Popular Education

Theory and Background Information

The term ‘popular education’ has acquired a variety of meanings throughout history. In both Spanish and Portuguese, the word ‘popular’ means ‘of the people.’\(^1\) The first use of the phrase referred to the extension of education to all citizens both rich and poor. In the 1970’s the term became linked to Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and community organizer.\(^2\) He worked directly with the poor, teaching them to read through a program he called ‘reading the word and reading the world.’\(^3\) The program participants not only became literate, but they learned to fight the system that was keeping them oppressed and impoverished. Our Field Project uses the term in reference to this second meaning.

**Defining Popular Education:** The term popular education currently defines many different types of educational activities and is therefore difficult to summarize. In fact, the Popular Education News collected definitions from leaders and organizers using popular education each month for two years in order to better define and understand what “popular education” means. While scanning the list may provide a sense of popular education values and ideals, there is no succinct explanation. This un-definability is inherent in Freire’s Popular Education model – the model is a philosophical approach, not a set of prescribed activities or tools.\(^4\) Popular education was a paradigm shift in education philosophy, transforming the view of education from a “banking system,” where the teacher imparts knowledge to the empty mind of the student, to a liberating pedagogy that believes all people have valid knowledge and experiences. Bringing this knowledge and experience together lets us learn from one another\(^5\) in a respectful and productive way.

There is a common process that describes the popular education philosophy, although the products of each step of the process are unpredictable. A popular education experience always begins with the experience and struggles of ordinary people. Those experiences are then generalized in order to learn more about the problems that exist within society. This leads to a desire to bring about social and political change. In this model, no one is the “all-knowing” teacher. Instead there is a facilitator who guides the conversation and helps participants build on what they have learned.

The main assumption of popular education is that all participants are simultaneously learners and teachers. As a result, popular education can be an

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\(^1\) The Trapeze Collective (2007)
\(^2\) Braster (2011)
\(^3\) Boyd (n.d.)
\(^4\) Jara (2010)
\(^5\) ibid
effective tool for empowerment, used to liberate and organize on a diverse set of issues throughout the world.

**Practical Visionaries and Popular Education**: The Practical Visionaries Field Project team completed a facilitator’s guide for a workshop that focuses on the “experience” stage of the popular education process. Tools and activities for an additional popular education workshop will further support the Practical Visionaries Steering Committee members in their efforts to start a meaningful conversation about the food economy in their communities.

**Challenges in Popular Education**: A major challenge within the popular education framework is the difficulty of generalizing the popular education work done. At its core, popular education is based in the experience of its participants. Since it is so dependent on individual and collective experience, it is extraordinarily difficult to draw conclusions about best practices. It also responds to varied political, social and economics contexts of each country and areas within a country. After interviewing multiple leaders in U.S. popular education, Professor Drick Boyd (n.d.) of Eastern University wrote, “popular education is a particular theoretical framework for supporting and encouraging social change.” He emphasized that the framework should have “a unique form appropriate for a specific group of people of a particular culture in a specific community.”

Not only does the unique nature of the philosophy make it difficult to define, it also makes it difficult to reproduce. There is general agreement about the basic philosophy, but there are different ideologies and methods for putting them in action. Although Freire has written many books, trainings tend to be based on word of mouth and workshops. This can cause core ideas getting blurred due to inadequate training, contributing to the inconsistencies within the framework of popular education. While popular education is a set of tools and techniques for participatory education for some groups, for others the sole purpose of the technique is empowering people towards social action. The different uses of the term can lead to confusion and frustration.

Another set of challenges for popular education are funding and resources. Costs vary among organizations, some with physical spaces and employee salaries for program support, while others are based on volunteers and/or internet resources. Most organizations raise funds through individual donations; projects are rarely funded by grants or government funding. This is partly due to the political nature of the work – because popular educations making it difficult to convince large donors to support an organization that is challenging the status quo. As a result of funding

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6 Kane (2010)
7 Kane (2010)
8 Boyd (n.d.)
9 ibid
challenges, many organizations have had to stop their work or decrease the services offered.

