

# Educating for a change



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## Postscript

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### THIS BOOK AND US: A CONVERSATION

Usually we just see the final product of a writing project: the book. We rarely get glimpses into the process of writing it. So that's exactly what this first part of the postscript is about. It's a conversation among ourselves – as five authors – about writing this book collectively:

- ◇ starting from what we have in common
- ◇ the differences that emerged and what they meant
- ◇ the learning – about ourselves, education, and politics.

Using this framework and with most of the writing behind us, we sat down and began to talk. Here are some bits and pieces from that conversation.

#### **About naming**

I didn't actually have words for some of the things that I did and saw others do. So part of working on the book was not just about naming power relations, contradictions, or dynamics but had to do with pulling out from our toes ways of describing what we do – the principles we act from. Because often we just do things by our instinct. For me that "pulling out from the toes" is hard labour.

#### **About taking ourselves seriously**

Taking ourselves seriously has been a theme as we wrote. So much of what we do is hidden, not valued, that it makes us defensive. The process of the book is about asserting the legitimacy in what we do. It's about all the issues of "naming" that don't come up until you try to speak about your experience. A lot of what's in this book was unspoken before.

#### **About speaking from our own experience**

Remember, we began by saying we would simply speak from our experience. But speak about what in our experience? And how would that be useful to someone else?

The writing was a focus for distilling the experience and then naming it from there.

For me, working on this book took my own experience further. I began writing about things I thought I knew about, like the spiral model, and did a first draft. But after you all pulled it apart, I learned a lot more about design from your input. Even the frame of planning, design, and facilitation really emerged from these discussions.

I also realized how much we freeze things into categories – and when you put it down, you realize that the frame isn't quite adequate. Sometimes I didn't know what I was talking about – in "planning", for example. I've been doing this work for all this time, but I didn't really know what the word meant.

### **About reflecting on our practice**

I got started on the writing late. I also had this block about “facilitation”, and “education for social change”. I always thought the context had to be a workshop situation – outside of the formal system. I had seen myself as facilitating learning – not just giving students a recipe but helping them critically analyse. I didn’t know if people out there would want to know about that – maybe people would only be interested in the informal settings.

So it was difficult for me to begin. I had done some thinking about myself as a participant researcher – giving voice to people who would not otherwise have voice. Publishing was a way of giving back to people their words so they could use the book as a vehicle for speaking to the wider community. So that’s why in my first draft the emphasis was on research. Then I moved from that and started looking at my work generally, to see how much my teaching and other work is littered with political messages or framework: engaging students in conversation rather than “telling them”.

The other night I had a dialogue with the students and afterwards I thanked them for the discussion and said I’d learned a lot. Everyone was surprised. “How could you say you learned from us?” they wanted to know. For them, learning is what they do. What I do is inform. So I had to start rethinking and it was good for me. Of course, the pressure of deadlines also helped a lot.

### **On choosing/writing our own chapters**

We chose the chapters that we were each going to write ourselves – not really knowing what we were choosing. So we have no one else to blame. Somehow it worked out and I was glad that I wrote my chapter – or at least that someone else wrote the other chapters and not me.

Once I started to look at my piece (chapter six), I wished it was ten years ago. There was more order then somehow. I knew what the limits were – how the world was divided, the gaps. Suddenly I wondered what was going on. Instead of writing in a time when you know what oppressive structures you’re pushing against, now is a time of incredible fluidity. It’s hard to know what direction things are taking. It’s a new ballgame in many dimensions, especially at the international level. I was also overawed by the assignment of my chapter. So it’s been a hard process for me.

On the other hand, I realize I’m not the only one in this boat. No one I’ve talked to out there has a clear idea of where things are going either. So I semi-relaxed. In all the other chapters we are pulling out from our own experience, flawed as it may be. This chapter is different – we’re looking forward.

