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In this issue . . .

Adult Literacy: A Call to Communicators	1
Testing Literacy Materials – It's Worth It	3
Writing It Ourselves: Adult Beginning Readers as Authors	5
Speak & Math: Learning Electronically in Belizean Schools	7
TV Networks – A PLUS for Non-Literates in the United States	9
Eyes on the Prize: Competing for the Attention of New Readers in Asia	11
Two Literacy Strategies: The Laubach Model	12
The Freirean Model	13
Radio Education in Africa	16
Resources for Literacy Promoters	17
What's New, What's Coming	18
Tough Questions for International Literacy Year	20

The Freirean Model

by Paul Jurmo

For some 20 years, Paulo Freire has been a central figure in literacy and nonformal education efforts around the world. The Brazilian educator's written works have been widely disseminated, studied, debated and written about. Educators, community activists and others around the world who are consciously trying to develop approaches to education and community development which are more responsive to the realities of communities cite his ideas as key influence in their work.

Freire argues that the world social order is characterized by a host of oppressive forces which keep a large segment of the population in a dehumanized state: impoverished, desperate and without a voice in determining the course of their own lives. A more just social order would be democratic in nature, with each individual participating in the process of shaping his or her own personal development and the structure of the society as a whole.

For Freire, illiteracy is much more than just being unable to decode written language. It is

one of the concrete expressions of an unjust social reality ... [It is] not strictly a linguistic or exclusively pedagogical or methodological problem. It is political ... [On the other hand] literacy [is] ... a process of search and creation ... to perceive the deeper meaning of language and the word, the word that, in essence, they are being denied.

Despite the abstract language, Freire's writings have held a powerful message for educators. Education can be a tool to alter the social order, to create a more just system, or it can be a means of reinforcing oppression. True education is not a matter of getting the masses to absorb information and values pre-digested by the powers-that-be. Rather, Freire says that education must help learners move to a higher, "critical" state of awareness, where they learn how to think for themselves, analyze how they are shaped by larger social forces and decide how they can control their relationship with those forces rather than be controlled by them. This learning process is more than a mere fine-tuning of an individual's self-esteem and reading, writing and other "technical" skills, important as those goals may be. Freire says that education – and learners – must also be linked to a larger, collective effort to

change the society as a whole, because improved reading and writing skills or self-esteem are by themselves simply not enough to make the lives of most low-literate adults significantly better.

Freirean Practice: No One Right Way

Freire doesn't set out a "formula" by which these principles can be put into practice. Although he is known for having used pictures depicting "generative themes" – issues capable of arousing heated debate – as a stimulus for the kinds of analysis described above, he rejects the notion of a "Freirean method" in the sense of a pre-packaged, step-by-step curriculum that can be implemented in a given setting.

Creative educators inspired by Freire's ideas have not let lack of "a method" stop them from applying his thought.

This lack of a clear methodology is perplexing to many who want to know how to put Freire's ideas to work. It is sometimes seen by his critics as a sign that his ideas are impractical, lacking relevance to the demands of the real world. But creative educators inspired by his ideas have not let lack of "a method" stop them from trying to apply his thought in real educational settings. Whether calling themselves "Freirean," "participatory," "learner-centered" or "popular," these practitioners structure their programs to enable learners to go beyond the traditional role of student as passive "consumer" of information spoon-fed by teachers. Instead, learners are given multiple opportunities to participate actively in the program, taking on high degrees of control, responsibility and reward. These notions have become so pervasive that even educators who have never read his books are following practices consistent with his ideas.

Literacy programs in the United States reflect many of the participatory practices which are occurring in other places throughout the world. For example, many nonformal educators have replaced large, "top-down" classes and overly isolating one-to-one tutorials with interactive small groups, believing that they are conducive to achievement of important cognitive, affective and social goals. In California, educator Raúl Añorve tours workplace facilities with workers, taking photographs

of work stations and equipment. He then uses the photographs and ethnographic discussion methods to encourage learners to talk about their lives, to identify topics and uses of verbal and written language of concern to them. These interests, in turn, become focal points for verbal and written language instruction.

