

## 7 why we still have a lot to learn



The Trapeze Collective

Tell me, and I forget. Show me, and I remember. Involve me, and I understand.  
(Chinese proverb)

Education, and in particular popular education, is vital to respond to the ecological, social and climatic crises we face and to achieve meaningful radical social change. An education where we relearn co-operation and responsibility that is critically reflective but creatively looks forward – an education that is popular, of and from the people. There are many examples of groups that organise their own worlds without experts and professionals, challenge their enemies and build movements for change. What we outline here is what is known as popular, liberatory or radical education which aims at getting people to understand their world around them, so they can take back control collectively, understand their world, intervene in it, and transform it. This chapter looks at the importance of education in bringing about social change, and indeed how social movements for change have popular education at their core.

### so what does popular education mean?

The word ‘popular’ can mean many things and has been mobilised by the right as well as the left. There is no single political project behind the methods of popular education. It has been used by all sorts of people including revolutionary guerillas, feminists, and adult educators; all with different aims. Development practitioners from organisations such as the World Bank, for example, increasingly use popular or participatory education to co-opt, manipulate and influence communities to secure particular versions of development. Yet it is important to promote and reclaim some of the more radical strands of popular education which are rooted in defiance (‘we are not going to take this anymore’), and struggle (‘we want to change things’), and

geared towards change ('how do we get out of this mess'), while promoting solidarity ('your struggle is our struggle').

The Popular Education Forum of Scotland (Crowther, Martin and Shaw 1999) defines popular as:

1. Rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people.
2. Overtly political and critical of the status quo.
3. Committed to progressive social and political change.
4. A curriculum which comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle.
5. A pedagogy which is collective, primarily focused on group rather than individual learning and development.
6. Attempts to forge a direct link between education and social action.

One of the activities that we have used in our workshops to start thinking about how we learn is to look at positive and negative learning experiences. People have told us that negative experiences are characterised by fear, discipline, constant assessment, humiliation, being bullied or bored, and unenthusiastic teachers.



Positive experiences, on the other hand, are often those that are creative, interactive, student led, interesting, when learners are given responsibility, and take place in a supportive and friendly environment. Although many teachers in the state sector use participatory and progressive teaching methods, state funded education remains constrained by large class sizes, national curricula and targets. Table 7.1 outlines briefly some of the main differences between the overarching aims of formalised education in schools and universities, and popular education.

## key aspects of popular education

### 1. A commitment to transformation and solidarity

Popular educators are not experts who sit on the sidelines; they participate in social movements, be they literacy campaigns, teach-ins about globalisation or by participating in actions. Solidarity means being on the side of the marginalised and working with agendas and goals chosen by those affected, not outside agencies. Charity and aid can provide temporary relief but are rarely designed to break the chains of dependency and encourage people to run their own affairs. At the heart of popular education is a desire not just to understand the world, but to empower people so they can change it. By identifying and exposing power relations, we can

Table 7.1 Comparing formal and popular education

<i>Formal-state</i>	<i>Popular-participatory-liberatory</i>
Why? To gain basic skills and teach acceptance of authority and preparation for participation in waged based work and consumerism.	Why? To raise critical consciousness, link with campaigns and action, and promote social justice and solidarity.
How? Learners receive knowledge from teachers, there is an emphasis on the end result, qualifications, exams and competitive grading systems.	How? Participants are active in how and what they learn. Hierarchies are challenged. Educators understand learning occurs in many different ways and employ a variety of techniques to build collective knowledge.
What is taught? Rational, fact based, information, learning skills for business and efficiency.	What is taught? Exploration of alternatives and radical solutions. Values emotional responses.

*Box 7.1 Mujeres Libres*

*In the late 1930s in Spain, Mujeres Libres (Free Women) mobilised over 20,000 women and developed an extensive network of activities to empower individuals and build community. The movement saw education as central to releasing women's potential and to free them from the 'triple enslavement of ignorance, enslavement as woman and enslavement as a worker'. Classes were organised through cities and neighbourhoods. In 1938 in Barcelona alone, between 600 and 800 women were attending classes daily to capacitar (empower or prepare) them for a 'more just social order'. They organised autonomously from men, arguing that only through self-directed action would women come to see themselves as competent, capable and able to participate in the revolutionary movement. Classes ranged from basic literacy to, social history, law, technical skills and languages. They spread their message further through books and pamphlets and speaking tours. Virtually all the activists were self taught, putting in to practice theories of direct action and 'learning by doing'.*

begin to develop an understanding of how we might challenge ways of organising social and economic life which perpetuate injustice, at whatever scale.

