John Hurst

On Popular Education

by John Hurst

Education: A Powerful Tool

When Rosa Parks was asked by the eminent talk show host, Studs Terkel, what the Highlander Research and Education Center had to do with the fact that she chose not to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on that fateful day in early December 1955, she answered quite simply, "Everything." As a result of its educational efforts on behalf of integration, the state of Tennessee closed Highlander in 1960 on bogus charges and auctioned off all of its property, only to have it reopen shortly thereafter under a new name and charter.

A few years ago, possession of the world's most widely read and influential contemporary book on education--and popular education's best-known treatise, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* was sufficient grounds to be arrested in South Korea.

Paulo Freire himself was immediately arrested and forced into exile for almost two decades after the 1964 military coup in Brazil. His crime? He designed and directed the previously elected government's National Literacy Campaign. The campaign's stated purpose was to enable the illiterate majority to become responsible, democratic citizens.

In the mid-1970s, a South African nun, Anne Hope, was arrested and exiled, and only recently allowed to return home. Her crime? She organized a Freireian-style literacy campaign for Steve Biko, the martyred founder of South Africa's black consciousness movement.

When the Sandinistas finally wrested power from the Somosa dictatorship in 1979, they immediately put a major share of their meager resources into mounting a massive and very successful national literacy crusade to further people's ability to participate in the decisions affecting their lives (V. Miller, 1985). Nicaragua remains a democracy today.

What is Popular Education?

What binds each of these institutions, events, and individuals together? They were seeking to build the capacity for democratic social change through education. Those involved believed that the fundamental purpose of education should be social transformation toward full human participation in society, and they possessed a philosophy, theory, and practice of education that often succeeded.

This form of adult education is now widely known as "popular education." The core of its meaning and definition are clear, while the boundaries are intentionally permeable. Popular education is, at root, the empowerment of adults through democratically structured cooperative study and action, directed toward achieving more just and peaceful societies within a life sustaining global environment. Its priority is ordinary people--the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised people of the world--who comprise a majority of the world's population.

In the words of the well-known Canadian educator, Doris Marshall, popular education is "ordinary people all over the world feeling their own worth and seeing the same worth in other people. It is ordinary people taking responsibility for using what's left of the world's resources, together. This can not be done from the top down, but only by ordinary people, imbued with their own power."

I often encounter educators and others who have never heard of popular education, nor of its principal exemplars like the Highlander Center. In each case, there is the spoken or unspoken implication that, therefore, popular education must not have much impact or significance. We've always been told, and

correctly, that the proof is in the pudding. Well, we know of the pudding, because there have been many successful social change efforts in recent U.S. history. Yet few of us know of the critical elements--like popular education--that contributed to the pudding's creation.

Myles Horton, co-founder and director of the Highlander Center for its first 40 years, once told me, "You can accomplish a lot of good in the world if you don't care who gets the credit for it." Certainly his is a very un-American and unacademic point of view. Paradoxically, it is the epitome of a successful popular education effort for the people to say, "We have done it ourselves."

One Example: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement

For example, virtually everyone knows of the Southern civil rights movement, the heroic role of Martin Luther King Jr., and the movement's contribution to achieving greater justice for people of color and others in our society. Yet few know of the Highlander Center's numerous contributions--often subtle and complex--to the movement. Many who played important roles, like Andrew Young, refer to Highlander as "the cradle of the civil rights movement."

The citizenship school movement is a case in point. It was at Highlander that the critical literacy and leadership training program--the citizenship school program--was conceived and developed. Martin Luther King's civil rights organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) adopted the program, and enlisted its co-founder, Septima Clark, to direct it. Not only did it teach tens of thousands of Southern blacks to read and write so they could register to vote. At the same time, it also developed the leadership that formed the organizational nucleus for the movement in countless towns and cities throughout the South (C. Tjerandsen, 1980).

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded at Highlander from a yearly integrated workshop for college students. Even the inspiring anthem of the movement, "We Shall Overcome," was originally brought to Highlander in the 1940s and transformed there by Zilphia Horton and Pete Seeger to be introduced later at a civil rights event in 1959 by Guy Carawan, Highlander's musical director (F. Adams, 1975). Highlander continues to this day to play a critical role in people's struggles for economic and social justice throughout the South, the nation, North America, and the world.

A Worldwide Movement

One of popular education's exciting strengths is that its prototypes have evolved in many parts of the world virtually independently of one another. The most important models have developed outside of the Eurocentric first world. Typically, people from diverse backgrounds become involved in organizations that enable them to retain their autonomy and regional power, while at the same time learning from and supporting the work and struggles of groups of ordinary people from every corner of the globe.