This example mirrors Freire's own practice of showing learners a picture as a "prompt" for such discussions. However, at the Door, a New York City program which provides basic skills, job training and health services to young people who have dropped out of school, educators ask open-ended questions like "If you could write to the President, what would you tell him?" The instructor notes the themes and uses of language which emerge from these discussions for later use in the group.

Or learners might work in teams to write their own essays, fictional stories, poems and songs about those topics. In a program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, sponsored by the United Auto Workers and Ford Motor Company, assembly line workers share writings and give feedback to each other, making suggestions, demanding clarification of a point. For advocates of this instructional approach, writing is seen as a particularly fertile area for development of learners' thinking and self-expression skills. (See p. 5 for another account of this approach.) In programs like Working Classroom, a family education-and-arts program in New Mexico, learners also develop self-expression skills through designing and performing dramas, dance, music, photo-novelas and other forms of artistic expression.

In these communication and artistic expression activities, learners achieve a number of objectives. They contribute actively to the creation of a meaningful curriculum. They get vital practice using a full range of language skills. And they learn that written language in its many forms is something which can be used to achieve real, meaningful purposes – whether for pleasure, to bolster friendships and family ties, to learn a technical skill, or to influence public policy – rather than something one does merely to "please the teacher" or "pass the exam."

Participatory groups can help learners develop vital social and community development skills as well. Participants can learn how to debate and analyze the issues they are concerned with. In the process, they develop a "team problem-solving" identity which they can carry with them

into their lives outside the program. Nicaragua-born educator Klaudia Rivera tells how, in a literacy program she directed for Hispanic immigrants at LaGuardia Community College in New York, learners did group research on topics like "housing," "immigration" and "jobs." They recorded information and shared strategies for dealing with these issues and invited outside experts to speak with them. In a women's education program sponsored by Lutheran Settlement House in Philadelphia, learners write letters to public officials and newspapers on causes close to their heart. Program coordinator Kathy Reilly explains that, although some of the topics chosen by students might be controversial, "these are issues which they are thinking about anyway, so you might as well come out into the open with them."

These instructional methods have even been carried over into programs which link basic mathematics instruction with community concerns. In West Africa, Gambian farmer co-op members worked in groups to learn how to perform a basic arithmetic task that was critically important to all of them: how to properly weigh their produce and calculate how much they should get paid for it. Group meetings provided a context in which farmers could also discuss questions like "How can we be sure we don't get cheated in our transactions?", "What other tasks can we apply our new math skills to?" and "In what other ways can our co-op help us?"

Beyond these "classroom" activities, some programs have also applied Freire's democratic principles to management. For example, learners at Push Literacy Action Now, a community-based program in Washington, DC, operate a committee which advises program staff on curriculum and other management decisions. Learners at Bronx Educational Services in New York City recruit new learners, select and orient new staff, decide on program policy, raise and manage funds for the group, and act as liaisons to traditional community institutions. Such learner involvement in "extracurricular," management-related activities can bolster group members' morale, group identity, cooperative spirit and interest in the program.

How Many Programs Exist?

It is virtually impossible to know how many groups worldwide use such practices or with what frequency. Attempts to quantify the number of Freire-influenced programs are hampered by a number of

factors, including weak information-exchange networks among nonformal educators and, in some cases, a natural reluctance by educators to identify themselves in a way that invites closer monitoring or even suppression by authorities.

The "democracy movements" now springing up worldwide are a sign of potential support – and need – for participatory education.

Despite the lack of hard figures, there is much anecdotal evidence of participatory education efforts on every continent; in industrialized and non-industrialized countries; in countries undergoing major social changes and in relatively more stable nations. Throughout Latin America, the "popular education" movement pre-dates Paulo Freire, but has gained considerable strength and direction from his ideas. Local groups in the Philippines, India and Thailand have been active in applying Freirean concepts for literacy, health, workplace and other forms of education, while similar applications are well established in at least a dozen African countries. In South Africa, Freirean methods are used in alternative education programs provided by anti-apartheid groups.

