

Popular and Democratic Education Overview

“The idea of popular education as a teaching methodology came from a Brazilian educator and writer named Paulo Freire, who was writing in the context of literacy education for poor and politically disempowered people in his country. It's different from formal education (in schools, for example) and informal education (learning by living) in that it is a process which aims to empower people who feel marginalized socially and politically to take control of their own learning and to effect social change.

Popular education is a collective effort in which a high degree of participation is expected from everybody. Teachers and learners aren't two distinct groups; rather, everyone teaches and everyone learns! Learners should be able to make decisions about what they are learning, and how the learning process takes place. A facilitator is needed to make sure that new ideas arise, progress, and don't get repetitive, but this isn't at all the same thing as a teacher. In popular education, then, we can't teach another person, but we can facilitate another's learning and help each other as we learn.

In popular education, the learning process starts with identifying and describing everyone's own personal experience, and that knowledge is built upon through various activities done in groups. After the activity, a debriefing process allows us to analyse our situation together; seeing links between our own experience and historical and global processes in order to get the "big picture". Through the generation of this new knowledge, we're able to reflect more profoundly about ourselves and how we fit into the world. This new understanding of society is a preparation to actively work towards social change. In fact, in popular education, the education process isn't considered to be complete without action on what is learned; whether it be on a personal or political level.”

- From, *The Popular Education News*, November 2005

Discuss the following:

Question 1: What questions remain for you about popular and democratic education?

Question 2: What excites you about popular and democratic education?

Question 3: Have you used this pedagogy at all in your co-op teaching experience? How have you felt about it?

Question 4: What techniques or methods from this practice would you like to implement more frequently in your work, or within the co-op movement?

Banking Education

With the banking method, educators view learners as vessels in which they need to “deposit” information. It is the learners’ responsibility to memorize and, in one form or another, directly repeat the information presented to them.

In learning situations, the full extent of what knowledge is going to be covered and delivered is almost completely predetermined. This means that the teacher comes prepared with a set of information, no matter the interests, needs, or input of the learners. This knowledge is “given” to the learners and is viewed as unchallengeable. Participants have little to no influence over what they learn and how they learn it.

Paulo Freire first defined the term “banking education” in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here he describes the teacher as the Subject - the active participant - and the students as little more than passive objects. He writes: “Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the ‘banking’ concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits.” Later, he adds: “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”

Question 1: What does banking method look like to you?

Question 2: Can you think of examples of the banking method of education being used in your experiences of learning about co-ops?

Question 3: Why might utilizing only the banking method of education not be the most effective way to teach about cooperation?

Table: Banking Education vs. Popular Education

| Subject | Banking Education | Popular, Democratic, and Participatory |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Educators... | ...“deposit” knowledge in learners' minds. | ...work with learners to discover information and its impact on their lives/efforts. |
| Learners... | ...passively accept and repeat information delivered to them. | ...are allowed to challenge information that is given to them; seek ways to discover information and determine its relevance/meaning to their work, lives, and communities; learn from and teach each other. |
| Educators... | ...predetermine what information will be taught and how it will be delivered. | ...collaborate with learners to determine what is important to them and how they will learn information. |
| Knowledge... | ...is viewed as an object that is owned by the teacher and given to the learners. | ...is viewed as something that everyone has, which they can share with others. |
| Learners... | ...are subservient to the authority of the teachers. | ...are viewed as equals and partners with their teachers. |

Question 1: What else separates the “banking” form of education compared to “popular education”?

Question 2: Can you think of any examples of banking education in your cooperative education experience? Can you think of how they might be transformed into a popular education experience?

Question 3: Are there existing co-op education programs that you think could benefit from incorporating more popular education methodologies? If so, what are they?

Democratic Education Method: Dialogue-based

The dialogue-based educational technique holds that the best way to learn and solve problems collaboratively is through conversations. True democracy can only be achieved through dialogue. When everyone speaks and interacts on an equal level - as opposed to simply having content delivered to participants by teachers - everyone becomes free to learn from and teach one another. Everybody has something to teach other people, and everyone has something they can learn from others. In these situations it is the responsibility of the teacher to both facilitate the conversation while simultaneously listening to (and learning from) the participants.

Question 1: Creating a healthy and equal level for dialogue can be very difficult - what are some of the challenges, and how do you think they can be overcome?

Question 2: Why is teaching dialogue practices important for teaching about co-ops?

Democratic Education Method: Problem Posing

'Problem-posing' is an educational technique that uses issues, conflicts, and questions to help participants learn how to collaboratively determine solutions. Generally, this is applied to situations in which the participants will be seriously affected by the outcome. This method values the process of learning just as much as the content that is learned. It holds that if the participants come up with a solution together, it will strengthen their dedication and ability to see the issue resolved. Through dialogue, teamwork, and investigation - they must be the ones to learn how to resolve a problem.

Question 1: Have you ever experienced problem posing education techniques? If so, why was it effective or not, and what were some of your major takeaways were in the process?

Question 2: Why do cooperators need to engage in problem solving in order to learn cooperative skills?

