, exploring and expanding their experience.

Action Circles were facilitated by experienced volunteer facilitators recruited by the program planning team. We held a meeting of facilitators the week before to explain what we had in mind and to engage them in designing the process.

Action Circles were a highly fluid situation in two senses, both of which the groups and the facilitators handled admirably. One was the response to the need for a measure of self-organization – some groups needed to divide, some needed to combine. The other was the dynamics of fluctuating attendance at both the conference and in the individual Action Circles.

I didn't facilitate the organizing of Action Circles in my college classrooms. It always gnawed at me that I did not, because there was no theoretical reason for me to avoid them. I did require students to have an experience of active participation in politics as part of one of my



classes, always advocating class members to form groups for this assignment. The groups would have been a type of Action Circle. But they could do the assignment individually as well. I tried to make it clear that they could meet the assignment by joining actions that were going on in their own communities. Many did that, but many worked for election campaigns or joined some other advocacy project like a political letter-writing campaign. It was almost always a new experience for the class participants, and the class sessions in which people talked about their experiences were often electric, but rarely did the action get beyond the sampling of activism that framed the assignment. To quiet the gnawing I tell myself that those enrolled in my class, mostly adult students, had busy lives and were very often living on the edge of survival. According to college statistics, 80% had jobs that averaged well over 20 hours per week. Since more than 60% of students were women, I assume they very often had family responsibilities, too. I adjusted to the real demands of their lives, figuring the best I could hope for would be that they would remember what they might do when faced with the need or opportunity for action in the future.

### **The Question Circle – Improving Presentations and Lectures**

Another type of circle I have been advocating is the Question Circle. I developed the technique during my years doing day-long conference-style classes as part of the College for Working Adults. More recently their use was part of the ReVisioning Conference at which we also had Action Circles as described above. I had introduced these ideas during the planning for this conference, which was aimed at the Twin Cities activist community.

The process for Question Circles was quite straightforward. After each major speaker finished their presentation, question circles were formed with the task of developing questions for the speaker. They, like the Action Circles, began with everyone in each circle introducing

themselves and talking briefly about their response to the presentation. But these circles had a deeper purpose. In words that came to me at that conference for the first time, they were designed to shift the focus of expert-speaker presentations from “podium-centered knowledge distribution to participant-centered knowledge creation.” We have plenty of anecdotal evidence that the process was wildly successful, including spontaneous comments from people who were there and evaluations filled out by participants. I quote here from my article about the conference, “Making Conferences Better – An Experience in the Twin Cities.”

### *Question Circles*

*Many people can see that workshops, breakout groups, concurrent sessions can be facilitated in ways that are highly participatory. But what about plenary sessions where there is a highly-acclaimed speaker or panel? We dealt with that with **Question Circles**. The three-day conference had six sessions with major speakers. The speakers were Polly Mann, peace activist and founder of Women Against Military Madness; David Korten, author of *When Corporations Rule the World* and other books, and president of the Positive Futures Network; Marjorie Kelly, author of *The Divine Right of Capital* and publisher of *Business Ethics* magazine; Michael Albert, author of *Participatory Economics* and other books and co-founder of *Z Magazine*; Ronnie Dugger, founder of the Alliance for Democracy and essayist; and Mel Duncan, co-founder of the Nonviolent Peaceforce: all people of stature in the progressive movement in the USA, all dynamic, interesting speakers. Question Circles were used in four of the sessions. The first speaker was followed by the launch of Action Circle sessions rather than Question Circles, the last speaker had the task of summing up the spirit of the conference, something he did with extraordinary eloquence. Otherwise we would have had Question Circles at those sessions as well.*

*To understand the Question Circle process you must keep in mind the quote that opens this paper: “they were designed to shift from podium-centered knowledge distribution to participant-centered knowledge creation.” The purpose of a speaker is not to distribute deposits of knowledge from the front of the room, but to animate knowledge creation among the participants. It is what happens for the participants that is the center. With this in mind we did a simple thing. At the end of each 40- or 45-minute speech by a speaker, we asked everyone to move their chairs around<sup>1</sup> and form circles of four to eight people to discuss their reactions and to work together to formulate and prioritize questions for the speaker. Rocket science is sometimes simple. At the end of 25 or 30 minutes we called everyone back.*

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<sup>1</sup> It was helpful that he had a large venue with moveable chairs. A Question Circle process could be done with a fixed seat auditorium but then groups would need to be limited to 3 or 4 persons so people could twist in their seats and hear and talk to each other.

