

SAJE Learnings

Defining the Issues and Demystifying Jargon

By Connie Galambos

Popular education breaks down seemingly complex information by connecting it to peoples' life experience, so that everyone can understand it. Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), an economic justice and community development center in Los Angeles, has been building economic power for working class people since 1996, using a variety of such popular education tools.

SAJE used popular education with the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice to negotiate the nation's most comprehensive community benefits agreement with the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. The agreement, signed in 2001, requires the developers to include affordable housing, living wage jobs, local hiring, and parks, in their \$1 billion, four million square foot sports and entertainment district. With large print maps and interactive community games, SAJE facilitated the construction of a grounded lively narrative. "Popular education allowed us to build a common analysis and campaign around who the developers coming into our community were, what they were doing and why," explains Davin Corona, organizing director at SAJE.

Jeopardy

Land use planning, redevelopment, and housing issues present perfect raw material for popular education. Community members intimately experience the impacts of these policy decisions every day, and are uniquely poised to take action. SAJE recently hosted a community "planning school session." Participants took a look at new planning areas in downtown Los Angeles—prime spots for gentrification—and demystified the arcane operations of the city's planning department. "We used a Spanish game similar to Jeopardy—'Quien personas dicen'," explains Davin. "Although it might seem a little cheesy, folks had a great time. The way we framed the session created space for people to put themselves out there!"

Like most popular education tools, the game helped to demystify jargon and break down language barriers, and encouraged people to move past their fears of public presentation towards hands-on advocacy.

Interactive Information

SAJE's popular education process starts with monthly tenant leadership committees, where residents of a neighborhood identify the hottest topics that they want to focus on. After initial research and brainstorming, SAJE staffers bring their ideas back to the tenants and work with core leaders on the design, development, and use of the appropriate training tools. While there may be some audience-specific nuances, the overall effectiveness of "social change through popular education" holds true, no matter who SAJE works with. And "popular education" could range from something as simple as teaching groups to form meeting circles and set agendas, to building an environment where knowledge is created as a team.

Standard schooling teaches one form of learning, but does not take into account the significance of human experience and emotions. Whereas, popular education helps you tell the compelling story that will not only be heard, but will move people to action.

"Let's face it: we're the MTV generation, and the audience wants real, interactive information now!" says Davin. "Here at SAJE, we get folks to define the issues for themselves because they are the ones experiencing it." ■

Connie Galambos is the Social Equity Caucus coordinator at Urban Habitat.

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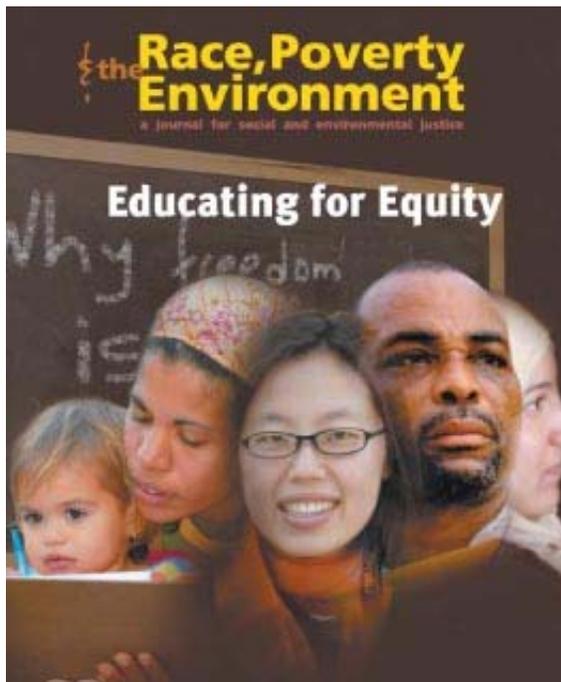
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