This type of education is not about explaining external problems, but also confronting each other and the social roles we have adopted. To make 'other possible worlds', we must also change ourselves and learn to listen to the experiences of others. It's not enough to understand how we think power works 'out there' if we overlook our role in reproducing power. Asking questions rather than providing answers is fundamental: What do we accept and reject? How do we pass on systems of domination be they class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality? How can we challenge these within ourselves? This way of teaching and learning is challenging and requires effort on both sides. Paulo Freire called it the 'practice of freedom' and talked of the dialectical relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. This is what Freire meant by *conscientizacion*, through which we recognise our presence in the world, and, rather than adapting or adhering to social norms, we realise our potential to intervene and challenge inequality.



## 2. Learning our own histories not his-story

Although there is always at least two sides to every story, the vast majority of official history is exactly that – 'his-story', written by the literate educated few, mainly men, not by peasants, workers or women. We are taught about leaders of world wars and histories of great scientists, but not much about the silent millions who struggle daily for justice. These are the ordinary people doing extraordinary things who are the invisible makers of history. When they do appear, they are often portrayed as violent extremists. Few learn about the Haymarket martyrs in nineteenth-century Chicago who fought for an eight hour day, the nineteenth-century Luddites who challenged the factory system during the Industrial Revolution, or the women who occupied the Shell platforms in Ogoniland, Nigeria. Many of these stories are not told because people could not read or write, or did not have any means to record events and communicate with a wider audience. They are not recorded by historians because they evoke the dangerous idea that ordinary people can act collectively and do it themselves. Talking about a proposed gas pipeline in County Mayo, Ireland, a campaigner reflected,

A generation ago we could not have resisted this pipeline, because we could not read and write – we wouldn't have been able to respond to what Shell were saying and doing or fight them in the courts. Now we can fight Shell on the same level and they don't know what to do. (Vincent McGrath, Shell to Sea Campaign, interview with authors, June 2005)

It is important to relearn our own hidden histories of struggle, they exist everywhere and can be uncovered. They can help to dispel apathy ('it's not worth it') and powerlessness ('it's too overwhelming'). Learning these lessons show us that most of our freedoms and improvements, which we value in our lives today, have been fought for and won through collective and sustained action by people like ourselves, not great leaders. Oral history projects that engage with members of a community and record their memories and walks that visit sites of historical interest, of uprisings and old ways of life are two ways of relearning and connecting these forgotten histories.

### **3. Starting from daily reality**

Any project should begin by looking for connections between problems and people's everyday lives, not a preconceived idea of this reality. Popular education is about avoiding judging people and encouraging people to express themselves, in their own way. It is not about learning lists of facts, but looking at where people find themselves and how they understand what's going on around them.

Many believe that learning happens best where there is affinity between the educator and the participants – and when common experiences can be used as the material to be studied. In his work on popular education in the El Salvadorian revolution, John Hammond observed that the teachers in the National Liberation Front (an army largely made up of illiterate peasantry) were generally combatants who had only recently learnt to read or write themselves. The biggest challenge can be building bridges between disparate worlds. Talking about television or football and finding things in common can be ways to start a conversation. It takes time to connect with people, and respect and trust are the keys to positive learning.

### **4. Learning together as equals**

Popular education methods are designed to increase participation and break down the hierarchy between educator/teacher and participant/learner. The educators and those they are working with collectively own the process, ideally deciding the curriculum and determining the outcome of the action to be taken. Whilst in many contexts educators are seen as experts who can provide quick fixes, popular education has an explicit aim to reduce dependency between educators and those they engage with. Radical educator, Myles Horton, would tell his students at Highlander that if he gave them an easy answer today, what would stop them coming back tomorrow and asking him again? He argues that groups trying to find a way out of a problem are often the most capable of experimenting with possible solutions and should be encouraged to do so.