Most noteworthy is the emergence of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) in the 1970's under the leadership of Budd Hall, with its secretariat in Toronto. Latin America has been a very fertile ground for the development of the methods of popular education. Paulo Freire, the best known figure in the field, is a Brazilian professor.

The most active and productive regional organization is the Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina (CEAAL) based in Santiago. CEAAL is the Latin American regional affiliate of the ICAE and thus, an integral part of the international network. The El Canelo Center near Santiago (directed by Francisco Vio Grossi) and its ten development centers throughout Chile comprise one of the most impressive and influential popular education complexes in the world. The El Canelo Center and the network played an important role in Chile's peaceful return to democracy a few years ago.

The Participatory Research Approach

The type of research or knowledge production associated with popular education, called "participatory research," was first articulated in Tanzania in the early 1970s. The most productive center for its scholarly development and promulgation has been the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (SPRIA) based in New Delhi, and under the leadership of Rajesh Tandon. SPRIA also coordinates the influential Participatory Research Network of the ICAE. Another leading figure in the field has been Orlando Fals-Borda of the National University of Columbia in Bogata. He calls his line of research "participatory

action research" (O. Fals-Borda and M. A. Anisur Rahman, 1993).

Participatory research **is the result of the on-going effort in popular education to come to grips--in both theory and practice--with the question, "What is knowledge, and what gives it credibility in a society that aspires to be genuinely democratic?" It asks and provides working answers to these basic questions: what knowledge is to be produced, by whom, in whose interest, and to what end ? It assumes that in a truly democratic society, knowledge is not simply *for* the people, but created *with* and *by* the people. Thus, it validates each person's right to speak, regardless of such factors as socioeconomic status, class, or race.**

According to Muhammad Anisur Rahman, former professor of economics at the University of Dacca, Bangladesh, participatory research "... returns to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems, as fully scientific, and the right to use this knowledge--including any other knowledge, but not dictated by it--as a guide in their own action (O. Fals-Borda and M. A. Rahman, eds., 1991)." The objective is always social transformation toward more equitable, just, and peaceful democratic societies.

The Story of Yellow Creek, Kentucky

What happened to the community of people living alongside Kentucky's Yellow Creek in the heart of Appalachia served as the catalyst for their own participatory research work. Back in 1981, residents first noticed that the fish and aquatic life in the creek were dying. Gradually all of their livestock also died. By then they began to worry about what the effect on people might be. They knew the pollution source was a leather tanning factory upstream. However, they had been told repeatedly over the years by industry and government officials that there was absolutely no risk to human health.

Alarmed over the death of their livestock and the loss of much of their livelihood, they organized themselves into the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens (YCCC) in the early 1980s. They began asking questions and soon discovered that chromium, one of many toxic chemicals used in the tanning process, caused cancer. They attended workshops at the Highlander Center and there met others struggling with similar environmental health problems from polluted waterways. Highlander is well known and trusted by poor people throughout the South, and is typically sought out when problems emerge.

Highlander workshops helped the group to frame questions and assisted them in their search for answers. The resources and expertise available at the Highlander Center enabled the group to conduct its own sophisticated research on the chemicals involved in tanning, as well as a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the pollutants in Yellow Creek.

They soon realized they would need a community health survey and epidemiological study that would stand up to the many industrial and government agencies that opposed them. Vanderbilt University's Center for Health Services agreed to teach the members of YCCC how to prepare a comprehensive health survey. They conducted the survey themselves and analyzed and interpreted the results in consultation with the health service professionals. Then they decided what actions they would take based on their new knowledge. During the survey, they were also able to educate their neighbors along the creek about the issues of the case. In the process, they built public awareness and support, and YCCC membership increased to one-third of the community or some 300 persons.

The YCCC findings were appalling in terms of the number and severity of health problems associated with Yellow Creek. Eventually they had to file a class action suit against the tannery and the city, which they eventually won. Even then, they had to initiate a number of other "creative actions," before anything was done to stop the pollution at its source and to clean up the creek.

For example, the tannery had given people in the community lumber from the cannery floors that was saturated with heavy metals. When YCCC exposed what the tannery had done, officials refused to pick it up. The group then dumped a truckload of the toxic lumber on the steps of the state capitol and held a press conference. The lumber was cleaned up the next day.

Today, some 14 years later, there are again fish in the creek and riparian animals along its banks. But there remain few families along the creek that haven't lost at least one family member to cancer or some other disease related to profound immune system damage.

The YCCC is a group of diverse rural folks, many with little formal education, that runs by strict consensus. They have been meeting regularly, at least twice a month, for over 14 years. During this period, they have undertaken a succession of legal actions. Finally this past February, YCCC was awarded $15 million by a jury, twice what they had asked for. If they actually get the settlement money, they will set up a long-term health surveillance program. They will also use the money to help pay the astronomical health costs of many community members who have no health insurance, and who are plagued with cancer and auto-immune deficiency diseases.

