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# Popular Education, 'So We Stand' and the 'Triple Self-Diagnosis'

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With funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, a novel project has taken place over the last two years under the title 'Using Popular Education in Anti-Poverty and Environmental Justice Organising: Bridging Constituencies, Building Movements, and Crossing Disciplines'. The aim was not just to take a popular education approach to promoting social change but also to make learning about popular education a central part of the process. I was a named researcher on the project, along with former *Concept* editor Eurig Scandrett, but the driving forces were Paul Routledge, a geography lecturer, and Aaron Franks, a PhD student, both shining examples, from the University of Glasgow, of how to promote popular education from within as well as outside the state. Of particular interest was that rather than starting from a community group, community workers or a department of education, the initiative sprung from a traditional academic discipline geography not something normally associated with popular education, albeit it was done in conjunction with the umbrella grassroots grouping 'So We Stand'. This article summarises what the project was about and discusses the use of 'the triple self-diagnosis', an extended activity which has stood the test of time, from Mexico to Scotland, and was useful for just such a scenario as this.

One objective of the project was to provide people of limited resources with an opportunity to learn from each other's experience of facing economic disadvantage and/or environmental degradation. From the start, then, the project hoped to bring together and form alliances between activists working in separate but related forms of activity. It was the cliché of 'starting from where people are at' - what Freire called people's 'generative' themes – and then moving out to broader concerns. The funding applications were to ensure that the costs of bringing people together would not be a prohibitive factor.



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Another was to 'provide participants with the practical and analytical tools, through popular education methods, for relating their personal experiences of economic disadvantage and environmental degradation within their communities to the experiences of other communities and individuals with similar concerns'. So the aim was both to ensure the whole process was immersed in popular education practice but also to encourage and enable people to go on to use a popular education approach themselves in their future work as community activists. This would mean that some of the training would focus more on the theory and practice of popular education itself rather than the content of anti-poverty and environmental justice.

Another aim was to facilitate a dialogue between 'popular', experiential knowledge and 'academic' knowledge, wherever it might be beneficial. In addition to those who initiated the project, a number of other, sympathetic academics were invited to participate in the process as well.

Ten day workshops were held in total, using a range of popular education methods - social theatre a la Augusto Boal, creative mapping, art and music, for example – in order to;

- help increase understanding of issues relating to climate justice, economic deprivation and privatisation
- explore environmental justice from the perspective of ethnic minority women in marginalised communities
- produce useful resource materials for community organisations and members.

The workshops facilitated exchange between different communities and groups from Govan in Glasgow (e.g. Sunny Govan Radio; GalGael), Friends of the Earth Scotland, the Afro-Caribbean Network, Glasgow Sport and Culture, So We Stand, AMINA (the Muslim Women's Resource Centre), the Women's Friendship Group in Govanhill and the International Women's Group in Sighthill. The workshops saw new collaborations between different (community, activist, and academic) constituencies - one participant commenting that the use of popular education and social theatre saw "people interacting without the usual barriers of language or social conventions. It was

successful in opening up a space for people to project their self and their own struggles".

A total of 200 participants engaged in the exercise and were introduced to practical and analytical tools through experiencing popular education and social theatre methods in action. Participants' feedback showed they highly valued the experience but recognised the need for more networking with other groups and ongoing practical help with relating popular education to their activism. Some concrete outcomes of the project were that it generated (i) a systematic 'contact exchange' between participants via the So We Stand website and email list (ii) a blog on 'popular education and environmental justice' (http://populareducationaenvironment.blogspot.com/) (iii) a Sunny Govan radio programme on popular education, using vox-pops taken from the workshops (iv) qualitative material for future community mapping in Govan (v) significant data for further research into the usefulness of this type of work. Further information on this and related projects can be obtained from the So We Stand Website (http://sowestand.com/).

Particularly since these workshops involved bringing together groups who had not known each other previously, an important first step was to try and make explicit exactly what the different groups were doing before considering what they all might learn from each other. One exercise used was the 'Triple Self-Diagnosis' developed by the Central American popular education network ALFORJA. While this can take up to a week to do fully, it can be adapted for a one-day workshop.