*Box 7.2 Highlander Folk School, USA. 'The people always know best'*

*The Highlander School emerged from the needs of various social movements in 1930s Tennessee. It initially got involved with the labour movement, helping workers to organise. By the mid 1960s it was central to the civil rights movement organising literacy classes in poor black communities, teaching them to read and therefore enabling them to register to vote. They started classes by reading the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the powerful language of 'all men being equal', encouraging those who attended citizenship schools to demand more than just the right to vote. Participants included Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, the latter sparking a desegregation movement by being the first black woman to refuse to give up her seat on a bus. Myles Horton, one of the founders, has become famous for his approach which argues that ordinary people have the ability to understand and positively change their own lives. The school continues today; its mission is 'to build strong and successful social-change activism and community organizing led by the people who suffer most from the injustices of society'.*



### 5. Getting out of the classroom

A critique of the powers and rules we live by cannot flourish when learning only happens within the official institutions and places controlled and funded by those in power. The state control of schools and compulsory education is not inevitable, nor does it reflect a widely articulated need. However, it has become all encompassing. The school forms the ideology, patriotism and social structure of the modern nation state. Free, compulsory education is now based on the assumptions that the state has the responsibility to educate all its citizens, the right to force parents to send their children to school, to impose taxes on the entire community to school their children and to determine the nature of the education on offer.

One particular issue is the creeping influence of corporations on our education – through private academies, but also through sponsorship of learning materials, research, and even food and entertainment. Whilst we enjoy a 'free education' (i.e.

we generally don't have to pay) the influence of private corporations in the delivery of curricula as well as in schools' facilities is increasingly a cause for concern. Teachers are ever more limited in what they can teach by the national curriculum, and there is more compulsory testing from a younger age. Students are taught conformity to values chosen by government and increasingly big business. A recent report highlighted the links between universities and the oil industry:

Through its sponsorship of new buildings, equipment, professorships and research posts, the oil and gas industry has 'captured' the allegiance of some of Britain's leading universities. As a result, universities are helping to lock us in to a fossil fuel future. (Muttitt 2003, 2)

Getting out of the classroom and institutionalised learning environments is a key part of rethinking learning about everyday life – outside encounters, street life, listening to somebody, at home, within the community are all places of learning that gives us valuable social skills and rounds our knowledge. This type of learning is also about challenging education's negative associations and making learning passionate, interesting and challenging. People learn everywhere and using social and cultural events, music, food and film is a good way to reach out to people who may not come to a talk or workshop. Experiments in education beyond formal schools include 'Schools Without Walls', such as the Parkway Program in Philadelphia where the whole city was used as a resource.

## 6. Inspiring social change

Discussing important subjects, such as climate change, can be depressing and can leave us with feelings of despair and doom. Rather than avoid talking about them we can look at ways to deal with this. Firstly, we can identify a number of common barriers to changing attitudes or behaviour:

- Apathy, 'I can't be bothered' or 'It doesn't effect me'.
- Denial that the issue exists.
- Feeling of powerlessness to do anything about the situation.
- Feeling overwhelmed by the size and scale of the problem/issue.
- Socio-economic time pressures and lack of support.

The way that learning happens can turn these attitudes around and help us turn our outrage and passion in to practical steps for action, our dreams in to realities. We can explore examples from the past where people have struggled and won and focus on workable alternatives. Practical tips for planning a workshop can help, such as identifying small achievable aims, breaking down issues in to manageable chunks

(see the next chapter for specific exercises), providing further resources, helping with action planning and campaign building.

Radical educators take on the responsibility to guide groups beyond common fears to reveal answers and possible escape routes to problems, laying possible options on the table. The art lies in the ability to make connections and establish bridges between people's everyday realities and what they start to think is possible in the future. Hence, inspirations for social change are presented slowly and gradually, with honest reflection, compromise and setbacks along the way.