I felt another pressure too. In doing the type of work I do, I come up against the academics who see popular education/social change educators as “flaky”. According to them, we are super-good at keeping people happy and moving them around, but we have no facts, no analysis. So recognizing that while it wouldn’t be a definitive statement, this chapter would be important to add to the general agenda, something to kick around.

### About writing collectively

One of the interesting things for me is how we've worked. I found myself writing for the four of you. Even though we didn't have a thousand meetings, I was conscious of "how you four would see this, or express that". So it was like having all five people in my head as I was sitting in front of the computer screen. And I think that's how I overcame part of the sense of being overwhelmed.

My assignment was to take the tradition of political economy analysis (which in the left has been structured in a very particular way: solo, detached, and deductive) and bring our own work in as the entry point and go from there. For me, that was like taking on Gramsci directly. In doing that, one resource was the active and implicit involvement of all five people and everyone's thought processes, which are all very different. My thought process is putting out a few ideas, playing with them, and then developing them. At the end you put on a framework.

For example, if you have cider and wine, you think of how to prepare them. Then you look at how they're different and work from there. The weakness of my approach is a tendency to pragmatism and a weak framework. Its strength is that it's tailored to the situation. So, in the process of dialogue, I was forced to formulate things in ways that would make sense to the four of you. I felt if you four understood, the rest of the world would too.

For me, the collective aspect was the most pronounced when I tried to put all the comments together. I'd have all the sheets in front of me and look at what each of you said on a particular page. Maybe I'd begin with one person's page – then chuck that and use someone else's. It's part of working collectively – to speak with someone and sense them speaking back as you try to interpret.

It's amazing that things we find so clear become unclear, because people are having different experiences with the material.

Having to comment on each other's stuff and take it seriously was great. It always had a bearing on something I was trying to think through myself, and not only for this book. But my biggest fear was that I had nothing to say. I start from that fear every time I write and it always takes me a long time to get enough down to tentatively show to people. If they don't burn it, I get the courage to go on. So my fear was to get past the point where the four of you would even consider my draft. Then the fear went and the process was as the rest of you describe.

I experience that same fear. Maybe it has something to do with being a woman?

**About voice** I learned a lot about the issue of voice. Some of you pointed out to me the way I used “you” and the corporate “it”. I knew about that in theory, especially from feminist literature. But I learned a lot in doing the writing about how I still fall into the traps. In talking about “we” I needed to think about who “we” are. In using “it” I was often disappearing whatever “it” stood for.

Who “we” are is an issue that ran right throughout the book. The process of doing the writing raised questions for me about how often we use “we” to be inclusive and how specifically we were using it here to mean “we five”. Then we had to confront who “I” am in the “we”.

**About being specific** I actually learned something about how you can edit usefully – knowing how much I appreciated when you gave me concrete examples, or spent time reworking something. I didn’t know how to do that for other people before.

The importance of being specific comes out here. We are five people who have been talking systematically for four years. A common text forces us to get very specific about what we think: isolate points on which we disagree and find a higher level on which we have consensus.

I think in that sense it’s like the ink-blot test. It serves as a way of locating ourselves and our trajectories in relation to each other as well as to the rest of the world. In terms of my own work, the writing is a part of the rest of my life. So I find myself explaining the spiral model to a colleague in the union. I never had words or an image to explain to him before.

**About having fun writing** I remember those days when we were high, joyful – when we had moved to another point on something. I’ve had wonderful moments in this process. I’d bring a draft without knowing how to move forward, get input. Then, saying “wow”, I’d go back to the computer. It’s the first time I’ve ever had good times writing – moments where I felt really good.

I got inspired. I would read some parts and there would be flashes of brilliance. None of us has the whole thing, but suddenly as I read I’d say, “That’s fantastic – brilliant – where did that come from?” In that sense there is a dynamic which is packaged as competitive which, in a context like this, is synergy.

I can’t resist this story. I was reading my draft with comments from one of you where you came to a place of “brilliance” and wrote “YES!” on the page. I howled with laughter since it was a paragraph I had lifted from that same person’s input on an earlier draft, which I had thought was a moment of brilliance.