Another, virtually serendipitous outcome of the popular education and participatory research efforts of YCCC is the independent formation of many effective citizen groups in Bell County, Kentucky. These groups have achieved significant victories in a region beset with poverty and environmental destruction, and which had never previously experienced any sustained organized citizen education and action (J. Gaventa, 1980).

YCCC had demonstrated that ordinary citizens could make a difference, even in a very repressive community. People in surrounding areas also sought YCCC's advice and assistance in developing their own community education and action groups.

Bell County is one of the poorest counties in the United States (the real unemployment rate is close to 60 percent). In spite of this, people there are regaining control over their lives democratically, bit by bit, through education, research, and action that is theirs at every point in the process (L. Wilson, 1994).

Implementing Popular Education Principles at Berkeley

I have told the story of popular education and participatory research in some detail because it provides a context within which to understand my own work. My efforts at the University for the past 25 years have been, in their own modest way, dedicated to building the capacity for democratic social change through education. I'd like to briefly sketch the trail I've taken. For many years my work has focused on education within the university community and on efforts to understand and contribute to undergraduate education and its possibilities as a catalyst for democratic social transformation. In all of these projects I have worked as equal partners with other faculty, students, and frequently staff, as a matter of principle. So what I am reporting on is, in fact, the result of collective efforts.

Conservation and Resource Studies

In the wake of the first Earth Day in 1970, I was part of a small group of faculty and students that began to meet to develop an undergraduate degree program on identifying, understanding, and solving environmental problems. The integrating principle of this educational program was a goal--to create and maintain a sustainable environment--rather than a traditional discipline. The Conservation of Natural Resources Department--later renamed Conservation and Resource Studies (CRS)--was soon authorized in the College of Natural Resources and graduated its first students in 1971.

The major was rather informally structured, with students having parity on all decision-making groups. The curriculum evolved over time through student and faculty dialogue as needs emerged in the field and community. CRS classes tended to be participatory. Students defined their own area of interest in the program in collaboration with an advisor. A substantial internship was strongly recommended for all students.

As the program grew, a need arose to more fully articulate the pedagogy, curriculum, and governance of the program. Around 1976, an environmental education class of mine took on the challenge of articulating and building a strong student organization within the program to assure their democratic presence in the CRS program. Within a year they had laid the groundwork and constitution for a strong and active campus organization. The CRS student organization was able to protect the student's parity within the program and go on to become one of the most active and influential student organizations on campus for several years (J. Hurst, 1981).

The Conservation and Resource Studies major soon will be 25 years old. I have taught in the program, and been a member of the small core faculty and a major advisor for students since its inception.

Democratic Education at CAL

In the fall of 1980 CRS offered a course called *Education for Democratic Action* that I developed in collaboration with a small group of CRS students. The class had two sections. I worked very closely with one of the sections, whose students had developed a mission to create a student-run center to promote democratic education on campus. It was a vision I had been nourishing for several years. By the spring quarter of 1991 we had created an organization called Chautauqua-A Center for Democratic Education, which published a magazine and a catalogue that described a number of student-initiated classes whose offerings it was coordinating. Chautauqua also sponsored workshops featuring distinguished democratic educators like Myles Horton.

In June 1981 the ASUC Senate accepted Chautauqua as a student-run ASUC operation. In a few years the name was changed to Democratic Education at CAL or DeCAL, so its name would clearly reflect its purpose and have meaning for students. By 1985 the function of DeCAL had narrowed to the important task of facilitating the offering of student-initiated courses. An extensive source book was published that dealt with all the details of creating a class, obtaining a faculty sponsor, and the discussion and promotion of a democratic pedagogy.

DeCAL continues to flourish today as an outlet for serious and creative students who wish to add to the campus offerings. Each semester some 30 to 40 student-initiated courses are offered for credit. Almost all of them rapidly fill to their maximum enrollment. I frequently hear students say that their DeCAL class was the best course they ever took at Berkeley. Many courses initiated by students through DeCAL have gone on to become regular courses offered by faculty in various departments on campus. DeCAL is perhaps the best known and most well respected of all the 21 Student Initiated Service Groups approved and funded each year by the ASUC Senate. Many of my advisees, both undergraduate and graduate, have been directors of DeCAL over the years, including this academic year.

Peace and Conflict Studies

In January 1984 an experimental undergraduate major in Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS) was approved on campus. For the first time, Berkeley students wanting to create a more peaceful and just world could focus their studies on understanding and seeking solutions to critical global problems. This program was the result of several years of effort by a small group of students and faculty, of which I was a part. Student involvement was critical--both intellectually and politically--in the establishment of PACS. Students were given parity in decision making almost from the beginning. I was elected to chair the program during its formative years.