Popular Education Method: Creative Drama

The creative drama technique is a form of education where people engage in scenarios, acting, and improvisation to learn from and teach one another. With this method, learners often take on roles that are not their own and place themselves into different shoes in order to gain an understanding of opposing viewpoints. In addition, creative drama can be used to practice situations people might face and to collaboratively problem-solve - or envision the potential outcomes and impacts of their actions.

Question 1: Think about your own work, or some of the ways you hope to use popular education techniques - how could you effectively integrate creative drama into your teaching or educational resource development?

Question 2: Some people aren't always comfortable engaging with creative drama techniques. Why do you think this is? What ways are there to address these concerns while still using this highly effective strategy?

Democratic Education Method: Mantle of the Expert

This educational approach works under the assumption that the minds in the room simply don't have enough information to come-up with a reasonable solution to a question that needs to be solved. Rather than deferring to an authority, however, the learners are responsible for taking on the "mantle of the expert" by searching out further information and then teaching the rest of their peers about their finding. In this way, learners work together to identify the core of an issue, investigate its potential solutions, and then work to educate their fellow peers on their findings. By taking on the role of the expert, they are much more likely to become one - especially if they work to educate their peers about their findings.

Question 1: One of the best ways to learn is to become a teacher. How could this strategy be used in YOUR co-op education efforts?

Question 2: What role should a facilitator/teacher/professor take on when the students/participants are asked to act as the experts?

A Guide: What To Do and What Not To Do when Using Popular/Democratic Education

What not to do

- Simply tell learners what you think they should know.
- Make the excuse that this subject is complex so you just need to sit the participants down and tell them about it.
- Reject challenges that learners make to your claims or the information you present.
- Talk more than the learners talk.
- Assume you know everything and the learners know nothing of consequence or only a little

What to do

- Help the people you are working with evaluate where they stand and what they know - in addition to what they need to do and learn next.
- Facilitate experiences where the learners impact what happens next.
- Actively listen to participants and create an environment where their voices matter the most. (Some popular educators follow the 20/80 rule - this means that a facilitator should talk only 20% of the time, while learners talk 80% of the time).
- Design learning experiences so that they are flexible.
- Design learning experiences so that they are directly relevant to the learners' situations, needs, and interests.
- Make sure that everyone feels that their voice is heard.
- Use the problem-posing method to help groups collaborate in the process of learning. (Remember: learning is a process of discovery, and how that process happens is just as important as what is learned.)
- Use the dialogue-method to make sure everyone is communicating and practicing democracy.

Question 1: What do you agree or disagree with about this list?

Question 2: What ideas might you add to the “What to Do” and “What Not To Do” list?

Question 3: How are these strategies particularly applicable to education for cooperatives and cooperation?

Popular Education Example: Highlander Center

From Wikipedia:

The Highlander Folk School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) was originally established in Grundy County, Tennessee. When Highlander was founded in 1932, the United States was in the midst of the [Great Depression](#)...Against that backdrop, Horton, West and Dombrowski [the founders] created the Highlander School "to provide an educational center in the South for the training of rural and industrial leaders, and for the conservation and enrichment of the indigenous cultural values of the mountains."...

In the 1950s, Highlander turned its energies to the rising issues of [civil rights](#) and [desegregation](#)...Highlander worked with [Esau Jenkins](#) of [Johns Island](#) to develop a literacy program for Blacks who were prevented from registering to vote by literacy requirements. The [Citizenship Education Schools](#) coordinated by [Septima Clark](#) with assistance from [Bernice Robinson](#) spread widely throughout the South and helped thousands of Blacks register to vote.

This Literacy program for disenfranchised African Americans used popular education at its core, just like all of Highlander's efforts. As one example, the original organizers of the program worked with sharecroppers and other poor rural African American farmers to identify what they needed and wanted to be able to read and write, and based their program around these materials. As a result, participants often learned how to read and write by filling out such things as voter registration forms, checks, Sears mail-order forms, driver's license exams, and so forth. By making the program directly relevant to the needs and interests of the participants, and not coming in with a rigid plan and an idea that the organizers knew exactly what the learners needed, the organizers were able to help thousands of poor, rural southern African Americans cast their vote in the face of massive opposition.

Today, Highlander works on issues such as environmental justice, democratic participation, immigration, racism, economic justice, and more.

Question 1: How does Highlander relate to the principles of popular education?

Question 2: Do you know any organizations within the co-op movement that are using popular education like this? What are they doing?

Question 3: Could any part of this model be applied to the co-op movement?

Think of a time in your life when you had an educational experience that made you feel good, empowered, or transformed as a result. What made this experience special?

Follow-up: Can you think of something similar in your co-op education experience?

