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Teaching for Empowerment

Liberatory Pedagogy, Social Change and Gender Dynamics

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Abstract: *This paper offers a critical perspective on popular education with a focus on inequities of gender and culture in the classroom. Using classroom observation, analysis of multiple social change curricula, and interviews with practitioners in El Salvador and the San Francisco Bay Area, we examine potential pitfalls and strengths of a pedagogy from the point of view of transformational theory, concluding that with judicious intention the pedagogy may still lead to inspired learning, transformation in the classroom, and change in the participant communities.*

Introduction

It is not sufficient to incorporate inclusive language, nor is it sufficient to promote more participation of women. It is necessary to look at and revise the entire approach. (Vázquez & Diez, 2000).

This empirical study addressed the following question: How empowering are popular education pedagogies for women and learners of diverse cultural backgrounds? It was born of organizing experiences with women from El Salvador, where the teaching methodology is practiced actively by social justice and community-based organizations, and from work with immigrant communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Through interviews with teachers and organizers in both the San Francisco and El Salvador, observations of classrooms, and analysis of curricula from a range of organizations, the study critiqued a pedagogy that espouses critical thinking as a means of learner empowerment. The study concluded that popular education is not inherently empowering. Rather, popular education offers a framework that can lead to empowerment only if practiced with conscious intent and constant questioning on the part of teacher and learner—questions about the process of learning, classroom environment, gender, culture, and unexamined assumptions of the learner and teacher. The study found that for women popular education is no more empowering than traditional education when its implementation is devoid of a gender analysis or lacking in attentive tactics to increase women's participation. But when the multi-layered dynamics of power and gender are addressed, popular education can indeed promote profound change in learning and student empowerment. The insights from the organizations and teachers in the study also offered concrete ideas on how to promote an empowering classroom that leads to change in learners, teachers, and communities. Most of all, the study suggests that popular education is most effective in fulfilling its goal of empowerment and transformation when its purposes and implementation are subject to constant analytical and practical scrutiny.

Critical Theory Underpinnings

Popular education proponents claim that its methods and theories are emancipatory, that they give students voice, and that by empowering students, the educators bring about change in society (Freire, 1987; Giroux, 1993; McClaren, 1989) hooks recounted that popular education enabled her to see herself as a subject, and that while it was incomplete in its analysis of gender and race, it created a foundation for her to see herself as an actor and an agent for social change, promoting ideals of liberation in her own classroom (1994).

Popular education was born out of Marxist theory during social upheaval in Latin America. Consequently, post-feminist and postmodern critiques observe that popular education is rooted in a Western, linear, and oppressive ideology devoid of social analysis of power beyond class, and that popular education is not inherently appropriate for non-Western cultural contexts, nor necessarily empowering for women of any culture (Ellsworth, 1992; Lather, 1992; Thompson, 1995; Vasquez & Diez, 2000). According to Elizabeth Ellsworth, a critic of popular education and critical pedagogy, “‘Empowerment,’ ‘student voice,’ ‘dialogue,’ and even the term ‘critical’ are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination” (1992). Vázquez and Diez for their part generated a list of concerns about popular education from a practitioner’s view, and they took issue with the assumption that it was empowering for women simply by virtue of its values. Instead, they argued, educators and theorists must reevaluate the basic premise of popular education. Given that popular education is a transformative methodology, it too should be subject to constant transformation (2000).

Many postmodern educators remind us that we are in need of more, not less, pedagogical approaches geared towards combating oppression (Lather, 1992); though they do not suggest that existing liberatory theories are necessarily unreceptive to constructive critique. The progressive aspirations that run through Modernism continue to contribute to social change, and this change applies to shifting realities. Critical pedagogy, a legacy of Modernism, should be analyzed within a discourse that regards issues of power, justice and inequality as ongoing narratives that are central rather than subsumed in a metanarrative that generalizes experience and voice (Giroux, 1991). Freire too particularly insists that popular education should be subject to adaptation and change

Experiences and practices can be neither exported nor imported. It follows that it is impossible to fulfill someone’s request to import practices from other contexts. How can a culture of a different history and historical time learn from the experience of another, given that it is impossible to export or import practices and experiences?.... I am not denying the validity of foreign practices. Nor am I negating the necessity for interchange. What I am saying is that they should be reinvented. (1987, p. 132).

