

The Roots of Radical Education

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Education is a potent tool for transmitting ideological and cultural practices and as such has long been a politically contested topic. As Apple writes:

“Education is both a ‘cause’ and an ‘effect’...The school is not a passive mirror, but an active force, one that also serves to give legitimacy to economic and social forms and ideologies so intimately connected with it,” (1993: 3). Perhaps precisely because of this potency, there are countless people and projects across the world who are engaged in a different type of education; teaching and learning which enable people not only understand but to get involved in changing the conditions of our lives. Interchangeably known as radical, liberatory, or the 'practice of freedom' (Freire) this is a collective process of education that can help to build vibrant, active communities and is often entwined with challenging injustice and working towards social change. From the early trade unionists who helped new residents of industrialised cities to understand their reality through night classes, to the feminist consciousness raising groups of women and liberation struggles against colonialism, many significant social movements have used education explicitly for social change.

This may be ringing alarm bells about it not being appropriate to do political campaigning in the classroom and fears about funding. Whilst these are by no means unimportant concerns, we argue that to negotiate these barriers, we must re-conceptualise what we mean by political action and education. Firstly we suggest that neutrality in the classroom is neither possible nor desirable. We live in an unequal and unjust world, and our teaching will always take place against this backdrop. It is important then to determine as a teacher where your own motivations and affiliations lie. The need to engage with issues of power in the classroom underpins the Reflect approach, but this should not be confused with manipulating the classroom for political purposes, or having to subscribe to a particular ideology. Secondly, we believe that the flaws and failures of our competitive and individualised education system education systems are feeding into broader social crises. We do not wish to be

prescriptive; if we accept that teaching and learning are a form of doing politics, we also must realise that there are no right or wrong answers to the complex questions that will inevitably arise.

(more in chapter 5)

Whilst there is inevitably enormous diversity in the type of radical education that we describe here, there are some common values that characterise many of these endeavours: Seeing knowledge as an asset to be shared, enabling true participation, creating space for dialogue and direct democracy, critical thinking, linking structural and personal levels, and a deep respect for the diversity of human identities and experience. This chapter will take a brief journey through some experiments in radical or liberatory education in an attempt to locate the Reflect ESOL project within this rich world and inspire those teachers who are struggling to make a shift of practice to know that they are in good company! We argue that if knowledge is power, it is no coincidence that those marginalised often have little experience of or are failed by formal education.

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” (Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed) (repeated in chapter 5)

Comparing formal and popular education (Trapese collective, 2007: 110)

Formal-state	Popular-participatory-liberatory
Aims; To gain basic skills and teach acceptance of authority and preparation for participation in waged based work and consumerism.	Aims; To raise critical consciousness, link with campaigns and action, and promote social justice and solidarity.
How?	How?
Learners receive knowledge from	Participants are active in how and

teachers, there is an emphasis on the end result, qualifications, exams etc.	what they learn. Hierarchies are challenged. Educators understand that learning occurs in many different ways and employ a variety of techniques to build collective knowledge.
What is taught?	What is taught?
Rational, fact based, information, learning skills for business and efficiency.	Exploration of alternatives and radical solutions. Values emotional, creative responses.

The dichotomy that Trapese presents, between two opposed functions of education, which is echoed in the Freire quotation above, may seem to oversimplify the complexity of teaching and learning today. The two sides of the table could be seen instead as two ends of a spectrum. Indeed, the purpose and practice of any one teacher may travel across the spectrum throughout their career or even during a working day. Whilst some radical education is carried out inside formal educational institutions, institutional and practical constraints often seriously impact upon teacher's autonomy.

Let us consider a little more the assumptions behind the idea that the school is a key institution to reinforce inequality and social stratification. The predominant educational system of the Western world in the past two hundred years was created around the same time as the industrial revolution and was influenced by the ideas of efficiency of the factory model. Children entered the school, were divided by their year of birth and emerged after years of schooling and testing ready to fulfil a social purpose, which depended on both their identity and their performance: miner, housewife, teacher, lawyer, manager and so on. In the 19th century education was likened to ladder, a way to achieve social mobility but was also characterised as a “great sorting machine for adjusting the opportunities to capacities throughout the whole population”, (P. H. Wickstead in Sandersen, 1987; xiv). Up to the turn of the 20th century education was gifted to poor and working people, from religious or

philanthropic concerns. By the 1930s still more than 80% of British children left school aged ten, with secondary education remaining a privilege for those who could afford it. As compulsory state education developed it was clearly influenced by the idea that all children were the responsibility of the state and should be educated to be good citizens. Early educational theorists in Prussia had devised one of the early models for schooling, they came up with centrally controlled curricula, systems of discipline, changing classes at the sound of a bell, and teacher-directed classes.