**Starting from Practice: The 'Triple Self-Diagnosis'**

True to the principles of starting and theorising from practice, the aim of this exercise is to help groups explore beneath the surface and take a fresh, objective look at what they do. The 'Triple Self-Diagnosis' requires groups or organisations to examine three dimensions of their practice: (i) Concept (ii) Context (iii) (actual) Practice. It takes the following format:

**1. CONCEPT (of practice):** First, the aim is to find out what people in any particular group/organisation *think* they are trying to do. The particular technique used to do this is normally a 'Brainstorm on A4'

- Each participant receives 4 or 5 blank sheets of A4 paper
- They take a few minutes to think of the 3, 4 or 5 main things they think they are trying to achieve (their aims or objectives) in their group/organisation (or in their particular role in the organisation)
- They write these down, in large writing, a separate sheet of paper for each aim/objective
- Participants are organised into groups of 4 - 5. All A4 sheets of paper are laid out on the floor (some 16 to 20 per group) and the group spends a few minutes reading them
- Groups then have to discuss all the aims/objectives written down and see if they can group them into different categories or classifications
- On a large, blank poster groups draw a column for every category they decide on. They write the title of the category at the top of the column and place all the corresponding sheets of A4 below it
- Each group's poster, showing all the objectives and their classification, is put on the wall (alternatively you can just do all this on the floor)
- All participants take time to walk round the room and see what each group has produced
- The co-ordinator asks questions to encourage critical analysis: how do the aims/objectives and their categorisation compare between groups? If they are different, why is that so? Are there any inconsistencies? Do some objectives conflict with others?
- If appropriate, the posters can be kept and written up for future reference

At the stage of classification, it is the discussion which matters rather than the final outcome: there are no right or wrong answers. In thinking through possible categorisations for the objectives, discussions move from the concrete to the abstract, from practice to theory. The co-ordinator should not provide a set of ready-made categories beforehand: at this early investigative stage, the less the co-ordinators interfere the clearer an idea is obtained of the groups' own perceptions of what they are trying to do. When the exercise is finished, the collective view of what the group *thinks* it is trying to do, inconsistencies and all, is there, objectified, for everyone to see. (If the organisation has a written constitution or stated aims and objectives, it is important that these are not to hand. The list of objectives should not be pre-meditated but come from the heart).

During these particular workshops, the co-ordinator divided the large group into sub-groupings according to the area of activity in which they were involved. Thus, people involved primarily with poverty-related issues worked together as did those working mainly on environmental issues. At the end of this exercise, there was a clear display, for everyone to see, of the collective perception of what people were trying to do, what different groups had in common and where there might be potential difficulties or divergent interests in working together,

**2. CONTEXT (of practice):** participants now describe the social context in which they are trying to intervene. In groups of 4 or 5, according to similarity of organisation, or role within an organisation, they 'brainstorm' what they see as the main elements of this context. The co-ordinator explains that these elements could be political, economic, cultural, organisational - anything and everything they see as important (though it is better to avoid giving examples as these may guide people to think in a particular way). Groups then do a 'poster exercise' (see below) and present their synthesised vision of the context for the larger group to de-code.

***Poster Exercise***

The aim is for small groups to produce a graphic, symbolic representation of their views on a particular theme and present this to a larger group for discussion and analysis. It can deal with a wide range of themes, abstract and concrete, from politics and religion to propaganda and soap opera. In the training of popular educators in Central America, it is commonly used to help popular organisations analyse the political-social context in which they are operating.

- In small groups, participants 'brainstorm' and discuss their understanding of the theme being explored. Someone notes the main ideas on paper.
- They then discuss how to represent their ideas symbolically, in a drawing. Rough sketches are made to accompany the discussion. When a final graphic is agreed, this is made into a poster.
- The small groups come together, presenting their poster in turns to the larger group.
- The group presenting the poster keeps quiet while the co-ordinator invites everyone else to (a) describe (b) interpret what they see in the poster.
- The group who produced the poster then give their own explanation to the larger group.


