

Exploring Praxis: Defining our educational philosophy and making it real

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When the opportunity first arose to present at the Critical Pedagogy and Participatory Learning for Social Transformation Conference, James Whelan and Holly Hammond proposed an interactive workshop to unpack some of the concepts central to the conference and situate them in the context of contemporary educational practice. Noting the first conference objective, which was "sharing and reflecting on participatory and transformative teaching-learning experiences, aimed at improving practice", our workshop centred on the question: **What do we actually mean by participatory and transformative education?** The workshop was further developed and presented by Holly Hammond, Pru Gell and Anthony Kelly. We saw our workshop as an opportunity to explore personal educational philosophies and how they inform our practice.

Background

The workshop followed the five-stage spiral model, developed by the Doris Marshal Institute in Toronto (see Arnold *et al.* 1991). The spiral model emphasises reflecting on experience and incorporating new information in action.

The spiral model suggests that learning begins with the experience and knowledge of participants. After participants have shared their experiences (their prior experiences or participants' experiences from the activity at hand), they are invited to look for patterns and analyse their experiences. New information and theory can be collectively created (through facilitated discussion) or added by outside resource people. Once an issue or problem has been analysed, it is important to practice new skills, strategise and plan for action so that the analysis feeds back into action.

As the goal of popular education is to lead to action for social change, the process must extend beyond the workshop. It is hoped that participants will return to their own groups and share the experience and thoughts from the workshop with others for further critique, strategy and applied action within the groups and daily living.¹

Process

We developed the workshop based on the spiral model of learning and chose to explicitly model stages 1 to 4 and then discuss this framework explicitly towards the end of the workshop.

Firstly we opened the workshop; we have found that all workshops, no matter how short, require an opening that provides an opportunity, however brief, for people to get a sense of who else is in the room, which includes introducing ourselves as facilitators. This is an important part of 'container building', a concept which we learnt from our allied organisation Training for Change, based in Philadelphia. Their online glossary defines *container* as 'a word for the degree of safety the participants are experiencing. Most workshops start with a weak container, not much safety, so participants are concerned about how others see them and have less attention for learning. The stronger the container, the more participants become authentic and take risks to learn.'²

We always acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, in this case the Wurundgeri of the Kulin nation. We try to do this acknowledgement in a thoughtful way, recognising the reality of colonisation and dispossession and ongoing sovereignty. As radical educators, it is important to emphasise the justice issues inherent in meeting on land in Australia.

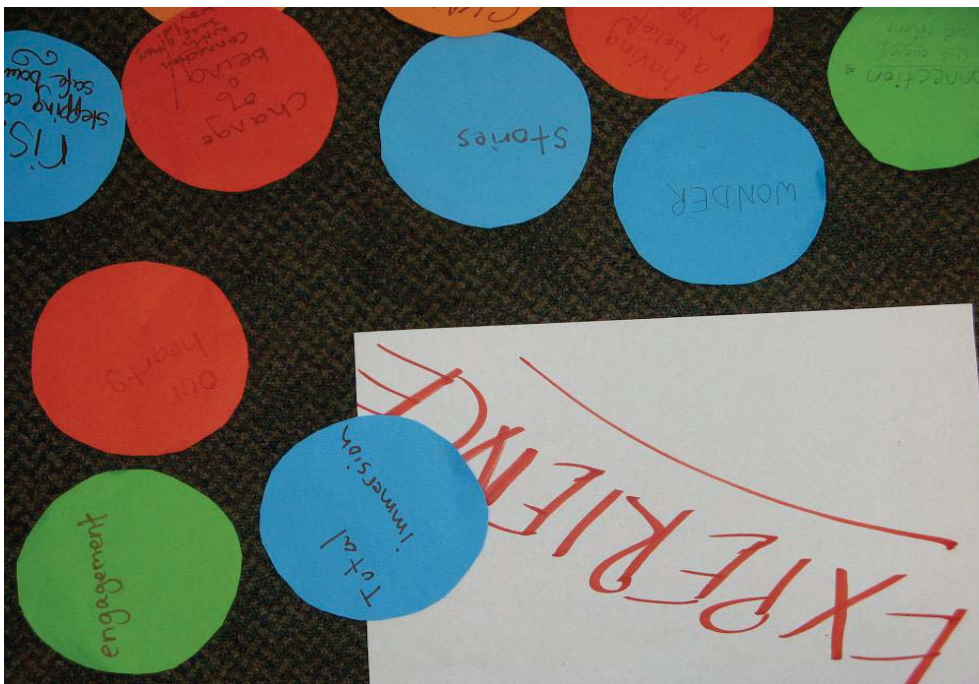


Figure 2:

First step in the spiral model, starting with experience of participants

Source: tCA photo

We provided a short introduction to the Change Agency and to ourselves as facilitators. The Change Agency is an independent activist education initiative; we work with community organisers and activists in the Australia Pacific region to help people win social and environmental change. Our mission is to strengthen effective community and workplace action for social, ecological and economic justice by providing facilitation, workshops, resources, research and other learning opportunities. Holly, Anthony and Pru have diverse experience as both activists and educators, encompassing Indigenous solidarity work, nonviolent direct action, community development and more. Further information is available on the Change Agency website (<http://www.thechangeagency.org>).

