

A GUIDE TO CONDUCTING



Popular Education

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Cultivating Rooted Community

15 LESSONS I LEARNED FROM ORGANIZING

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1. **Mobilizing is hard but organizing is harder. Organizing is labor intensive and there are no shortcuts.**
2. **Organizing is a slow process and efforts that allow the issue to overshadow building organization dissipate after the issue is won or lost.**
3. **Nothing works like following the classic steps in organizing**
4. **One must be persistent and always keep one's eyes on the prize.**
5. **Outsiders can't organize insiders. Empowerment is an "I" word.**
6. **The people know what is best for the people.**
7. **There is no such thing as apathy.**
8. **Someone is only leader if s/he has followers.**
9. **Where you stand depends on where you sit. Ethnicity, gender, social class, etc. matter.**
10. **History counts.**
11. **If there are mediating institutions, use them. If there aren't, build them.**
12. **Power is never given.**
13. **If you don't ask, the answer is NO!**
14. **Know the root cause of the problem before you design the solution.**
15. **If you want to know why, ask "Who benefits?"**



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POPULAR (PEOPLE'S) EDUCATION IS . . .

The word “popular” has two meanings, i.e., “liked, admired, etc.” and “coming from the people.” While the first definition is the more common usage, it is the second one that defines what we mean by the word “Popular” in Popular Education,” i.e., education that comes from the people. It is as much a way of organizing, as it is a form of education. It differs from traditional education in that:

1. The focus is on issues and concerns that come from people living within a particular situation or set of conditions. There is no predetermined curriculum. The content is determined when people come together to address their issues or concerns.
2. It is overtly political. The educational process comes out of people’s desire to take action regarding some situation or condition. However, rather than beginning with the typical question, “How do we address the issue?” the process in Popular Education asks, “Why do we have this issue?” It recognizes that the conditions that people live in and with are the result of decisions made by people in positions of power. It teaches that if you want to know why a condition exists, ask, “Who benefits?” Popular Education brings the issues of power and inequality to the surface and begins with the belief that if people want to change their conditions they must confront the issues of power and inequality.
3. Its primary purpose is to inform action. The Popular Education process begins with people critically analyzing their own situation and conditions in order to understand the forces that created them. From their analysis, it takes people through a process where they create an action plan based on their critical analysis.

Popular Education has a long, rich history of working with disenfranchised and marginalized people throughout the world, particularly in Central and South America. While there is no single way of doing Popular Education, there are consistent themes and basic principles that run throughout the practice. Some of these are:

- Life is school; everyone has something learn and everyone has something to teach
- We don’t learn from doing, we only learn if we reflect on what we do
- Knowledge is collectively generated through the educational process and is shared equally with all participants
- Knowledge is power **AND** responsibility; responsibility to use the knowledge for the common good
- Power is finite and power is never given.
- Understanding power, how it works and how it is distributed, is critical to understanding any situation and the conditions that created it

Popular Education teaches people to question some of the assumptions they make about the world – things they take for granted. It recognizes that there is a dominant class in the United States that operates from a particular set of values, values that are taught to our children and are reinforced by most institutions, e.g., schools, government, churches, media, etc. Because they are the dominant class they get to set the rules by which we all must live by and the standards that we all must meet. Not surprisingly, the rules reward people who reflect their values and punish those who don’t. These rules and standards are presented, not as a value-based set of rules that advantage a particular group, but as natural, as coming from nature. Not accepting these values is seen as crazy. We are taught through our institutions to accept them

without question. Even though these rules serve the dominant class at the expense of the rest, most people accept them and even work to maintain them.

A clear example of how this process works is our educational system. A core value of the dominant class in the United States is the “American Dream,” i.e., anyone can achieve their goals if they have the talent and put in the work no matter what station they were born into. Education, in this view, is the great equalizer. Whether born rich or poor, through education, you can achieve your aspirations. Because all have access to education, one’s success or failure in life is due to whether or not one took advantage of what was offered. Those who succeeded did, those who failed did not. Success or failure is in the hands of the individual. A closer look at our educational system, however, would show that, while every child does have access to education, every child does not have access to a quality education. The quality of one’s education depends on where one lives, which depends on one’s economic status and ethnicity. When half of African-American youth in this country attend high schools where graduation is not the norm, do we blame the youth for this failure or do we look deeper? The values of the dominant class put enormous emphasis on the individual suggesting that, yes, the failure does belong to the youth or, more accurately, their parents. This view conveniently ignores the decisions made by people in positions of power that created these extreme differences in the levels of investment in education based on one’s wealth which, along with ethnicity, dictates where one lives. If you examine where we put our resources in addressing these disparities you would see that most of the resources are dedicated to changing the behavior of school children, their parents, and/or their teachers. Very little resources are spent on changing the conditions that lead to the glaring disparities.