Part of this learning experience is about sharing what is feasible, both in the here and now and other times and places. There are many workable ways of living that directly challenge the money economy, wage labour and ecological crises – many of which are discussed in this book – working co-operatives, community gardens, low impact living, direct action, autonomous spaces, independent media. On their own they may not seem much and are spread far and wide. But if they are gathered up and presented collectively they can provide excitement and hope and form a basis for a more creative, autonomous life.



## popular education in action

There is a rich history that criss-crosses the world as people have struggled for freedom and against oppression. Popular education has flourished at times of big social upheavals, when people question the way the world is, and see a need to change their lives.

### Educating the workers for freedom

The Industrial Revolution meant massive changes and new realities such as overcrowding, long working days and urban poverty. Working-class people in the UK did not have the right to formal education; in fact many educators and members of the aristocracy argued that education would confuse and agitate working people. Various associations were established to campaign against this injustice. Some authorities conceded that education for working people might be useful so long as it was devoted only to basic skills development. Associations struggling against these views developed their own forms of education – 'rag' magazines, study groups and community activities. Socialists of various affiliations struggled to educate themselves and those around them to understand and tackle the horrific new realities of life, whilst openly trying to develop class consciousness.

The book *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist* (1918) by Robert Tressell is one famous example. It depicts the efforts of Owen, a firebrand socialist painter, trying to educate his reactionary pals about the evils of capitalism. A rich tradition exists ranging from the Labour colleges, the Correspondence societies during the revolutions in France and the USA, to later experiments such as Co-operative colleges, Workers' Educational Association, and adult education colleges such as Ruskin College in Oxford. Many of these presented a blueprint for transformation to a socialist society, based more or less on a Marxist-Leninist perspective. Alongside the workshop and the trade union, Marx schools or Workers' universities were set up. These sprang up across the world into the twentieth century, offering classes to workers in the basics of socialist thinking whilst also training professional international socialist activists and agitators, and becoming a focus for anti-communist surveillance and repression. Radical organising in working-class communities has continued through tenants' and claimants' unions, and in the UK through anti-poll tax unions drawing on these powerful roots.

### **Free schools**

Many educational alternatives have been tried over the years, experimenting with radical education through free or progressive schools. Many had revolutionary potential, not just undermining state power, but also challenging ways of life and were seen as a real threat. For example, Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer was executed for plotting a military insurgency when he opened a school that was free from religious dogma. The high point for free schools was the New Schools movement in Europe in the mid twentieth century. Schools were based on voluntary attendance and children and teachers governed the school together. There was no compulsory curriculum, no streaming, no exams or head teacher. Instead libertarian ideas were promoted and there was a focus on creative learning and interaction between different ages and the outside world. Free schools exist throughout the world, such as Mirambika in India and Sudbury Valley School in the USA. British examples include Abbotsholme School in Staffordshire and Summerhill in Suffolk. While education is compulsory, schooling isn't; networks such as Education Otherwise and the Home Education Network provide support for the thousands of parents in the UK who choose to educate their children at home.

### **Struggles for independence**

Popular education movements have played central roles in the struggles for independence in many colonised countries. In the twentieth century, socialist inspired nationalist struggles across Latin America and Africa used popular education to

engage with the masses, challenge oppression, apartheid and colonialism. Liberatory educators in countries including Nicaragua, Granada, Cuba, El Salvador and South Africa set up educational programmes to mobilise the masses, especially the rural poor. In these revolutionary contexts popular schools flourished. 'People's Education for People's Power' in South Africa, for example, was a movement born in the mid 1980s in reaction to apartheid and was an explicit political and educational strategy to mobilise against the exploitation of the black population. It organised Street Law and Street Justice programmes and literacy and health workshops – these programmes were also subject to repression.

### Latin America

One of the best known examples of popular education being used to challenge oppression and improving the lives of illiterate people is the work of Paulo Freire in Brazil. Working with landless peasants, he developed an innovative approach to literacy education believing it should mean much more than simply learning how to read and write. Freire argued that educators should also help people to analyse their situation. His students learned to read and write through discussion of basic problems they were experiencing themselves, such as no access to agricultural land. As the causes of their problems were considered, the students analysed and discussed what action could be taken to change their situation.