There remain deep problems entrenched in our educational philosophy, or pedagogy, many of which can be traced back to this traditional approach to education. Problems of 'under achievement' by certain social classes persist and many are failed by the educational system, leaving compulsory education with no or few qualifications. The debates in ESOL about the nature of prescriptive education system stifling the creativity of teachers and their pupils, are echoed across the educational spectrum from nursery to university. In our increasingly complex world, many people are asking how we can teach in ways that better foster creativity and equip people for the different challenges of the world we live in today. As Ken Robinson argues, *“Education is the system that's supposed to develop our natural abilities and enable us to make our way in the world. Instead, it is stifling the individual talents and abilities of too many students and killing their motivation to learn.”*¹

From a structural analysis the class system has been obscured but also reinforced through standardised testing, streaming and elite schools and institutions. Any evaluation framework such as exams, will reinforce the values that underpin it, (Krathwohl, 1980), and so it is often those who come from privileged groups who often perform best, progress to higher education, gain better jobs and live more comfortably, thus enabling them to bring up their children to do well at school and to continue the cycle of privilege.

These factors can go some way to explaining the objective need for another

¹(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2009/feb/10/teaching-sats>)

way of learning, but what do we mean by radical? The word is often defined as getting down to the roots of something, hoping to discover its essence.

However, it is of course quite possible for radical education from across the political spectrum. When trying to understand radical adult education;

“What comprises the roots of the field depends very much on whose history is being consulted. For every historical example of mechanics institutes or worker cooperatives, one could cite counter examples of adult education for cultural genocide or for the education of an officer class of an occupying army. The question is whose roots we are getting back to and whose purposes and practices we seek to rediscover.” (Radicalizing Learning, p:)

In this sense we are left asking what values or social change an educational project is working towards. To us, the term radical means challenging the status-quo in society, by this we mean not accepting race, gender, class or any other oppression as the natural order of things. We are driven therefore by both an awareness of injustice that must be challenged and also a vision of what a more equal society could look like. Perhaps most importantly we see the need to act and the role that mobilisation will play in order to have any chance of bringing about the change to these power relations. We are conscious that many commonly held beliefs today began as radical ideas e.g. the idea of human rights, 'all being born free and equal', and that it is only through ordinary people struggling against abuse of power and privilege that we enjoy many of the freedoms we do today. In the Reflect ESOL project we understand that not being able to speak, read, write or understand the language of the country where you live can combine with other factors to mean that people have a lack of control over one's life chances, or as some call it, “disempowerment”. We will deal with more detail with the values underpinning Reflect in Chapter X, we now turn to some case studies from other times and places.

One of the best examples of an emancipatory tradition in adult education also emerged around the time of the Industrial Revolution. In the early 19th century, as people moved to the rapidly growing and changing cities, institutes were set up to provide factory workers with the opportunity for self-improvement during

their adult years. They offered a range of subjects from art, philosophy, to geography and medicine. Often delivered by 'enlightened industrialists' and professionals this tradition of night classes continues to this day, through the Workers Educational Associations. Albert Mansbridge, the founder of the largest provider of adult education in the UK, believed that workers should “acquire knowledge which would enable them to decide for themselves what to think about the society in which they lived and worked.” There are countless examples of Trade Union courses and educational projects from training for shop stewards to work more effectively against managers' efforts to limit the terms and conditions of their work, to touring theatre companies who mobilise around particular issues, e.g. Banner Theatre. Reflect ESOL has worked with both UNITE and domestic workers, This work clearly has important links to defending the teaching professionals...(more?)

On the other side of the Atlantic, one of the most inspiring stories of radical education also has close links to worker's education. In 1932 Myles Horton, Don West and others, founded The Highlander School in Tennessee, with the aim of “*Creating a new social order through education.*” Based in one of poorest areas of the USA, the focus was unemployed and low waged working people. By late 1930s Highlander was training union organisers in eleven Southern states. They organised strikes for better conditions at mills and factories across the US, accompanied by picket line songs composed by Zilphia Horton. Ever since, music and cultural activities have been a central part of Highlander's work.



Zilphia Horton singing on the picket line in the 1940s. Highlander Research and Education Center, Resource Center photo collection.

In the 1940s, the struggle developed to fight racial segregation in the labour movement and the first integrated workshop between white and black workers was held there in 1944. Through the 1950s and 1960s the Citizenship Schools, were an important incubator for the civil rights movement. Young, black, female teachers helped lay the ground for the Montgomery bus boycott, the founding of the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee among others. Rosa Parks, Septima Clarke, and Martin Luther King were all involved. Literacy programmes linked to the Citizenship Schools, helped thousands of black Southerners to pass the test required to vote. These educational programmes made Highlander the target of white supremacists, and their early building was attacked by the Klu Klux Klan. In 1960 after Highlander land and buildings were seized and their charter revoked, they moved to become Highlander Research and Education Centre, Knoxville. As Myles Horton said after the original school

was closed, “*You can padlock a building but you can't padlock an idea.*” The Centre continues to this day, its focus has remained, but the campaigns now include environmental pollution, linking with groups resisting impacts of globalisation, LGBT, immigrant groups, and grass-roots think-tanks.