We outlined the *objectives of the workshop*:

1. Sharing and reflecting on participatory and transformative teaching-learning experiences, aimed at improving practice.
2. Exploring and defining our educational philosophy.

We used a short game, 'the handshakes mingle', to get people up and moving and meeting each other. This game involves shaking hands and introducing yourself, but before you can let go of that hand you need to shake the hand of someone else. The aim is to meet as many people as possible in the short time available. We frequently use games in our workshops as a means to release tension, shift energy, keep people engaged and build the learning container (for other games and energisers tCA uses, check out

<http://www.thechangeagency.org/download.asp?varAction=part2&ID=417>).

1. Experience

After opening, we moved on to the first step in the spiral model; participants were encouraged to individually and quietly reflect and write with this prompt: *Think of an educational experience you've had that was transformative or critical. What was transformative or critical about it?*

2. Generalising ... looking for patterns

Then, in small groups, participants shared and discussed their transformative or critical educational experiences and, following this,



Figure 1: Spiral Model of Learning, Doris Marshall Institute
Source: http://thechangeagency.org/01_cms/details.asp?ID=36

they were asked to identify three attributes they associated with critical or transformative education and learning and write each of these on coloured circles of paper.

But what does do these attributes look like? To respond to this question each group was asked to make a group image or sculpture using their bodies to embody these attributes. We asked them to make a image based on Augusto's Boal's (2002:xxii) idea that "a picture paints a thousand words... our over-reliance on words can confuse or obfuscate central issues, rather than clarifying them; that images can be closer to our true feelings even our subconscious feelings than words since the process of thinking with our hands can short-circuit the censorship of the brain placed there by society or personal experience".

Then, one at a time, each group made and showed their image to the other workshop participants and, after viewing each sculpture, the 'audience' was asked what they saw in the images. Once all of the images had been viewed, a whole group discussion about the common themes people saw across the images followed.



Figure 3:

Group images of 'what transformative education looks like'

Source: tCA photo



Figure 4: Group images of 'what transformative education looks like' Source: tCA phot

3. New information

The whole group then moved into a discussion prompted by the questions: *Which educators' and theorists' work looks like this and reflects the attributes that you find inspiring (in the images that were just made)? What do you find inspirational about them? How does this influence your educational practice?* The purpose of this part of the process was collective sharing and exchange of new information.

To contribute to the exchange of new information in the learning environment at this stage of the workshop, we unveiled the spiral model steps that we had been walking participants through as an example of a framework we use in our educational practice. To do this, we placed large pieces of cardboard on the floor each with a different step on it to create a large spiral map on the floor that echoes the spiral model in Figure 1. This sharing highlighted that, so far during our workshop, we had used steps 1 to 3 and that we were now moving to step 4 of the spiral model.

As a final step, participants formed pairs for a brief listening activity and discussed their responses to the questions: *How will you put into practice the educational techniques, approaches and values that define your educational philosophy? How do you plan to honour your praxis? How will you put into practice the educational techniques, approaches and values that define your educational philosophy?*

4. Planning for action

The purpose of this part of the process was to have an opportunity to move into the *planning for action* stage in the spiral model and consolidate learnings from the workshop. As important as it is to 'open' intentionally, we also 'close' the workshop purposefully. We closed by having a round and asking people to share a word relating to what they are walking away with from the workshop.

Educators that inspire our approach

Our pedagogy is influenced by a number of educators and educational organisations, including Myles Horton and the Highlander Research and Education Center, Fran Peavey and John Paul Lederach. We are influenced by Training for Change's notion of 'direct education' and the Rant Collective's methods for 'empowered learning'. Like many popular educators, we're also influenced by Paulo Freire (1978: 11; 92), who argued,

The educator's task is not to ... uncover the object themselves and offer it, paternalistically, to the learner, thus denying him the effort of searching that is so indispensable to the act of knowing. Rather, in the relationship between the educator and the learner ... the most important factor is the development of a critical attitude in relation to the object and not a discourse by the educator about the object... The educator must not press their own position to the point that the learner's position is a reflection of their own. At the same time, the educator must not negate, as though from shame, their own insights.

Conclusion

The workshop was a great opportunity for members of our collective to learn with other popular educators. It served to remind us that our philosophy and practice of transformative education is heavily shaped by our informal and formal educational experiences. 🍏

References

- Arnold, Rick et al. (1991) *Educating for a change*, Ontario: Between the Lines & Doris Marshall Institute.
- Boal, A. (2002) *Games for actors and non-actors*, 2nd ed., Great Britain: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1978) *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*, Seabury Press, New York, NY.

(Endnotes)

- 1 <http://www.perc.ca/library/resources/social-justice/bob-hale/p04.html> cited 29 Feb 2009
- 2 <http://www.trainingforchange.org/glossary> cited 24 Feb 2009

Figure 5:

Fifth step in the spiral model, planning for action

Source: tCA phot