**About humility** I like the spirit that runs through the book. I believe that we have some extremely important resources in the DMI and its network for pushing the popular agenda forward in this country at this moment. On the other hand, I like that the book is humble, that it doesn't say this is the recipe we've been cooking up for three years and now it's baked. I like that spirit and would be surprised if we don't get comments about that – that it's good to state our limitations as we write.

For me personally it's been a process of running up against the limits of what we can possibly know. When I haven't included suggested changes in a rewrite, it's been because I didn't know how to do it.

**On looking into the future** We left out a lot of important issues in chapter six – like youth, ability/disability, the situation facing farmers and fishermen.

One of the strengths of that chapter is that the connections are alluded to but it's not all tied up. It's not as if we, the enlightened vanguard, have sorted it all out. So here are the primary and secondary contradictions – and here's what you need to do. This has been the traditional political discourse we've rejected but we haven't always come up with an alternative discourse.

**An invitation** I think that the tone of the book is one of invitation – inviting people to experiment with design, adapt tools, and put their own educated guesses forward for criticism and shaping. I think that tone of invitation can help social movements to grow. We are not about maintaining progressive groups and organizations as private clubs.

I think the question of language can be situated in the context of invitation. In a lot of the work I do, the question of language comes up in people's unease in using any words to name things for fear they'll be wrong. This invitation is to try out words to see if they describe or name, as best one can, what's going on right now.

**About language** For me the question of language is saying, "That term doesn't work – so I'll try this one." You then leave it in the cupboard because there are some other things to go on to. This writing has required me to take the stuff and dust it off and look at whether I need new terms.

I was doing that all the time in my chapter. Do we use Black people, people of colour? Whatever we decide, whose words and meanings are those?

Words also change with time. At another time, in relating to issues around Native people, we were clear they wanted to be called "Native people", not "Indians". Now "First Nations" is important because politically it's a different moment. And "First Nations" is a political statement. So it matters very much how people refer to themselves. We need to say, "This is the best we know now." If we were writing a year from now, we might be using different words.

**READERS  
RESPOND:  
SOME QUOTES**

The readers of the draft manuscript had a very short time to do a lot of work – and they all came through for us. We have incorporated many of their comments and suggestions into the text itself. But they also made general comments that raised new questions for us, and we want to share those comments with you here. In keeping with the rest of the book, we have not attached specific names to the quotes. The names of all of the readers are noted in the acknowledgements.

**On taking care of ourselves**

How about a really strong piece on the importance of not packing the agenda? For example, Fran Endicott has a principle: one activity per block of time. The underlying principles for me being:

- 1 we can't do everything, so what's most important to do?
- 2 if we keep the breadth from getting away from us, maybe we can have some depth.
- 3 we want to learn/practice resistance to the culture of burn-out, which is essentially a weapon against ourselves.

Audre Lorde in *Burst of Light* (her cancer journals) says, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an art of political warfare."

I think the value of popular education as a creative tool is a very important point – what helps us laugh together, to create and re-shape our world together. The task of nurturing ourselves and each other is something we tend to forget – we burn ourselves out – we lose our ability to laugh. The spiritual *can* be political.

**On the tone of the book**

Another comment about tone. At one point I commented on what I said was an excessively "apologetic" tone. . . . I don't think you need to be defensive or to seem to be defensive. There's a tension between arrogance and humility. There's a fine line between criticism (especially self-criticism) and apology. There is a kind of personal defensiveness which no doubt relates to the interpersonal context of the kind of work you all have committed your lives to. This is a reality that I have felt myself all too often – and never really figured out how to resolve for myself.

Actually, much of the value of your manuscript is in giving me personal insight about these very same feelings in myself, about what to do differently.

**On the differences in voices, styles**

I liked not knowing who wrote what. It gave me a collective sense of the basis of what I was reading. (And it was fun to guess).