*I was lied to for a long time in our 'traditional' school system. From Columbus to the war of 1812, I only began to learn some of the truth in university. During my 3rd or 4th African History class, I cried, there was so much I didn't know. And since taking my learning into my own hands and into the arms of my community, I have been able to root myself as part of a narrative of cultural creators, activists, nurturers, femmes, as well as Red, Black, Brown, and Yellow people. My story is woven together from the stories we never hear. The moment I began this learning journey, my ability to self-determine drastically transformed. No one could name me, I now had the language and context to name myself. This is radical. ²**(Not sure where to put this quote, but I really like it)***

Horton once said, “*The best teachers of poor and working people are the people themselves. They are experts on their own experiences and problems.*” (ref) This is a powerful idea and one that is discussed in the fascinating dialogue between Horton and Freire in “*We Make The Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change.*” The book is made all the more interesting by the similarity of Horton's and Freire's ideas across such different times and continents.

As mentioned before Reflect is heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, whose pedagogy continues to provide insight years after his death. Freire was born and worked in north-east Brazil, which at the time was one of the poorest regions in the world. In the early 1960s, when his work became internationally known, 75% of people in this region were illiterate, with a life expectancy of thirty. Half of the land was owned by 3% of the population.

² <http://queergiftedblack.blogspot.com/2011/05/radical-education.htm>

Freire worked as a teacher in the slums and became interested in adult literacy. Since only literate people had the right to vote literacy was the key to social reform. In 1963 Freire's literacy programme was extended to the whole country. However opposition to his literacy methods grew amongst the political right who accused him of spreading subversive ideas. In 1964 a military coup overthrew the government and Freire went into exile rather than facing the risk of imprisonment. He was not allowed to return home to Brazil until 1980. His book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) is a classic of revolutionary education and influenced many academic disciplines.

There is a strong thread of popular education across the continent of Latin America. Bev Burke & Rick Arnold explain "*Popular Education is called 'popular' because its priority is to work among the many rural and urban poor who form the vast majority of people in most Third World countries. It is a collective or group process of education, where the teacher and students learn together, beginning with the concrete experience of the participants, leading to reflection on that experience in order to effect positive change.* (A Popular Education Handbook, 1983)

Of the countless contemporary examples we could give, we draw attention to the MST, Landless Peasants Movement, who organise under the banner "Occupy, Produce, Resist." Across two thousand autonomous settlements, and providing for 1.5 million people, there is a well developed educational system including schools, university and teacher training colleges, which all draw heavily on liberatory approaches. This educational autonomy is seen as integral to the success of one of the continent's largest social movements.

While some find the vibrancy and politicised culture of Latin Americans inspiring, others find it hard to imagine these ideas transferring to their own setting. While the popular education answer to this dilemma may be to always start where people are at, there have been many interesting adaptations of Freire's work to Western contexts. For example Burke and Arnold took the tools and principles they had learned in Central and South America back to Canada,

where union based, and Latin American solidarity movements flourished and continue to this day, (e.g. Popular Theatre- Ground Zero Productions).

bell hooks, prolific, black, feminist scholar has written extensively about the impact of Freire on her pedagogy. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, a collection of personally insightful essays, she discusses her work within the academy. She argues that “Teachers must be actively involved committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.” (hooks 1994: 15) (more here or covered in theory chapter?)

In Ireland there is a rich history of Community Education programmes, with a clear Freirean pedagogy. At KLEAR, in Kilbarrack on the outskirts of Dublin the provision of a crèche was crucial to the success of the project of women's community classes in the early 1980s. Originally publicised simply as a chance to 'Get out of the house' the classes became an important part of forming relationships between the women and taking action together. The classes were led by what the students wanted, their experiences, of claiming unemployment benefit, or of their children's experiences at school, became the material for writing classes. The project was linked to the consciousness raising of the time and led to women speaking out about recession and the way it impacted upon them. They organised demonstrations, wrote letters and got involved with running the building and the classes from interviewing the teachers to planning the curricula. One learner said, “*People know what they want themselves, but it can be hard for teachers to hear that.*” Within three years one young mother had become a teacher herself, although they were “*run as a collective, run with the people not for them,*” she helped to run the class for 15 years! She said, “*It gave us permission to become activists, and out of that we got a sense of our own power and how good we could be starting other groups in other areas and linking up, they could do it too.*” KLEAR is still going and has recently celebrated its 27th year of providing adult education. See this short film for more <http://vimeo.com/10048550>

Contemporary examples of movements using education include the environmental justice movement where front-line communities, from Glasgow to San Diego, have educated themselves to effectively use environmental and human rights legislation to challenge experiencing the environmental racism of everything from airport expansion to toxic dumping.

