

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral. **Paulo Freire**

Changing the story

We all have an understanding of what life is about, what we are able to achieve, what it means to be human. Similarly, every human society is built around a particular story, or narrative. If we don't change these stories, then humanity's legacy will be of dominant behaviours that uphold structures of domination, which will then continue to affirm that there is no alternative to the current systems of oppression. For the story to change, we must intervene in how and where it is made, and the best place to challenge the old stories – and to create new ones – is at the individual and community level.

The core of popular education is the development of critical consciousness and creativity. Popular education was developed from Paulo Freire's radically different approach to adult education, which helped people 'to read their reality and write their own history', and motivated them to action that transformed their life situation – popular education helped them create a new story. When he developed his ideas, Freire was an active educator in marginalised and poor townships across Brazil, where – as in most of Latin American - literacy was a requirement in order to vote and people wanted to challenge the many dictatorships across the continent.

Popular education has nourished social movements all over the world; the Centre for Human Ecology, So We Stand, Abahlali – the South African Shackdwellers Movement, Centre for Youth Resources Foundation Network (Cryogenic), Mamelani, the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST) are just some examples of movements that have used popular education to mobilise their communities.

For Freire, popular education is rooted in generative themes. Generative themes are best thought of as powerful images or stories that impact the daily lives of people in a community. Critical consciousness is the product of a process where generative themes are recognised and analysed by members of a community. Exploring these themes speaks to people, allows them to understand their context, and helps end 'a culture of silence.'

Freire thought those at the grassroots were marginalised by power and profit; it is easy to internalise negative images of ourselves, propagated by the oppressor, but doing this means we become our own worst enemies. If we don't understand the generative themes in our communities struggles then cultures of silence will continue, and we will become 'ventriloquists of power'. This means we end up repeating what we are told about ourselves, blaming each other for societies' ills, instead of challenging the power holders or oppressors.

Banking education

Banking education is the opposite of popular education. Freire uses the term 'banking education' to describe the traditional education system; the concept illustrates students as 'empty containers' with no capacity for critical thinking, just waiting for educators, who will deposit knowledge into them. For popular education practitioners, 'banking education' reinforces systems of oppression and should always be avoided.

An important foundation of popular education is that the 'students' already carry all of the knowledge they need; the teacher is simply a facilitator in harnessing this knowledge and experience. This is why tools like the [education spiral](#) is useful; they encourage us to always begin with the experience and knowledge of

participants, for it is in understanding the patterns and generative themes within such knowledge and experience that people can begin to understand and respond to the world they live in.

Adult education – the working toward common goals of improving the methods and materials of adult learning, extending the opportunities for adults to learn, and advancing the general level of our culture – becomes popular education when it begins to work for radical transformation. Popular education should get to the root of societies pathologies.

Conscientisation

At the heart of this journey to critical consciousness is conscientisation – which helps to build a culture of self-determination among those isolated and affected by inequality. 'Conscientisation' refers to a critical positioning (action) in the face of a reality, understood from a continuous process of reflection and questioning (conscience). Conscientisation programmes use different methods to engage simultaneously with the 'head' (intellectual arguments), the 'heart' (emotional engagement) and the 'hand' (the action-oriented potential) to create transformation. The [tools below](#) can all be used to address the head, heart and hand in workshops or training.

When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus or resolution, we take hope away. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture.

bell hooks

Education is political

Steve Biko's practice of popular education resonates with this process of conscientisation. He say;

Key to Friere's methodology is the recognition that teaching should be a political act directly related to production, health, social conditions... to be able to submerge themselves in the context of the learners' life experience, primarily to be able to listen while encouraging learners to unveil and 'unpackage their lives and problems.

Alternative education and health programmes are therefore imperative for our survival. To bring these to life we must understand the dominant values, beliefs, and myths of our society, which means critical questioning and the necessary action to combat structural and cultural violence (see '[violence](#)'). This questioning to discover the 'possibility of all possibilities' leads to emancipation, as Freire states, 'human beings must become active agents in their own history and their own models of development'.

The skills within popular education – of deep listening, unpacking power, overcoming fear, generating love, celebrating our powers, truth-telling, and creating alternatives to obedience - all provide avenues on the road to freedom and collaboration.

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