

Civil Rights Movement Origins at Highlander Educational Sessions

By John Hurst

When Rosa Parks was asked by the eminent talk show host, Studs Terkel, what the Highlander Center had to do with the fact that she chose not to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama on that fateful day in early December 1955, she answered quite simply, “everything.” As a result of its educational efforts on behalf of integration, the state of Tennessee closed Highlander in 1960 on bogus charges and auctioned off all of its property, only to have it reopen shortly thereafter under a new name and charter.

This form of adult education is now widely known as “Popular Education.” The core of its meaning and definition are clear, while the boundaries are intentionally permeable. Popular Education is, at root, the empowerment of adults through democratically structured cooperative study and action, directed toward achieving more just and peaceful societies, within a life sustaining global environment. Its priority is the poor, the oppressed and the disenfranchised people of the world—ordinary people.

I often encounter educators and others who have never heard of popular education, nor of its principal exemplars, like the Highlander Center, with the spoken or unspoken implication that therefore, it must not have much impact or significance. Myles Horton (co-founder of the Highlander Center in 1934) once told me, “you can accomplish a lot of good in the world if you don’t care who gets the credit for it.” Certainly, a very un-American and un-academic point of view. However, it is the epitome of a successful popular education effort for the people to say, “we have done it ourselves”—and they are, paradoxical as it might seem, quite right.

For example, many may have heard mention of the fact that Rosa Parks attended training sessions at Highlander prior to sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but too few realize the depth of Highlander

Center’s contributions. It was at Highlander that the critical literacy and leadership training program—the citizenship school program—was conceived and developed. The program, along with its co-founder Septima Clark, were transferred to Martin Luther King’s organization to become Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s principal education program. Not only did it teach tens of thousands of Southern Blacks to read and write, so they could register to vote; it also developed the leadership that formed the organizational nucleus for the movement in countless towns and cities throughout the South.¹

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded at Highlander from a long-running annual integrated workshop for college students. Highlander continues to this day to play a seminal role in people’s struggles for economic and social justice throughout the South, the nation, North America, and worldwide.

A fine nutshell description is Myles Horton’s, “the greatest education comes from action, the greatest action is the struggle for justice.”²

Endnotes

1. Tjerandsen, Carl, *Education for Citizenship: A Foundation’s Experience*, Schwarzhaupt Foundation, 1980.
2. From an interview on *Bill Moyer’s Journal*, “The Adventures of a Radical Hillbilly,” PBS, June 1981.

John Hurst is a professor in the Language and Literacy, Society and Culture Program at the University of California at Berkeley. Excerpt from an article first published in Educator, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley.

Democratizing the Public School System

By Kathy Emery and Eric Mar

W

enever popular education is mentioned, Paolo Freire is usually the first name that comes to mind.¹ But students of democratic pedagogy in the United States have plenty of home grown examples of their own to study. John Dewey, for example, who saw the public school system as fundamentally authoritarian, reproducing a “superior class... [whose] culture tends to be sterile [and whose] actions tend to become... capricious, aimless, and explosive...”² He wanted teachers to teach children not by force but by inducement; and growth itself had to be seen as an end.³ Indeed, if American society was to become truly democratic, Dewey argued, the children had to be taught to “take a determining part in the making as well as obeying laws”⁴

In 1932, Miles Horton—taking democratic education to an activist level—founded the Highlander School in Tennessee, on the principle that people had the means to solve their own problems without relying on experts or institutions. Horton believed that a pedagogy that helped people analyze their own experiences, and that of others, would promote participatory democracy. Many organizers of the labor movement in the 1930s gained valuable skills at Highlander. In the late 1950s, Septima Clark made the Citizen Education Program at Highlander the foundation for the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) Citizenship Schools.⁵ In turn, the Freedom Summer Schools of Mississippi used the SCLC citizenship curriculum as a template.

The 1964 Freedom Summer Schools arose in response to the inadequacies of the existing public school system, which was segregated and authoritarian. The teachers were given a written curriculum but were also advised “to shape your own curriculum in the light of the teachers’ skills, the students’ interests, and the resources of the particular community.”⁶ The emphasis on developing curriculum and teaching method based on the students’ experiences arose out of a vision that “[encouraged] the asking of questions,” and a “hope that society can be improved.”⁷

Like the authors of the 1964 Freedom School curriculum, Don Arnstine argues that public schools

have historically failed to produce active democratic citizens. Instead, their aim is only to socialize students, not educate them.

“Socialization is characterized by imitation, participation, and obedience to instruction and command. Its outcome is the acquisition of adaptive habits, skills, and attitudes. The processes of education... are far more subtle, adding to the above processes two-way communication, initiative, creativity, and criticism. The outcome of educational processes is the acquisition of attitudes and dispositions, knowledge and skills, that are individualized and critically thoughtful.”⁸

Uprooting Bureaucracy

To change a system that merely socializes, into one that also educates, would require a social movement. Not only because “macroeconomic mandates continually trump urban educational policy and school reform.”⁹ Or that corporate-engineered high-stakes testing has eliminated community participation in the creation of educational goals and policy.¹⁰ But because a social movement is the only way fundamental change can occur in any deeply entrenched bureaucracy. If the system can prevent a progressive school board in a progressive city from implementing systemic progressive educational reforms as advocated by Dewey or Horton, the only hope for change is outside the system.

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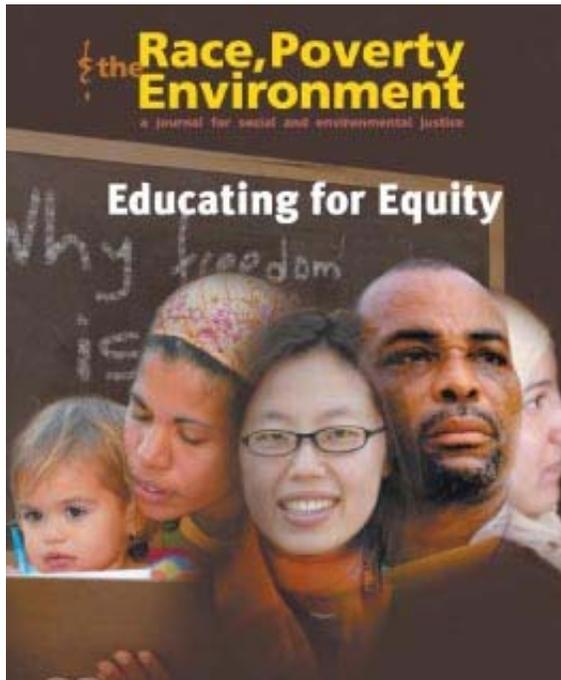
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