Critical Believers: The Participants Speak for Themselves

Teachers from El Salvador and the San Francisco Bay Area were the focus of the study. Both areas have a rich tradition of applying popular education as an organizing and educational strategy, and participants were very critical of their own practice, as Ana Ligia, the coordinator of a popular education organization in El Salvador noted

There are experiences of popular education over in Brazil where the whole theory of Paulo Freire was born; that is not our own experience here. That is to say it is enriched with this information, but starting from the conditions in which we live or in which people live in rural areas here it is not possible [to apply it directly]. So there has been a whole process initiated to reconceptualize popular education and what it means for us here and now.

Teachers in both contexts argued that popular education could be used as a guide, but that the individual contexts needed to be carefully analyzed in order to adjust the approach. On the other hand, when the popular education techniques were coupled with intentional, individualized design, teaching could take on a transformational dimension. In several cases participants, while deeply critical of popular education as a panacea, were also quick to demonstrate how much of

an effect their teaching had on their women students. One of the authors of this study also found this to be true while teaching Latina women in a leadership development program in San Francisco. Prior to the training series, the women in this program were often passive, quiet, and uncertain of their ability to be a voice in their classroom or their community. After a few sessions, according to field notes, she observed a shift in voice in the classroom

I looked around the room and realized that there was so much interaction and lively discussion – everyone was talking during small group sessions, appreciably and managing the content with great intellect. I was the only one in the room that was relatively quiet... I realized the power that exists when exercises are designed specifically for quiet people to have space and to have voice.

In Tecoluca, El Salvador remarkable improvement in learning and personal empowerment occurred for dozens of women in a literacy project, due in no small part to their teacher, Esmeralda, who was trained in classical popular education methodology. One student described the impact of Esmeralda's class on a fellow participant

It is really lovely what they [students] have achieved. Maria developed the confidence to stand up and speak in front of one hundred people. She has the confidence to read. It is really remarkable how far she has come from being afraid to talk aloud.

In the case of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, a group in San Francisco, organizers found that they were most successful in raising complex topics with groups when using real-life connections. This was well depicted in the immigration history clothesline, where participants were asked to create images (using photos, drawings, newspaper clippings, etc.) that shared where their personal and family history fit on the continuum (see image below). The lesson was transformational in several ways – it acknowledged the histories of individuals, looked critically at a historical trend of oppression toward immigrants, and led those that wished to engage in action-oriented events to work to impact local, state, and national legislation and attitudes toward immigrants. The activity was designed with popular education methodology at its core, yet it was adapted to meet the characteristics and needs of the participants.

In addition to individual empowerment, popular education can have an effect on bringing communities from different sectors together to problem solve and bring about change. The NNIRR curricula explicitly facilitated dialogue between communities on the inflammatory topic of race and immigration in the United States and made a difference in empowering communities fighting for immigrant and civil rights.



Critical Themes

The themes that emerged from this study indicate that popular education is only a framework that must be augmented to reflect the learner reality. In order for the pedagogy to meet the needs of the unique learner and sociological setting of each classroom, the premise for its application must be willing to depart from the sociopolitical roots of its formational theoretical underpinnings, which met the needs of a different society and student population. The practical tools that popular education offers are valuable. Combined with other tools and analysis, its

principles provide a venue for dialogue, greater student participation, reflection and analysis about one's situation, and problem solving for social action. Popular education is powerful, but it cannot be used as a standalone method for classroom facilitation. The educator must do the work to fill in the blanks, and, above all, be self-reflective and critical about the process itself. Equipo Maiz, the leading popular education institute in El Salvador gets this message across in their promotional materials (see image below left).

“¿Qué queremos?” lists the reasons why Equipo Maiz utilizes popular education

What do we want?