**Key Concepts in Popular Education**

**The Popular Education Spiral**: Although popular education is a philosophy and not a set of tools, a common structure has emerged. The popular education spiral and the learning heads are two concepts made popular in the 1991 book Educating for Change by Arnold, et. al. The popular education spiral has five steps. First, it must start with people’s experience. Second, look for patterns in the collective experience. Third, new information and theory is added to the conversation. Fourth, participants create a plan for action. Finally, apply what has been learned to action. Some other references add a reflection step at the end of the process. The process is also understood to continue spiraling. This spiral makes up the core of any popular education model regardless of the theme being discussed.

**The Learning Heads Concept**: The learning heads concept, another key popular education component, assumes that 1) all people learn differently and 2) we retain more information when it is given to us in multiple formats. We retain 10% of information we hear only, 50% of information we hear and see, but if we hear, see, talk and do we can retain 90% of the information. This central belief leads to the multiple learning styles addressed in popular education. Information is presented in multiple formats to address these different learning styles and maximize retention.

**Popular Education Methodologies**

**Creative Methods**: Due to its emphasis on multiple learning styles, popular education is also known to use creative methodologies to draw on experience and analyze patterns within experience. One example of this is Theater of the Oppressed. This technique uses theater to examine experiences more closely. By acting out our experiences we can make connections to the larger issues in society and demonstrate the human face of oppression and injustice. Other creative forms of dialogue have been used as tools to share and generalize experiences including sociodrama, role plays, drawing, sculpturing (creating human sculptures of an experience), and songwriting. These tools help group members create a dialogue about the issues they are exploring.

**Workshop Facilitation Methods**: Other strategies and tools have been developed to help organizers facilitate popular education workshops. In A Popular Education Handbook by Arnolds et. al. (1983) seven key components to popular education are

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10 Arnold et. al. (1991)
11 ibid
12 Dr. Pop (n.d.)
13 Boal (1979)
14 Arnolds et. al (1983)
listed. These include warm ups, collective learning, using visual activities, debate, connecting histories and lives, creative educational events, and planning for action. The handbook gives multiple activities that can be used at each step. These activities are designed to create an open learning environment, helping participants feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and learning collectively.

*Popular Education In Practice*

Popular education methodology has been used to bring awareness to many political, social and economic inequities for the past forty years and is still instrumental for social change. A powerful organizing tool, popular education empowers people to take action on issues important to their well-being. For example, in the 1990s the labor movement used popular education methods to switch their labor education tactics from union maintenance to more empowering union building.

In addition to community organizing and political activism, other sectors and groups have recognized the effectiveness of popular education. At the Transformative Learning Center in Toronto, an Environmental Adult Popular Education curriculum was developed to examining the root causes of the current environmental crisis. Another interesting example is the use of popular education with trauma survivors, where visual arts are used to help stimulate recovery and collective action. These are just a few examples of how popular education has been adapted to empower individuals to change the world around them.

**Developing a Popular Education Curriculum:** Many examples of popular education curricula exist. We will highlight just a few that are relevant to our work. First, a sample activity called 'Jobology' (the Catalyst Center, 2008) helps participants explore the history of class in the workforce by sharing their own history and experiences. Participants are asked to pair up and create a 'jobology' chart or timeline that represents the jobs held by their relatives as far back as they are aware. Then they are asked to make generalizations about the charts as a whole group. This leads into a discussion about the history of work. This simple activity goes through three parts of the popular education spiral. It begins with participant experience, leads into generalizations and finishes with new information. This activity could be used as a stand-alone activity or as part of a larger popular education curriculum.

The second curriculum example is from United for a Fair Economy, which has developed comprehensive popular economics education workshops. They hold trainings for popular education facilitators and also facilitate workshops for

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15 ibid
17 Hall and Clover (1997)
18 Escueta and Butterwick (2012)
19 The Catalyst Center (2008)
community organizations. The Growing Divide Trainer’s Manual explains how to lead each activity for the workshop. The workshop begins with a warm up activity helping to create an open learning environment. The next activity ‘Signs of the Times’ gets the participants to share their experiences of the current economic situation and make generalizations. The next five activities give new information about the current economy and the history behind the issues. These activities are designed to be interactive and engage multiple learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and discussion. The last five activities help participants turn knowledge into action. This workshop goes through the popular education spiral and makes use of the learning heads strategy.

20 United for a Fair Economy (2011)
21 United for a Fair Economy (2012)