I loved the many voices – like a Latin American novel.

I like the voice shifts as a model for diversity.

For me the mixed voices in one volume mostly does not work.

**On power** Because our struggle against hierarchical arrangement of power is constant, I think we have become in regard to "power" something like the flip side of the liberal educators who recognize difference but not inequity. The challenge is to understand the uses of power and the choices we have available for the employment of power.

"Respect the people you teach. Empower people through learning." These are both liberal platitudes which do not "respect" people. I think it should be stated – perhaps more succinctly – that these expressions easily serve to reinforce lopsided power relations, neopower relations. When we talk about "teaching people" or "empowering them", a position of power is assumed by the teacher – as the one doing both the "teaching" and the "empowering".

My sense is that it all goes back to the power of language. In this case, the language is used to protect our territory, our control, our sphere of influence, while seeming to mouth change. It makes it possible to talk about democracy and democratic practice without giving up power.

**On activities for seeking new information**

It would be useful to have a tip or two about the process of seeking information beyond the workshop. What I mean is: the presumption of all or nearly all the activities seems to be that all the information and insight the participants will need to accomplish what they want, already exists within the group. And yet one major problem activists need to solve is how to gather "information" that will help them in their struggles.

Information gathering in this sense might involve:

- ◇ identifying general topics of active concern and relevance, specific questions whose answers would be helpful in addressing those general topics of concern
- ◇ identifying possible sources of information (in the group, local organizations, and beyond)
- ◇ clarifying good ways to access this information
- ◇ clarifying ways to figure out what the gathered information "says" that might be useful for action-strategies.

I don't mean to retreat to the reification of "experts" and "expert knowledge". In fact, that's part of the challenge here: maintaining participants' respect for the power of their own expertise and insight, while at the same time supporting their ability (individually and collectively) to seek and find the kinds of information they will need to help accomplish what they want to accomplish.



**About language**

I was struck with your comments in the postscript about the use of "we" because that is something I wanted to write to you about too. Sometimes I felt a bit put-off by what seemed to me your ambiguous use of "we". Sometimes you very clearly meant you five.... Other times you seemed to mean we-educators-for-social-change ... a more inclusive use of "we". So this latter use of "we" includes me. But sometimes the usages went back and forth – in a way that I sometimes felt roped me into your assertions, your knowledge, without my consent. I felt a bit patronized. Your honesty throughout the manuscript helped me get beyond my own personal defensiveness.

Surprisingly, what I really didn't like was your introduction ... I had problems with the non-user friendliness of the language. For example: The craft of democratic practice is judging the timing and content of what we say, so that we move people forward, rather than indulging in our own need to be heard. When I read this sentence I asked myself: "What is the craft of democratic practice? Democracy as espoused by the American/Canadian state?"

Judging and timing and content of what we say. Well, politicians in this so-called democratic practice of governing in Canada really judge their timing and content to fit the audience in the most offensive and manipulative way. Is this what is meant by this statement?

So that we move people forward. This sounded anti-participatory, almost like forcing people to go forward when they might want to go clockwise, or bounce thoughts around like billiard balls, so what is the direction "forward" and in whose eyes is a direction forward and not backward or sideways?

Indulging in our own need to be heard. Does this mean a popular educator has no voice? But just facilitates others? It certainly is a thought-provoking sentence; but it didn't give me any assurance that my questions would be answered in future chapters.

I started to mount an argument in my mind.... Where were you all coming from and had you become conservative in the last couple of years????!! It was a great relief to find everything falling into place as I read the other chapters.

**About the people we work with**

Is transformational education only with oppressed people? Can a person who does not come from an oppressed class be an effective facilitator with their oppressed brothers and sisters? What gives that person the right to be a facilitator for someone else's change process? How can we ensure that the facilitator doesn't "take over" the change process? The answers are alluded to in other chapters where you stress the importance of facilitators locating ourselves as actors, identifying our own social and organizational identity.