*Each group sent their spokesperson to the microphone to ask the group's priority question. For the two sessions that I facilitated, I took 6-8 questions and then had the speaker respond. In the other sessions the facilitators had all the groups ask their question before the speakers responded. In spite of being told they didn't need to respond to every question, the speakers felt compelled to do so. Fortunately our time constraints were loose enough to allow this.*

*The instructions for the Question Circles handed out at the beginning of each session read:*

**Question Circles: generating questions for the speakers**

**Purposes:** Everyone gets to speak, be heard, discuss - i.e. to be fully human participants in today's event  
Generate good questions that are of interest to more than an individual

**Instructions:**

- 1) Form small groups of 3 - 5 people (Look around you and see that no one is left out.)
- 2) Share reactions to the speaker being sure everyone gets to speak.
- 3) Make a list of questions that members of the group have that they would like to ask the speaker, or they think should be asked of the speakers.
- 4) Clarify and improve the questions.
- 5) Determine which of the questions are the group's priority questions. Use consensus if possible in choosing the priority questions. Indicate with an \* the group's priority questions.
- 6) Choose a spokesperson to ask the question when it is the group's turn to ask a question.

**LIST YOUR QUESTIONS BELOW AND ON THE BACK. MARK THE PRIORITY QUESTIONS WITH AN \***

*In reflecting on the experience of using these question circles there are several things I learned.*

- *I felt the process of 6 to 8 questions at a time, then the speaker's response, was better than hearing all of the questions before responding.*
- *Good questions were asked. It is not surprising that a group would hone and improve the questions to make them better than individuals would make their questions. Michael Albert commented that although he has spoken to audiences all over the world, the questions at our conference were the best set of questions he had ever been asked. But what was far more important than the questions was the dialogue in the circles. Remember it is the participants engaging together that is the center of the enterprise. The interactions with the speakers are meant to serve that central task.*

- *The integrity of the process requires the cooperation and participation of the speakers. They must agree not to make themselves available for individuals who break away from the groups for private questions with them.*
- *There are a couple of points to note in assessing this situation and comparing it to a regular Q and A session where self-appointed extroverts ask the questions. 1) Only a few people can ask their question in a regular Q and A session; in a question circle process, everyone's questions are voiced in the circles, 2) All the questions of people in the room are not asked in a typical Q and A; with question circles, many more questions are asked in front of the whole group. It is important in the circle process that all questions are asked, and that the questions that represent the groups' grappling with the ideas of the session are the center, rather than the central focus being the experts' musings from the front of the room.*
- *I would have been comfortable with only selected questions being responded to, but the speakers were not. This suggests that the speakers' role as experts is well-ingrained in the cultural context of being a conference speaker. It would be better for speakers to adopt an ignorance-based model, in the sense I recently heard advocated by Wes Jackson, that Midwest treasure and curmudgeon of the Land Institute in Kansas. Knowing that the more we study, read, listen, the more experience we get, the more, we learn, we discover the more there is to know. We realize more and more how little we know; we realize how ignorant we actually are. It is presumptuous to assume that one person can answer everything. We therefore need a model of behavior that accepts this ignorance. In the Question Circle process it would be better if speakers responded to what they knew best and left the rest for someone else. Remember the real importance is in the process that forms the questions.*
- *Someone suggested that groups might be allowed to make a one-minute statement rather than ask a question. That I thought was a good idea.<sup>2</sup>*
- *If I did it again I would take care that the microphones were turned toward the audience, not toward the speaker. This would be a symbolic gesture to emphasize that the main focus ought to be on the participants.*

It is obvious to me that the discussion above is directly relevant to the college classroom.