An unfolding story as I write, the *Occupy* movement includes workshops, lectures and skill-shares. Like many smaller movements and mobilisations before them, their general assemblies are innovative and inclusive processes for decision making that explicitly counter marginalisation and foster active listening.

As the clamp down on migrant's rights increases, from cuts to legal aid to mass deportations and increases in far-right activities, a whole range of grassroots education is springing up in UK cities; from trainings on anti-deportation campaigns to workshops, talks and artistic interventions that attempt to make the invisible visible.

To us popular education is about trying to understand and be prepared to try and change the structure of the world we live in and is based on the assumption that learning is most effective if participation is active, content is relevant to learners' lives, learners are treated as equals, and the learning process is enjoyable. There is often, though not always, a crossover between the political project of radical education and its methods. It is important to note that, using participatory methods alone is by no means the preserve of progressive or popular education. Institutions such as the World Bank have employed participatory methods to promote a neo-liberal version of community development and sometimes a power point presentation can have a radical objective!

Whilst the ideas we have explored here have long historical roots, in 2011, is there wider traction to these experiments? There is a widespread feeling that our democratic system is deficient, the economy is in crisis and inequality

continues to rise. Our apparent freedom to choose between political parties can feel like a choice between Pepsi or Coke, the root causes of many of the issues we face do not seem to be up for discussion. Our political systems can't apparently solve our local issues nor meet long term challenges such as climate change. Modern representative democracy has been described as a form of political adolescence; we give our power away to elected representatives. **M**eeting contemporary social and environmental challenges will require a broad level of participation rather than reliance on a few experts, activists or elected representatives. We argue that we need more directly democratic and participatory political systems where ordinary people are more directly involved in determining the decisions that most affect us; we believe that beyond citizenship courses, popular, radical or liberatory education is an important step towards achieving this aim. This requires developing collective values of equality as well as skills in accountability and taking responsibility.

As a popular educator from the USA explains; "*[Here], there has been a kind of separation between organizing and education. But, when I see different models, like how the Zapatistas organized or how folks in Africa organize, there is no separation. I think a lot of that is based on a culture of democracy that is not the same in the United States.*"ⁱ

It is politically powerful when we work towards equality, accountability and personal responsibility in our education work, and learn from taking action together and reflecting on our actions. Can we embed in our teaching the idea that ordinary people, given a good range of options, can determine a dignified and fair future? This is education that invites people to think through their own lives, and trusts them to make wise decisions. Ultimately, they're the ones who have to take responsibility for their own decisions, anyway!

As the US artist/activist Ricardo Levins Morales so eloquently puts it;
"If you give me a fish you have fed me for a day. If you teach me to fish then you have fed me until the river is contaminated or the shoreline is seized. But if you teach me to organise then whatever the challenge I can join together

*with my peers and we will fashion the solution."*ⁱⁱ

PRACTICAL ACTIVITY. The Radical Education Cocktail Game! (45mins-1hour)

Aims: To pool collective knowledge about historical examples of radical education from around the world. To show links between education and social change. To get people talking to each other.

For who? To be used with teachers or those interested in exploring radical education.

Method: Make cards with name, location and period in history of radical education projects/ movements/ experiments. Give out one card per person, or to every other person if a large group. (It doesn't matter if there is more people than cards.)

Set the scene. Imagine you are at a cocktail party. Mingle with all the other people in the room and find out as much as you can about these examples of radical education from the others in the room. Talk to as many people as possible.

After 20-30 minutes of mingling, sit back in a circle and go round each example, sharing what you have found about each example. Facilitator can add in information about each case study if needed. Expect feedback to take 3-4 minutes per example used.



Potential examples for cards;

- Mujeres Libres- Free Women of Spain, Barcelona 1930s
- The Free School Movement- Scandinavia, 1950s to present (?)
- Anti- World Trade Organisation mobilisation, USA, 1999
- Anti Genetically Modified organisms (GMOs) movement, UK, late 1990s/early 2000s
- Bolivarian Circles, Venezuela, since 2001
- Workers Educational Associations, UK, since Industrial Revolution
- Summerhill School, UK, since 1960s (?)
- Nicaraguan Literacy Crusades, 1960s
- People's Education for People's Power, South Africa, 1980s
- Women's Health learning circles, USA, 1970s
- Popular University of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Argentina, since 1980s

(Source; The Trapeze Collective. See Do It Yourself, A Handbook for Changing our World, Chapter 7 for info on some of these examples)

(WORDS 4198)

Partial bibliography- resources for further reading

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WEA

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Krathwohl - 1980