Can we say that we are engaged in transformational education if, for example, we are working with an all-White, fairly wealthy, middle-aged group of church goers ... people who could not class themselves as oppressed? Some may even see themselves as oppressors but who want to change?

**On ownership of the event by participants**

Ownership of the event by the majority of participants . . . means that the event is "messy", the agenda is continually being changed by the participant-dominated steering committee, whole planned sections will have had to be reworked or dumped in order to meet the participants' needs, participants become agitated by the framework and the agenda and start to challenge the planners, and I face each major session with great trepidation, until the middle of the event, the participants take over, they own the event and they pull it off!

I see my role as setting the stage to ensure that the conditions are ripe for the participants to take over. If an event isn't messy, and people don't start challenging me, then I start to worry. I know that something is terribly wrong.

Control: it seems to me that an integral part of the spiral approach is control, as sense of ownership of the process. I would find it useful if this was consciously and deliberately named as one of the stages in a workshop. This is not to suggest that there's a beginning-and-end model but a time when this is placed on the table.

**On making the context visible**

Making context visible and talkable is an important issue which might be more explicitly discussed. Context is a key characteristic of education for the nineties as links to environment (constructed and natural) and attempts to draw attention to the importance of a sense of place – metaphorically and materially speaking.

**Challenges to transformational educational work**

In the public mind, the experience and model of source countries – Cuba and Nicaragua, etc. – for transformational educational work are now profoundly questioned and, in several vital dimensions, discredited. We therefore ask: What does it say for the role of this educational practice? There? Here? This book twice alludes to this issue. It is a very partial response to a question which threatens to make this education even more marginal in the eyes of many.

**What's missing**

The importance and role of culture – its deeper meaning, how it gets recovered, expressed, integrated into educating and organizing for change.

The real challenge and complexity of linking our educational work to organizing, to political action, to movement-building.

**Outsider-insider**

Most pieces appear based on the practice of facilitators as outsiders working with an organization or group for a limited period of time. This outsider-insider dynamic, and the differences of the experiences of facilitators in those two positions might be useful to name and address more explicitly; also to include more examples from those who do work within organizations, because it is a different experience and I think it reflects the majority of the readers.

**On endings** I like the idea that you will including a section that “reveals” your work – thereby demystifying the process. However, I think that it is rather long, and a bit hard to follow. . . . Whatever [you do with it], the Postscript as it stands now is definitely not a good way to end the book.

You who think I find words for everything  
 this is enough for now  
 cut it short    cut loose from my words

You for whom I write this  
 in the night hours when the wrecked cartilage  
 sifts round the mystical jointure of the bones  
 when the insect of detritus crawls  
 from shoulder to elbow to wristbone  
 remember:    the body's pain and the pain on the streets  
 are not the same    but you can learn  
 from the edges that blur    O you who love clear edges  
 more than anything    watch the edges that blur

Adrienne Rich  
 from *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems*

## Bibliography

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To help us decide what to include in this bibliography we used the following guidelines:

- ◇ more on practice than theory
- ◇ must be in print and available
- ◇ major works of DMI members
- ◇ only books, kits, booklets – no articles.

Materials distributed by the Doris Marshall Institute are coded "★".

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### 1. THE PRACTICE OF EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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EDUCATION / SOCIETY

For the authors of *Educating for a Change*, genuine democracy does not happen solely through our political and educational work. Democratic processes and practices are essential elements in achieving a truly participatory society. Drawing on the authors' experiences in facilitating a wide range of workshops, the book offers theory and practical tools for consciously applying the principles of democratic practice to daily work.

The authors have worked in social education for almost twenty years. In community and solidarity groups, unions, boards of education, anti-racist and human service organizations, they have been challenging (their own) assumptions and refining skills towards a more integrated theory and practice.

The authors are all members of the Doris Marshall Institute in Toronto, an organization committed to popular education and social change.

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