Education in that setting need not focus on podium-centered knowledge distribution; study

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<sup>2</sup> At a speech by Mary Robinson, the former UN Commissioner of Human Rights, an interesting alternative process was put in place I think is worth experimenting with at conferences. At the conclusion of Ms. Robinson's talk members of the audience were invited to make statements on issues important to them – the time limit was one and a half minutes. Microphones faced the audience as the guest speaker listened from behind the speakers. Thirtyseven people spoke with brevity and eloquence before the time ran out. The speaker closed the session with her comments on what she had heard. It was better than the usual Q & A but there were hundreds of us who didn't speak at all, who did not get to participate in an active way. Question circles seek to include everyone in the dialogue.

circles have an obvious application as an alternative way for classroom participants to approach the canon in any field or for people to study the same materials together. Moving beyond discussion circles to dialogue is a worthy process wherever it is found.

I will now discuss three other types of circles, which I have named “Culture Circles,” “Jigsaw Circles,” and “Reading Circles.”

### **Culture Circles – Exploring Problems, Finding Solutions in the Community**

The Jane Addams School for Democracy on the Westside of St. Paul adopted a process they call Culture Circles. The Westside is the area of St. Paul that is home to the oldest Mexican community in the Twin Cities. This vibrant community began with migrant farm workers who settled there instead of returning to Texas or Mexico, and has been greatly enlarged by immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries in the past 20 years. Starting from the mid 1970s it also became the home of a growing population of Hmong people who were refugees from the Southeast Asian wars. The Jane Addams School brought people from each of the communities together for Culture Circles to talk about their problems and to find solutions together. There were both circles for Latino(a)s and for Hmong, and I have heard, more recently, some circles bringing people from both groups together to meet across cultures.

That is all I know of these Culture Circles. They are clearly a model worth naming and knowing about.

### **Jigsaw Circles – Bringing Diverse Knowledge Together**

Jigsaw Circles are a simple variation of a regular Study Circle. In the Study Circle everyone has read or studied the same thing. In a Jigsaw Circle each participant reads or studies a different item then shares a summary and their reactions with the circle. The knowledge comes

together like a jigsaw puzzle to make the whole. There are many uses for this tool. I used it with articles, with videos, and with magazines and periodicals.

**Reading Circles – Bringing Different Ways of Knowing Together**

One of the most useful tools in my college classrooms came to me late in my career under the name Reading Circles. One of my colleagues who had been part of a group of faculty members meeting regularly under the banner of “Improving Teaching” had passed the idea on together with her example of prep sheets that make the process work.

Reading Circles are a process for a group of six or seven to learn together from materials that all of them read. I found the process useful whether the material was a book chapter, an article, or a video. Each member of the group takes a different role in the circle, a role for which they have prepared by completing a prep sheet.

The roles are:

<p><b>DISCUSSION DIRECTOR</b></p>	<p>Your job is to develop a list of questions that your group can discuss that will help them understand the main points of the assigned reading. Don't worry about the small details. Your task is to help people talk over the big ideas in the reading and to share reactions to the text. Be prepared with your own brief answers to your questions.</p> <p>You will also have a major responsibility for facilitating the reading circle process when you are Discussion Director.</p>
<p><b>PASSAGE MASTER</b></p>	<p>Your job is to locate a few special passages that are important in the reading assignment. These may give key information, they may back up the information given, or summarize the author's key points. They might also be passages that strike your fancy for some reason, are particularly well written, or might be controversial or contradictory with other passages or other information learned in class.</p> <p>You may read passages aloud, ask others to read them, or read them silently and then discuss.</p>
<p><b>ILLUSTRATOR</b></p>	<p>Your job is to make some drawing or construct an illustration</p>