- *To explain difficult issues in a simple way.*
- *To offer an enjoyable way to analyze the reality of our home, group, community and the country.*
- *To form opinions so that each group can affect what happens in their home, group, community and country in order to bring about changes.*



In order for educators to facilitate an empowering process for women through popular education, a number of recommendations emerged from the study. To break down the dynamics of oppression in society, teachers intentional about addressing how gender and cultural hegemony are reflected in the classroom will have greater potential for success in fulfilling the goal of empowering their students.

Recommendations for Educators and Curriculum Developers

Three categories of recommendations were drawn from the study to facilitate more meaningful participation of women. The first category calls for educators to rethink practices and theoretical inspirations for teaching, to ensure that transformational pedagogy is itself actively changing. The second presents practical and logistical considerations. Sometimes barriers to participation include subtle and

seemingly insignificant requirements we might not even realize are limitations for our students. The third category focuses on ways to develop intentional curriculum to encourage teachable moments when issues of power are reproduced in the classroom. We must constantly dialogue about power and how it is reproduced by our behaviors in the classroom and in our lives. Great care should be taken when raising complex topics such as gender and sexism and its impact on women in the classroom, but when facilitated sensitively, dialogue can result in action and change for women and men.

1. General analytical approach of popular education.

- Drawing from Equipo Maiz experience and their reflections on the challenges and discrepancies of popular education, educators should reflect on theory and practice as they understand it, and think critically about how it might be transformed through a gender or racial justice lens.
- Be careful that the process does not simply tokenize participation, or address concerns of the learner population in a cursory way. Again from Equipo Maiz, simply

adding politically correct language or increasing numbers of participants, for example ensuring a high number of women, is not sufficient. The premise, curriculum, and behaviors of educators and learners can perpetuate and reproduce power dynamics if not carefully addressed.

- Consider the motives and goals of the chosen teaching methodology and, most importantly, look for potential unexamined assumptions that could lead to unintended repetition of power inequities.

2. Practical considerations: classroom setting, logistics, participant needs.

- Provide childcare to help women who are still the primary caretakers of children and who would not be able to participate otherwise.
- In addition to “mixed” gender groups and trainings, look for opportunities to have women-only spaces for learning.
- Facilitate women getting to the meetings – support for them if their partners are reluctant, help them find transport to meetings.
- Be careful of how the room is arranged, and look out for a tendency for men and women to sit together, with the women more often in the back of space and farther away from center of room’s focus.
- In report-backs from small groups, require that at least one woman from each group present – maybe even two.

3. Awareness and use of teachable moments.

- Use the gender dynamics as “teachable moments,” track the behaviors that come up in mixed groups, and take the time at the end to show what was going on. Leave time for dialogue and analysis of the causes and potential solutions.
- Incorporate gender and cultural issues into content. There is a way to look at gender and socio-cultural dynamics from the lens of almost any subject.
- Make note of how often men and women report back compared to their percentage in overall classroom demographics.
- When facilitating, ensure that women are speaking as often as men, and call on more women if that is not the case. Comment to the class what you are doing, with the intent that the vocal men are aware of how often they feel entitled to speak versus women.
- Establish a list of “values” for the meeting participation at the beginning of the class, asking participants to help create the list. If it is not brought up, add to the list, “those who speak up often should think about how often and if their participation is inhibiting others...” and then use this value to point out conduct throughout the session.

Conclusion

Gender and culture are among the most complex issues facing critical educators today. While popular education has endured ongoing scrutiny that has sculpted and reshaped its premise, many scholars agree that it remains a powerful means for empowerment and the realization of democratic ideals. Nonetheless, popular education must continue to move through cycles of change, and critique from gender and cultural perspectives can serve to deepen popular education’s foundations. Freire repeatedly asserted that this was his precise intention. The findings of this study can inform educators who wish to maintain a practice that is relevant for their students. There is a danger in applying popular education unquestioningly, for it can be

disempowering, particularly for women. Critical theorists, modern and postmodern pedagogues alike, agree that the pedagogy's assumptions should be called into question and reshaped to incorporate the subtle and unique profiles of students and societies in which it is applied. It is hoped that this study and the inspiring and critical views of educators interviewed herein, contributes to and enriches such an ongoing dialogue.

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