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Adult Education Research Conference

2000 Conference Proceedings (Vancouver, BC,
Canada)

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Recommended Citation

Lange, Elizabeth; Mayo, Peter; Miles, Angela; and Schugurensky, Daniel (2000). "New Research Directions in Popular Education: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Field," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2000/roundtables/20>

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New Research Directions in Popular Education: Towards a Reconceptualization of the Field

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Abstract: *In this roundtable, departing from traditional popular education theory and practice, four panelists share findings of their research in progress, and pose questions to stimulate the current debates on popular education.*

Traditionally, popular education has focused on engaging oppressed groups in a political-pedagogical process whereby new understandings of social reality (conscientization) precipitate political organization and transformative action. The *raison d'être* of popular education is to catalyze structural change towards a just society. At the end of the century, popular education theory and practice has been challenged by several developments that emerged in the 1980s and consolidated in the nineties. Among them are the demise of formal socialism and the intensification of neoliberal hegemony, globalization dynamics, structural adjustment policies and the erosion of the welfare state, identity politics, information technologies, de-unionization, critical race theory, postmodernism, poststructuralism, ecofeminism, etc. In many parts of the world, popular educators are responding to this new climate, and to the theoretical and political challenges that come with it, by developing new strategies and by adapting and refining their frameworks. In this roundtable, departing from traditional popular education theory and practice, four panelists will share findings of their research in progress around these issues, and will pose questions to stimulate the current debates on the theory and practice of popular education.

In the first presentation, Elizabeth Lange examines the role of the middle class as potential agents for social transformation. Based on a popular education process, this research concludes that the apparent political passivity among the middle class can be moderated through pedagogical processes that stimulate cultural critique and pursue strategies for linking people with local social movements that actively anticipate new social forms. Most participants experienced increasing conflict between their professional and citizen responsibilities that appear as

political passivity. They considered their work as the primary vehicle for “making a difference” but their responsibilities wed them to confidentiality and suppressed their opposition. While they consider citizen involvement outside of work as an important responsibility, the increasing fragmentation, feverish pace, heavier workloads and longer hours in their workplaces inhibited such public involvement. Further, they understand the complexity of social change and therefore see any citizen action taken as symbolic only, not substantive.

Popular education was utilized to engage these participants by experimenting with different forms of social analysis that could utilize this professional/citizen conflict as a transformative opportunity. A collective critique of neo-liberalism and globalism to build resistance was paralyzing and demobilizing, not emancipatory. The most vital aspect for transcending this paralysis was building hope by providing living examples of people who have transformed their living and working and thereby exemplify an implicit critique. A second aspect was collectively assessing and transforming the connections between one's time, money, consumption, and their job. This resulted in reconstituting a citizen capacity and the opportunity to understand these connections within their ecological and global impact. The third aspect was restoring the pedagogical vocation of social movements. Most participants reported their impressions of social movements as closed, confrontational, judgmental and dogmatic. They were skeptical of conflicting, politicized claims and critical of single-issue movements. This study suggests that popular educators can position themselves as bridges between educational sites and social movements by working dialectically to expose participants to new social norms

and societal forms as well as reveal gaps in movement practice that block the proliferation of transformative sites. It also suggests that no one single form of pedagogical engagement will revitalize citizen action, but a multiplicity of entry points, analyses and social possibilities will enrich democracy and enhance civil society.

In the second presentation, Peter Mayo links the current debates on popular education with an analysis of the latest works of Paulo Freire, particularly books and other pieces published from 1996 onwards. Using the issue of 'Learning, Identity and Difference' as a guiding thread, it will focus on the discussions concerning 'multiple and layered subjectivities.' The central theme here is Freire's contention that part of the task of becoming fully human (one's "ontological vocation") involves a never ending struggle to attain greater coherence as human beings. The role which popular education can play in rendering its participants 'coherent beings' is a central question in this regard. Further questions asked are how do popular educators struggle to become coherent beings and how they are confronting their own contradictions that are often expressed in the 'oppressor within'. This, in turn, raises issues regarding what constitutes a plausible approach to popular education in these neo-liberal times characterised by the prominence given to the ideological negation of ideologies.

This work also deals with Freire's preoccupation with rigour and with the delicate interplay between authority and freedom. For Freire, there could be nothing more pedagogically treacherous than indulging in laissez faire pedagogy that confuses authority – necessary in any meaningful education (including popular education) – with authoritarianism. Hence his rejection of the term 'facilitator' and preference for the term 'teacher' throughout. This raises three questions: What are the implications of this for a popular education scenario where people who have barely acquired a basic education feel compelled to teach the little that they know to others? Does coherence imply in this popular education context the need for exploring new avenues for ongoing formation to ensure that one's approach to teaching is characterised by rigour? Who will provide such opportunities for ongoing popular education formation that ensures competence as well as a democratic pedagogical spirit?

In the third presentation, Angela Miles reports on a longitudinal study of feminist theory and practice which examines the ways that emerging global feminisms in many parts of the world are challenging and offering resources for redefining core concepts of popular education such as development, identity, equality, diversity, universality, difference, wealth and work. The research focuses on the dialectical relationship between these conceptual redefinitions and the material creation of new possibilities for popular education theory and practice. Specific examples from the research will be presented to illustrate these concepts.

Finally, in the last intervention, Daniel Schugrensky reports on an ongoing empirical research on the connections between popular education, citizenship learning and participatory democracy. This presentation focuses on one of the case studies of this project, namely the participatory budget of Porto Alegre, Brazil, where the Workers' Party has been elected and re-elected since 1989. In Brazil, as in many parts of Latin America, popular education's theoretical insights emanated mainly from different combinations of Marxism and liberation theology, a synthesis that owes a great deal to Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In the 1960s and 1970s, during the era of military dictatorships, popular education played a key role in liberation struggles, and was part and parcel of larger social processes such as guerrilla warfare, mass mobilizations, class consciousness and open confrontations with the state. In that repressive environment, the emphasis was placed on social transformation and political mobilization, which in many cases meant to emphasize the 'popular' dimension of the popular education movement and to disregard its 'education' component.

In the post-military era, political democratization is prompting popular education to reconceptualize its traditional approach towards pedagogical processes, the capitalist state and formal schooling. Freire himself, accepting a position as Sao Paulo's Secretary of Education upon his return to Brazil, is one example of this new approach. In the current Latin American context, some of the new challenges for popular education are how to strengthen and radicalize formal democracies, to enable people to assert their rights as citizens and participate effectively in political decision-making, to help people hold governments accountable, and to build partnerships between social movements and progressive

municipalities. This study examines the new role that popular education takes when a popular coal-

tion is elected into municipal governance.