Educating with Soul

By Liz Derias

For nearly 11 years, the School of Unity and Liberation (SOUL)—an organizing skills and political education training center in Oakland, California—has conducted workshops for people around the Bay Area and across the nation, with the goal of building power within oppressed communities. For the most part, we are self-taught as educators, facilitators, and curriculum developers. We have learned what we do through years of political study and experimentation, and our mistakes.

The belief that education is an important component of movement building underlies all of SOUL’s programs and is reflected in our trainings and workshops. Political education focuses not only on understanding the systemic roots of oppression and developing a conscious action response, but also on providing a context for our (working class, immigrant, queer, and transgender communities and communities of color) experiences with oppression.

The Methodology of SOUL

SOUL’s political education and trainings are based on a methodology that encourages participants to reflect on their own experiences as a way to understand the importance of political education. Our definition of Popular Education is taken from the series “Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers,” produced in Zimbabwe by Anne Hope and Sally Timmell. It is “...a method and a philosophy of education that holds oppressed people at the center of the learning process.”

SOUL understands that education and good ideas alone cannot bring about radical change in society. It takes a grassroots movement of community organizing. So, we strive to develop leaders in the movement to fight against the systemic roots of oppression. Akua Jackson, an organizer with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, says that SOUL has helped her to “...think of organizing as a science, and to think about organizing in a politically and historically grounded way. The process has mirrored the type of leadership development and the new political reality we’re fighting for.”

As facilitators and educators, it is our role to always move people to the next level. The multi-step process for raising consciousness through political education is different for all oppressed people. And consciousness itself is not a static thing, but a continually evolving process that requires developing conscious organizers. SOUL’s Educational Alternatives Program attempts to raise consciousness through a series of 16 workshops on understanding systems of oppression and identifying community solutions to combat them. Another approach focuses on developing a framework for analysis, otherwise known as “coming into consciousness.” Our 10-week summer internship program brings 12 young organizers from around the world to engage in political education and organizing skills training. This advanced study course is designed to raise the analytical, critical thinking, and assessment skills of participants. In addition, SOUL offers a three-day training for trainers to build and strengthen facilitation skills.

Finally, SOUL offers two programs that attempt to develop the analytical and assessment skills of people trying to become conscious organizers. They are, a five-day intensive training for youth organizers at our National Youth Organizers Training Institute, geared towards new lead organizers and youth leaders transitioning into formal lead organizing positions, and
Sunday School. We hope these programs help people to commit to becoming lifelong movement leaders.

To date, SOUL has trained over 5000 people. We engage in regular evaluations of our work, drawing primarily on participant feedback and by tracking the impact of our work on individuals, organizations, and the movement as a whole.

Says Malachi Larrabee-Garza, SOUL’s advanced political education coordinator, “SOUL trains people in frameworks that will help them to develop their analysis and to engage the Left. The whole process, which is very Freierian, is based on input and evaluation from participants, which requires constant refining of the curriculum. It has taught me about the broader process of consciousness raising because it forces you to check in with your base. You tailor your stuff based on what’s in people’s heads and… on reflection, action, and evaluation—not what’s solely on… paper, which is the traditional model… in the United States.”

Educating the Next Generation

SOUL’s aim is to develop youth leaders with effective political analysis and organizing skills, and an organizational capacity to create leaders who impact policy with field-wide knowledge and collaboration.

According to Yu Tong, a SOUL summer school graduate who starts law school at Santa Clara University next fall, “SOUL has made me think about educational access for the poor. I personally have been motivated to access different things… instead of waiting and… not being proactive because of my oppression. I’ve found different outlets… to do what I want to do and get where I want to go. My time with SOUL has provided certain bridges, and in some ways, outlets to help me organize and realize I can do what I want in life.”

Educating the next generation of leaders for our movements is a key element in building social movements. Transformative change takes a long time—many generations long. At SOUL, we are in it for the long haul, providing opportunities for developing consciousness and taking action for 21st century youth.

For more information about SOUL’s programs and instruction manuals, contact soul@schoolofunityandliberation.org.

Liz Derias is the educational alternatives program coordinator at SOUL. Originally from Egypt by way of Philadelphia, she began educating and organizing at the age of 17 with Sankofa Community Empowerment, Inc.
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