	<p>related to the reading. It can be a sketch, cartoon, diagram, flow chart, concept map, stick figure scene, collage, etc. Your illustration can be something specific that is discussed in the text or something of which the reading reminded you. You can label with words if that helps. Be creative.</p> <p>You may use the space below or add an attachment if you wish</p>
VOCABULARY ENRICHER	<p>Your job is to develop a list of words and concepts that are important to the understanding of the reading. You need to write down the definitions or a brief explanation of the words and concepts which you select from the reading.</p> <p>List the words and concepts with definitions or explanations below:</p>
CREATIVE CONNECTOR	<p>Your job is to help everyone make connections to other important ideas, both to ideas from this class and also to other political and economic ideas. You may make connections to other reading assignments, to media presentations, or to other experiences. You should summarize the connections below and formulate questions that help others make the connection themselves.</p>
QUESTION COLLECTOR AND PROCESS CHECKER	<p>Your job is two-fold. First, during the discussion you are to collect a list of questions, those you might like either the instructor or some other person to address. Identify to whom the question might be addressed.</p> <p>Second you are to review the group process for the day with the group and identify highlights or problems in the group's work. The instructor will provide a form to assist with this latter process.</p>
DEVIL'S ADVOCATE	<p>Your job is challenge the ideas in the article by developing a list of questions and arguments that might be raised by critics of the authors or by those with different points of view.</p>
FREELoader EXCUSE SHEET	<p>Each person is entitled to submit this sheet once during the quarter instead of any one of the other Reading Circles Prep Sheets with no penalties in grading.</p>

In an academic quarter I organized one cycle of reading circles in which everyone filled every role once. Making that work required systematic planning for the whole cycle. It did not work for participants to choose their role session by session. Unless the possible combinations of people and roles were systematized, some would find themselves repeating some roles and not getting to try others.

At first there was no Devil's Advocate role, I added it because students requested it and I thought it was a good idea. Once the Devil's Advocate was added, I stopped using the process-checker role with six-person circles. It was always available in case someone was not prepared or for some reason there was an extra person in the classroom. The Process Checker role did not require preparation but did require reporting on the circle session. The Freeloader Excuse Sheet developed when our academic term changed from 11-week quarters to 16-week semesters. I then used two cycles of reading circles and allowed that class participants might come unprepared one time in twelve.

A Reading Circle session took at least three-quarters of an hour to complete. Circles with more serious participants usually wanted more time. The factor that made Reading Circles zing was the multiple role preparations. The Illustrator's artwork was often just wonderful, and the connections made by the Creative Connector were usually impressive. But I wonder now what more could be done with the process. What if you had one Discussion Director and five Illustrators, or five Creative Connectors? Could the addition of some new roles move the circle from discussion to dialogue? There are possibilities. Work with them.



## Chapter 37

### Bonnie

I was standing near the end of the dock, my bicycle parked with the kickstand down a few steps away. I was staring into the water of Lake Winnipeg wondering what brought me to this place when she spoke. “Are you the one? Grandmother told me to look for you here. I have been waiting.”

In truth I had noticed her sitting on the bench when I rode up. Striking long black hair with some streaks of gray told me of her age-appropriateness. Beaded barrette and porcupine-quill earrings hinted at her heritage. I was always looking, even before I had separated amicably from my long-term spouse and partner. I had noticed. Now when I turned as she was walking toward me, I saw that the late evening sun also reflected a glint of red in her hair. I noticed too that she was tall with just a hint of extra pounds on her hips and stomach. But though my eyes had begun a quick body scan they stopped at her eyes. She was looking at me in such a penetrating way, as though she were scanning me – not my body but my inner being. She looked right down inside and I knew at once that everything there would be open to her. “Grandmother said when I could read your heart I would know that you are the one who can help my people.” Then she stopped, got a shy smile on her face, stuck out her hand and said, “Hi. I’m Bonnie.” Then she laughed.

“Hi. I’m Larry,” I replied. “Let’s go have coffee. I want to hear about your grandmother.”