For a while the mobile phone company, T-Mobile, had a commercial in which an attractive young woman represented them and a frumpy, harried, nerd-like man represented the other phone companies. In one of their conversations, the frumpy man says, “sometimes you have to pay more to be slower,” and when the young woman gives him a confused look, he responds, “it makes sense, if you don’t think about it.” This commercial is a perfect representation of how the process described above works in our daily lives. There are so many things that “make sense, if you don’t think about it.” Or, in other words, we simply accept the view of the dominant class without questioning their logic. I saw this process first hand while working with a group of refugee youth who were brought together to promote healthy life choices. Using a Popular Education model, I started by holding a number of 1-on-1 meeting with the youth. The one issue that kept coming up was the difficulty they were having graduating from high school. Some were having difficulty completing their requirements while others had completed the school’s requirements but had been unable to pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE). After doing some research, I found that while just over half of the English Learner students graduated from the two local high schools in the last year, over 90% of English Learner students had graduated from two high schools fifteen miles west and north in the same school district.

Armed with the documented disparities I met with a dozen refugee youth, showed them these disparities and asked them what they thought. The first round of responses blamed the youth themselves. They didn’t do their homework, they didn’t go to class, they didn’t take advantage of support programs, they were disrespectful, they took drugs, etc. All of these reasons “make sense.” You can’t expect to graduate from high school if you don’t do the work and you don’t go to class. However, this explanation for why almost half of the youth fail at the local schools while over 90% succeed at the other schools only “makes sense, if you don’t think about it.” In this session, I listened respectfully to the youth and validated what they said. I then pushed them to look a little deeper, to think about it. If the only reason for the failure was the students themselves, as the values of the dominant class would suggest, then that must mean that all of the smart, motivated students go to the two high schools fifteen miles away while the dumb,

unmotivated students go the high schools in their community. When the logic of the dominant class was unveiled in this form, they rejected it. The youth began to ask themselves why so many of their age-mates were acting in self-destructive ways. As the conversation evolved the group began to speak about how their teachers didn't expect them to succeed and that they felt this low expectation from the moment the teacher saw them. Through the conversation they saw a connection between the low expectations and the behavior they first described as the cause. The low expectations led many youth to become discouraged, lose faith in themselves, and give up. Some just dropped out and others acted out.

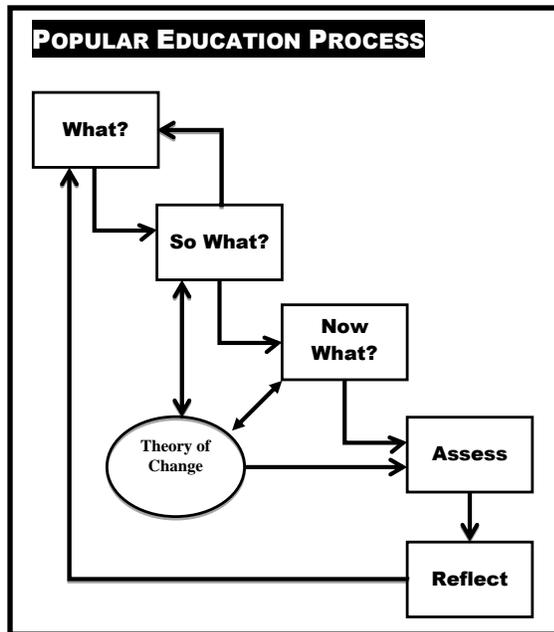
The above is not to say that the educational system is not attempting to address this issue. There are programs within the schools and within the network of nonprofit service agencies that assist students. The State of California has, by law, money earmarked for supporting students struggling to pass the CAHSEE. These programs, however, all operate from the values of the dominant class and its focus on the individual. When students continue to fail even though the schools and the state provide programs, the blame tends to be placed on the parents for not "being involved" in their child's education. As pointed out above, this explanation conveniently ignores the actions of those who made the decisions that shaped the curriculum, set the standards, distributed the resources, etc. Youth who don't graduate from high school are condemned to a life of poverty regardless of how much or how hard they work. Will the 40% to 50% of the students who fail to graduate in this example be the cause of their life in poverty or will it be a consequence of an unequal educational system that limited their options? Assuming you can eliminate the disparities that persist by focusing on the behavior of the students and their parents only "makes sense, if you don't think about." While it makes sense to provide additional support to English Learner students, those programs alone cannot resolve the disparities. The disparities cannot be resolved without a change in the educational system.