The program's structure, pedagogy, and curriculum were hammered out in committees comprised of equal numbers of faculty and students, and some staff, over a period of years. Their recommendations were then brought to the PACS community as a whole for ratification. Besides being chair of the program, I co-chaired the curriculum committee with undergraduate student Lisa Raffel, who later went on to get a teaching credential from Berkeley. The students' responsibility, seriousness, and contributions in these deliberations certainly equalled those of the faculty in every respect (J. Hurst, 1986).

As in CRS, the students designed their own areas of concentration within the program and crafted a set of courses to reflect this, in conjunction with breadth requirements in several areas. The program also contains a required internship in connection with a seminar, "Peacework as a Profession," that students take during their senior year. Many students' internships evolve into their first professional position or lead to a position elsewhere in the field (F. McMartin, L. Spurlock, and J. Hurst, 1986).

I continue to teach courses and advise students in PACS. Today, Peace and Conflict Studies is a program and major within the College of Letters and Science, and has close to one hundred students. This makes it the largest undergraduate degree program in peace studies in the nation.

North American Alliance

As the above examples illustrate, I have spent many of my years at Berkeley working with the unempowered members of the university community--namely undergraduate students--to implement the principles of popular education and participatory research within the university. However, I have only been formally connected to popular education outside the university since 1980. At that time I began to work with others to bring distinguished democratic educators to Berkeley to offer workshops and to meet with my classes. Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, Danilo Dolci, and Budd Hall all came to campus with some

regularity over the next few years.

In January 1990 I was a delegate at the International Council for Adult Education's (ICAE) World Assembly in Bangkok. While there, some of the participants met to explore the possibilities of creating a representative organization that might become the North American regional affiliate of the ICAE. We wanted to create an organization that would truly reflect and meet the needs of the diverse popular education sectors, from the grass-roots to the academy, as well as the full diversity of North American cultures, taking into account race and ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, different abilities, age, and regions. Hitherto, professional organizations of adult educators had been dominated by academics, and thus primarily met their needs. We wanted our prime focus to be the popular sectors. This was new territory.

A small committed group of us went through several truncated attempts to form an organization. In our final successful effort we issued a call to a diverse set of existing organizations to attend a Gathering Voices Congress, held near Toronto in February 1993. After three days we drafted and approved a Basis of Unity document and with a great deal of enthusiasm created the North American Alliance for Popular and Adult Education (NAAPAE).

The Alliance publishes a journal called *Seeds of Fire* which I have co-edited as chair of the communications committee. I was also a member of the planning and program committee for our first General Assembly held outside of Calgary in August 1994. The gathering was a heartening culmination of years of effort. Close to 200 people representing over 60 organizations attended, and reflected the many faces of North America from James Bay to Chiapas, and from California to Newfoundland.

Participants proposed resolutions of support and initiated work with groups as diverse as the struggle of the Lubicon Cree to re-establish their ancestral land rights in Alberta, and the efforts of two brave lesbians, Brenda and Wanda Henson, to develop and maintain a feminist popular education center, Camp Sister Spirit, on their land outside of Ovett, Mississippi, in the face of escalating acts of violence directed against them.

In February 1994 at the Plaza Resolana in Santa Fe, NAAPAE co-sponsored a gathering of about 30 people representing several groups in the process of creating new popular education centers and folks schools, and a number of established organizations. Our purpose was simple--to establish, if there was a demonstrated need, a cooperative consisting of fledgling popular education centers and folk schools that would be dedicated to providing technical assistance to developing centers, ranging from bookkeeping to pedagogical expertise.

We subsequently founded the Marrowbone La Mazorca Cooperative under the able leadership of Gilda Haas, a community educator from Los Angeles and a former student in Berkeley's City and Regional Planning Department, and Frank Adams, formerly of the Industrial Cooperative Association. Some ten emerging popular education centers and folk schools, along with a number of existing organizations, including NAAPAE, have indicated their intent to purchase shares in our new cooperative. We expect Marrowbone La Mazorca to become an important force in strengthening the popular education movement in the United States.

My professional involvement outside of the University has, thus, been dedicated to strengthening and formally networking the popular education movement in North America in order to further contribute to building the capacity for democratic social change through education. I continue to believe that the human community has the potential to transform itself into just, peaceful, and equitable societies and at the same time stabilize and maintain a sustainable environment for all. I further believe that this can only be attained through democratic societies, where each person's voice is heard and given equal weight. Democratic education, as exemplified by, but not limited to, popular education, obviously must play a seminal role in this process of transformation. It is the task of ordinary citizens working together cooperatively, to create an up-welling from the rich earth. It will not be easy.

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Entered: 15 August 1997