In the majority of cases, programs have been carried out by non-governmental grassroots organizations. However, a Freirean approach does not imply rigid opposition to government involvement. The Nicaraguan literacy campaign of the early 1980s stands out as one example of a state-sponsored effort to apply Freirean approaches to literacy on a national scale. More notably, the recent appointment of Paulo Freire himself as education minister for the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo, following many years in exile, suggests that educators should seize opportunities to exert power at the government level in support of participatory approaches.

What Needs To Be Done

While there appears to be considerable interest in Freire's ideas, the programs seen as models of participatory education remain relatively small in number and generally isolated from each other and from mainstream education and development efforts. In order to develop the par-

ticipatory approach as a strong education and development alternative, there are a number of things we can do.

1. *Build communications among supporters of a participatory approach.* We need to overcome the isolation which now exists between educators – and learners – who already support a participatory approach. This can be done by strengthening mechanisms through which educators and learners can share experience and build solidarity: informal study teams, teacher and student exchange programs, conferences, referral services and information clearinghouses, telephone hot-lines, newsletters and professional journals.

2. *Reach out to new sources of ideas and support.* For example, the fields of reading and writing research, linguistics and ethnography have produced considerable thinking which effectively supports many of Freire's basic positions. Those same disciplines have produced many participatory research, evaluation and instructional techniques which can be adapted for use in literacy programs and the converse is just as true. And the "democracy movements" now springing up in nations worldwide are a sign of potential support – and need – for participatory education. Encouraging such cross-fertilization among disciplines and social movements will require minds open to new ideas and a readiness to break down traditional territorial barriers. While purists may argue that "Freire's ideas" will be watered down or co-opted in such a process, they too must guard against making his ideas dogma, and, in effect, turning Freire into an icon to be worshiped.

3. *Learn how to deal with social, political and economic constraints.* It is naive to imagine that social institutions committed to more traditional forms of education will readily accept participatory education alternatives. As Freire himself argues, we need to understand the socio-political contexts in which we work and develop strategies for dealing constructively with potential obstacles or conflicts.

For example, if governmental or education officials perceive a participatory literacy program as a threat to the existing power structure, they might very well withdraw support to that program. In some cases, learners who become more willing to think and take action find themselves cut off from friends, family members, fellow learners – and even from some teachers – who feel threatened by their emerging strengths. Educators must be aware of distribution of power not only within society

as a whole but also within educational systems, within the cultures and families of the learners they work with, and among learners and staff participating in literacy programs.

Educators must also learn to respond to demands by funders and planners for accountability. Too often, literacy educators are expected to justify their existence by producing "numbers" – student enrollments, grades on standardized tests and so on – as evidence of their effectiveness. But participatory programs find those kinds of measures relatively meaningless. Learner-centered programs are instead building new forms of assessment which focus on measuring how well programs are helping learners achieve what they want to accomplish with their lives – e.g., informal feedback from learners, periodic review of learning contracts, observation of student involvement in various activities, student learning logs. Nonformal educators – and learners, too – must learn how to use these alternative measures, while funders must encourage their use.

Finally, even the most sound methodology and tolerant political climate cannot substitute for lack of resources. Literacy programs have traditionally suffered from lack of funds to pay for salaries, materials and administration. Learners themselves need extra supports like transportation, day-care and job opportunities to encourage participation. Literacy groups will have to struggle to promote local self-reliance. But recognizing the limits on their ability to generate material resources, especially in Third World countries, they must also take on the role of lobbyist for support from outside funding sources.

4. *Institute a research and development system.* No field, including adult literacy, moves forward without considerable ongoing research and development work. While promising participatory research work is already underway, practitioners must document what theory and practice already exists and develop a new "R&D" ethic: to remain fresh, relevant and vital, we will have to continually analyze and revise not only our practice but the thinking which underlies it.

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