Popular Education is about getting people to question these values and rules by exposing how they provide a hidden advantage to some members of society at the expense of others. Because Popular Education is overtly political, it seeks to understand why this disparity persists by asking the question, who benefits? There is a great deal of research that shows how wealthy communities and highly educated adults, as a group, are aware of these educational disparities and work to maintain them. The failure of the youth in this example shrink the pool of competitors for the college slots and jobs that they want for their children.

At the heart of America culture is the belief that people who work hard should be rewarded and that anyone who has the talent and puts in the work should be able to achieve their goals regardless of the conditions they were born into. This core value is admirable and is held by many whether they are part of the dominant class or not. It is, in fact, a value that draws people to the United States from throughout the world. The dominant class is served by this value when achieving one's goal is seen as a singularly individual act. When the rules set by the dominant class strip away the responsibility of all other factors in a person's life except their own behavior, it absolves itself of any responsibility. If people accept the rules as fair and unbiased they simultaneously take full responsibility for the failure of the youth. The Popular Education process opens the participant's eyes to all the factors that contribute to the conditions they are focused on. It is from this analysis that people develop a plan of action.

THE PROCESS: AN OVERVIEW

When done well the Popular Educator comes with questions rather than answers. Guided by the awareness that everyone has something to teach and everyone has something to learn, the process creates the space for everyone to contribute what he or she knows to the pool of knowledge. In general people know a lot more than they think they do. This knowledge is embedded in their lived experience. It is knowledge that often guides people's behavior but is only articulated in response to questions, questions that lead people to examine their lived experience and what they have learned from it. When people are unknowingly guided by this embedded knowledge, we call it instincts.



The diagram presents a picture of the overall process involved in Popular Education. It begins with the three core questions, what, so what, and now what? There are three parts to the question of **“WHAT.”** The first question is what are people concerned about and why? The second is, what is people's experience with the issue? Lastly, what do we know about the issue? This process is designed to do two things, i.e., insure that all participants are in agreement about what the group will focus on and share what is already known about the issue. In the youth example, processing the **“WHAT”** resulted in the youth agreeing to focus on graduation rates. What they learned about the disparity in those rates helped them make that decision.

Once the group has come to agreement on and is knowledgeable about their issue, the process moves to the second question, **“SO “WHAT?”**

Given the pool of knowledge generated while answering the question, **“What,”** the participants move to the question, what does that knowledge tell us, what does it mean? It is in responding to these questions that participants begin to challenge the assumptions and logic of the dominant class – assumptions and logic many have taken as common sense and natural even though they are inherently inequitable. This part of the process focuses on power and asks the questions, who makes the decisions, who benefits from them, who bears the cost of them, etc.?

As the diagram suggests, going through the **“SO WHAT”** process often leads a group to revisit the **“WHAT”** question. Analyzing the pool of knowledge collected in the **“WHAT”** process can, and often does, lead a group to re-evaluate the **“WHAT”** and ask more questions and/or change their target. It was by going through this process that the youth in the example moved from blaming the students for their failure to naming low expectations as a major cause for the low graduation rates.

Through the process of defining the **“WHAT”** and the **“SO WHAT,”** the group begins to develop its **Theory of Change**. The Theory of Change is a statement of:

- The outcomes the group is working to achieve
- The conditions that need to exist for those outcomes to be achieved
- What the group is going to do to create those conditions
- Why they think those interventions will work
- How they will know they have created the necessary conditions

The **Theory of Change** gets more fully developed through the “**Now WHAT**” process. Based on what the group now knows about the issue, i.e., “having thought about it,” what action will it take to address it? What interventions are needed to create the conditions that will allow the group’s goals to be achieved? The **Theory of Change** both informs the **interventions** and shapes the design for assessing the group’s progress toward its goals. The **Assessment** is the basis for the **Reflection** that is the basis for **learning**. A group that consistently moves through a process of acting, assessing, and reflecting increases its knowledge with each cycle. As indicated in the diagram, this new knowledge changes the “**WHAT**” which creates the opportunity for the group to reassess its **Theory of Change** in light of that new knowledge. That reassessment can, and often does, lead to changes in the groups strategies for achieving their desired outcomes.