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The small groups often interpret the context in different ways, some emphasising the local, others the regional, national or even international. The co-ordinator again asks questions to provoke deeper analysis: why are there different interpretations? Are they complementary or contradictory? Would any group want to make changes, having listened to different interpretations? The posters can be photographed or copied onto smaller paper for future reference.

**3. (actual) PRACTICE:** again working in small groups, participants note down what they actually do in the organisation and how they go about doing it (as opposed to what they think they do, or would like to do). This is then synthesised into a 'sociodrama' and presented to the whole group for interpretation and analysis.

***Sociodramas***

Sociodramas are short drama sketches which problematise unresolved conflicts taken from the concrete, real-life experience of the learners. They allow people to reconstruct this experience, analyse it from a distance, and consider options for change. Again, it can deal with a wide range of themes or topics, from the abstract to the specific, such as the conditions of health, housing or poverty in a particular community.

- Participants divide into groups (4-8 people) to discuss the problems they have experienced (or witnessed) relating to the theme being explored.
- They then select one or more of these which they think are (a) generally representative of the group's experience (b) suitable to re-enact in front of others (albeit artistic license is permitted).
- They decide on (a) the brief story-line (b) the physical layout of the room so that it resembles the appropriate location (c) who will play what character in the sketch (c) the kind of dialogue in which the characters engage.
- After some rehearsals, they act out the sociodrama in front of the larger group.
- As before, the co-ordinator stimulates wider discussion in two stages, firstly inviting people to *describe* what they see happening in the sociodrama and then to *interpret* what it is meant to reveal.
- Having heard the audience's views, the 'actors' then explain what it was all about and the whole group engages in further discussion and analysis.

**Variation:**

- Groups are instructed to ensure that sociodramas present problems for which they have found no easy solution.
- Once a sociodrama has been performed and analysed, it is acted out once more, only this time the audience can stop it at any point, replace the characters, improvise changes to the dialogue/storyline and try and push the sociodrama towards a different conclusion, forcing everyone to consider possible actions for change.


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The co-ordinator guides a whole group discussion along similar lines as before: do the sociodramas reveal any problems with the practice? Do some examples of practice clash with others? Is there anything obviously needing to be done to improve this practice?

An optional, final stage of the 'triple self-diagnosis' is to reunite the analyses of these three areas - concept, context and actual practice - in what is called the 'CONFRONTATION'. What is consistent through the three areas? What are the conflicts? What requires remedial action? A full-group discussion revolves around the completion of a chart with three columns entitled 'Consistencies', 'Inconsistencies' and 'Knots' (i.e. something needing straightened out).

'Starting from where people are at' is an oft-cited mantra, not only in popular education but in adult education as a whole. The 'triple self-diagnosis' is designed to find out precisely 'where people are at', in all its variety and contradiction. When all aspects of a popular organisation's practice are laid bare and no assumptions taken for granted it provides the basis for discussion between educators and learners about the appropriate way to proceed with a programme of education and action. Participative techniques are useful for this exercise but they are not ends-in-themselves: it would be possible to do the triple self-diagnosis using a completely different set of techniques.

When the training is over, activist-educators go back to their own organisations and pay close attention to all aspects of their practice, possibly running or adapting the triple self-diagnosis themselves.

I have been using this exercise in a variety of forms for years, it provokes endless amounts of discussion and brings clarity to areas often insufficiently addressed in a group or organisation's practice. It's an ideal exercise to use or adapt when working with a group(s) for the first time and hopefully proved to be a useful starting point for many of the participants involved in this particular project.


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**References**

All quotations and factual information are taken from the Report on the project written for the ESRC by Paul Routledge and Aaron Franks.

For more information on popular education methods taken from Latin America see chapter three of:
Kane, L. (2001). *Popular Education and Social Change in Latin America*. London: Latin American Bureau.