I have often wondered about the paths my life had made up to that point. Many a fantasy crossed my mind that I would some day be asked to help. And a beautiful woman to guide me to places I had not been? What more could an all-American boy want? Never mind that I was past 60 with my own gray hair and over-indulged body. True, too, that I had long since learned the dysfunction of those fantasies, the damage they had done to me and as well as to my people. Bonnie's grandmother was right. If you can read the heart, then you will know.

I don't know what Bonnie found in my heart either, but we went over to the Northern Lights Coffee Shop where I treated myself to a cappuccino instead of just having the dark roast Coffee of the Day like I usually do. I am the kind of person that often chooses vanilla ice cream too. We talked for a long time. She kept trying to find out about my stories. I kept trying to find out both about her stories and, of course, about her grandmother. We talked and listened, and laughed and cried for a long time. As I had known in the first moments, everything about me was open to her. And she to me, too, except to the end there was an element of mystery about her, some deep connection to something where I could not go. I can see looking back that it was a place most often covered by laughter. But laughter isn't exactly right. It was more that laughter and that place were parts of the same.

We were together a long time, or it seems like it in my memory. I don't know how many hours and days it was by the end. Sometimes I think she was an alien who touched my hand and downloaded the whole of my life and hers while I drank a single cup of cappuccino. But that doesn't account for the memories of caresses and that other kind of human bonding unless she put them there to distract my memories. But I dwell too long on the personal joy of the encounter. I still ask, could she have learned from me something that her people needed?

Bonnie herself was a modern woman. She had been to the University, had degrees from several of them at different times. She read books. She traveled. She had even been a volunteer in a Peace Corps-like program. I didn't know if she was indigenous to the shores of Lake Winnipeg, a Canadian First Nations person. Sometimes it seemed so, but sometimes she spoke of things that made me think her roots were elsewhere, or everywhere.

Bonnie's grandmother had been an important elder in her community – not exactly a political leader or a healer, not a spiritual leader either. But people came to talk to her to find out what was on her mind. She also, as Bonnie related to me, knew things for which there was no explanation. It was a mystery to everyone. And she had visions. It was after her last, just before she died, that she had told Bonnie to go there to the dock to find the one who could help. It was clear from the vision that the person wasn't going to be a savior or a messiah or one to right the world's wrongs. And as I got more of the story the way her grandmother had related it to Bonnie, I could see that there wasn't really going to be only one "One." In fact, looking for one "One" was a big problem. I had come to see that in a number of different ways myself. Over one of my later cappuccinos I had laughed with pleasure at remembering when it came to my mind that we needed to "shift from podium-centered knowledge distribution to participant-centered knowledge creation." That is just another way of saying the same thing as there not being one "One."

Come to think of it, I did share a lot about popular education, about what I've learned about how to help people to help themselves, about people's need to name and solve their own problems, about what to do as an educator if you want people to be transformed and empowered. I even read some of my writings to Bonnie. She was a good audience. She encouraged me to go on writing.

At my mother's 84<sup>th</sup> birthday party dinner at my house I told my mother she could ask any question she liked and everyone around the table would have to answer. In a moment she had the question, definitely rising to the occasion. "What is the most important thing you have learned in your life so far?" is what she asked. People did respond in a meaningful way; it was quite moving. Although such an activity was not a rare occurrence around my table, and our table in the years with Dorothy, this particular time was a special one for us together as my family of origin. But I didn't like my response. I went on far too long with a lot of stuff about learning that we are not alone in the struggle to make a better world, there are thousands of people all over the world working too, etc., etc. Later I wished I had just said two things: "There is not just one One." and "Time passes. Things change."

The second seems now to be an appropriate thing to say now about meeting Bonnie. I am changing. I am learning about reading the heart and seeking to understand more about the mystery. I don't know if I helped her people. I know that what she had to say could help mine. Time passes. Things change.

Lately I have been thinking that I am going back to see if the waters of Lake Winnipeg are the same.