Radical popular education has recently seen a resurgence in Latin America, as people try to make sense of the current crisis brought about by 30 years of neoliberal economic policies. In Argentina after the 2001 economic crisis, Rondas de Pensamiento Autonomo (roundtables for autonomous discussion) and open platforms in neighbourhood assemblies have become common features where people talk about the crisis and possible solutions. The Madres de Plaza de Mayo (The 'Mothers' who tirelessly campaign against the disappearance of many innocent people during Argentina's dirty war) have set up the Universidad Popular Madres de Plaza de Mayo on the Plaza del Congreso in the centre of Buenos Aires. This people's university, dedicated to popular education, houses Buenos Aires' best political bookshop, the literary cafe Osvaldo Bayer, and gallery and workshop space which holds classes, seminars and debates on topics from across Latin America. Since the establishment of the Venezuelan Bolivarian Republic in 2001 under Hugo Chavez, Bolivarian circles and local assemblies have spread to engage people in implementing decision making and the new constitution.

**Education for global justice**

Over the last ten years, the anti/alter-globalisation struggle has been a hotbed for popular education activity. A global summit of world leaders rarely passes without several teach-ins, counter-conferences and skill sharing events where activists and campaigners come together to inspire and inform each other about what they are attempting to understand and challenge. Groups and networks have emerged dedicated to producing and disseminating a huge amount of information on topics crucial to understanding our contemporary world: sweat shop labour, fair trade, immigration, war and militarisation, the effects of genetically modified organisms, neocolonialism and climate change. Hallmarks of such workshops are teaching horizontally and encouraging equal participation. Whilst big campaigns and mobilisations are often times for such educational outreach there are many social centres that provide space for ongoing autonomous education. La Prospe in Madrid has, since the mid 1970s, hosted Grupos D'Apprendizaje Colectiva (Groups for Collective Learning) on topics such as gender, globalisation, basic skills and literacy. As well as converging at global summits there are many international gatherings and seminars that all provide means of exchanging, building and networking ideas and experiences of different groups.

**where now for popular education?**

Social change will not be achieved by a small group of experts but will involve bringing people together on an equal basis. One of the issues that has faced the alter-globalisation movement is it's need to communicate with wider audiences to get off the activist beaten track. Although popular education on its own is not enough, it is one way for people to engage themselves and their communities in these discussions, to begin to think of their needs and the possibilities that can be created.

In post 9/11 USA, Katz-Fishman and Scott argue that a climate of fear, hysteria and pseudo-patriotism has been created to control and contain dissent. They argue that:

To prevent the fragmentation and break down of the community means organizing ongoing educational development among grassroots-low-income and student-scholar activist communities of all racial-ethnic-nationality groups and bring people together on the basis of equality. (Katz-Fishman and Scott (2003)

This, they argue, must be done ‘community by community and workplace by workplace’. We echo and support this call to action, to extend groups and networks of popular and radical education.

There is a widespread sense that something is not working. The illusion of infinite upward economic growth can’t be maintained for much longer as natural resources become scarcer and the capacity for the planet to absorb waste becomes exhausted. There is therefore, a potential for radical critiques to be articulated and developed. Popular education tools can help us do this in ways that make sense to people and to reveal why alternatives are possible and necessary. One great potential of popular education is that its participatory methods mean that ‘activists’ learn to make their ideas relevant and accessible. In a world where we all impact upon the lives of others, the boundary between who is the oppressor and the oppressed becomes increasingly confused. In the developed world, as consumers of the world’s resources driving a system of global exploitation, we must teach ourselves about the impacts we have on the world, the role our governments play, how to take responsibility, and, most importantly, how we can take action to change this. An education that seeks to address unequal power relations and empower collective action is vital. The work of people over the centuries, with limited resources but with a passion for change, should be our inspiration.



*The Trapese Popular Education Collective is Kim Bryan, Alice Cutler and Paul Chatterton. They are based in the UK and since 2004 have been working with groups of adults and young people to understand and take action on issues including climate change, globalisation and migration. They also produce educational resources and promote participatory, interactive learning through training and skill-shares (see [www.trapese.org](http://www.trapese.org)).*