Popular and Democratic Education Example: Community Centered Organizations

From: Health Promot. Int. (2011). First published online: August 11, 2011

“The process of *people and communities gaining greater control over their lives* represents a further step toward collective action, in that formerly uninvolved community members now begin not only to participate, but to take leadership roles. Several studies have linked popular education interventions to this outcome across a variety of levels. For example, participants in peer support groups in Florida took ownership/leadership of the groups, assigning tasks among themselves ([Lugo, 1996](#)), while formerly homeless men in Georgia who participated in training became actively involved in setting the agenda, identifying the topics, deciding what methods would be used and sharing leadership ([Conner et al., 1999](#)). Immigrant women in the intervention in Norway took responsibility to form their own health education groups and did the planning with some support from staff. Two years after the project began, 80 women were participating in health education groups, many of them facilitated by the original participants ([Aambo, 1997](#)). In the study in Jalisco, México, which introduced an alfalfa concentrate into the diets of the rural participants, female participants assumed responsibility for preparing the alfalfa ([Figueroa et al., 2000](#)). More significantly, women involved in the child nutrition intervention in Mexico took over responsibility for conducting an epidemiological surveillance program ([Arenas-Monreal et al., 1999](#)). Volunteer mothers participating in the prenatal program in Texas were deeply involved in the development of the program from the start, writing the mission statement and developing program activities ([McFarlane and Fehir, 1994](#)). By Year 3, ‘volunteer mothers were mainstreamed into all program decisions’ (p. 387), and by Year 5, participants took over the program completely, becoming the only paid staff. Many of these outcomes represent valid examples of internal organizational empowerment, as programs moved from hierarchical control by outsiders to more democratic control by participants.”

Question 1: What do these examples make you think about in terms of the importance of learners being involved with the design and implementation of a program?

Question 2: Why especially should co-op learners be active agents in the design of their educational experience?

Question 3: What are some of the dangers of this strategy if not implemented correctly?

Can popular and democratic education be infused into traditional education settings when teaching about co-ops?

**What are some of these traditional education settings?
And if so, how could this be done?**

What do you think about the following statement?

The ways that people learn almost always influences the ways that they work. Therefore, because cooperatives are democratically owned and operated organizations, it is crucial to teach and learn about co-ops and cooperation utilizing democratic education. We can't simply be told to act democratically. We have to experience and practice democracy.

How are traditional forms of education hierarchal? What are some of the dangers of using hierarchal education to teach about democratic organizations? Can you think of any benefits to using traditional forms of education in teaching about co-ops?

What questions or concerns do you have about using popular and democratic education to teach about co-ops?

Popular Education in the Zapatista Movement

The Zapatista movement, located in the autonomous zone of Chiapas, in Mexico, has long been a champion of popular education. The pedagogy of popular education has been the foundation for their community centered education, public health, and governance. Recently, the Zapatistas have opened *escuelitas*, which are popular education schools for people outside of the Zapatista community. The *escuelitas* allow people to experience the holistic nature of Zapatista education, and begin to experience “a world where many worlds are possible.” Below are excerpts from an interview with a Zapatista educator (Morelia, Chiapas (Mexico) 25 July 2007):

Q: Is there cohesion within the content of the subjects taught in “Los Caracoles”? For example, in history or politics do they teach the same things in the different “Caracoles”?

A: Generally, the first thing taught is the history of each community which is done by consulting the community elders...It places great emphasis on children knowing the history of the community, of the place they come from. These stories are not in textbooks and they are very special...the official history always leaves some things out that they don't want people to know...On the political side, they teach the philosophy of the Zapatista movement. It explains in simple words and their own language all the key Zapatista concepts like 'lead by obeying'... We also look at the current situation and critique it. Why are they so poor, how has that situation come about?

Q: Since you say that everyone learns, what have you learned from these years? What has this experience given you?

A: It has given me a lot. I came here with the bourgeois city idea that I was going to teach or share my knowledge and it has proven to be the other way around. I am the one who has learned the most, and not only in educational level, but about life: about collective life, and the organisation that they have.

Q: And what delights you most after all these years? Is it the progress of a student?

A: I am pleased to be contributing and that some “compañer@s” who have gone through secondary school now are authorities and promoters. People who only three or four years ago were in secondary school, I now see working in their communities as promoters or as members of the Council or some other authority. This is uplifting because you see that how quickly they learn and that day by day they are learning with ease.

Question 1: What elements of popular education can you find in the work of a Zapatista educator?

Question 2: Traditional education has us think about a strict hierarchy between teachers and learners. What are the benefits to breaking this down when teaching about co-ops? What concerns would you have?

Do you know of any examples of democratic education being used in or by other cooperatives? What are they?

Democratic Education Example: FAGOR Factory

FAGOR is one of the Mondragon worker co-ops in the Basque region of Spain. Each one of its factories has thousands of workers. However, Mondragon heavily values the idea of “labor entrepreneurship” - meaning the workers contribute to the betterment of their business as well as the launching of new ones. One great example of democratic education employed on a day-by-day basis in their labor entrepreneurship efforts is the “idea sharing” practiced in FAGOR factories. In the center of the building is a giant board, where workers can post thoughts, comments, and ideas on how to improve the factory or the co-op. They can be both big and small ideas – from adjustments to the assembly line to the launching a new product. Other workers can then go comment on and discuss the ideas posted to the board. After this discussion, a committee regularly checks the board. This committee is responsible for evaluating the ideas and then, if approved, determine how to implement them.

Question 1: What do you think of this practice?

Question 2: Could you see it working in other co-ops?

Question 3: Why do you think this practice is a form of “democratic education?”