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Finding and Analyzing Information for Action and Reflection: Possibilities and Limitations of Popular Education in One-Shot Library Instruction

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CHAPTER 10

Finding and Analyzing Information for Action and Reflection

Possibilities and Limitations of Popular Education in One-Shot Library Instruction

Kenny Garcia

BECAUSE I WAS A first-generation college graduate with immigrant parents, my undergraduate experience was full of doubt, uncertainty, and inexperienced parental support regarding academia. Using the academic library for research was a foreign concept. Instructors expected students to inherently have information literacy skills, while librarians provided only basic one-shot instruction. I learned to use the advanced library resources on my own and summoned the courage to ask the friendly librarians for help when I needed it. Yet even with the support of librarians, I did not feel a part of the academic community. There were and still are structural and systemic issues that first-generation college students have faced disproportionately, such as lack of college preparation in public high schools, lack of institutional support for undergraduates, decreased funding for city and state colleges and universities, and decreased financial support for students from the state and federal government.

I was able to name and understand these barriers through discussions with my fellow students and concerned faculty and staff. We discussed Paulo Freire, popular education, and other critical theorists and theories. After reading, writing about, and discussing Freire's work as an undergraduate at SUNY Binghamton, I became involved in a small collective of educators that wanted to continue thinking about transformative and liberatory pedagogy after graduating from the university. This small collective was based in New York City and named itself Quilombo NYC, which refers to the communities created by escaped slaves in Brazil. I helped coordinate Quilombo Summer, a summer program coordinated by Quilombo NYC and held in New York City in 2003 and 2004. Quilombo Summer strove to empower working class youth of color through popular education and social justice projects. Popular education is an educational framework that uses dialogue to contextualize and examine ideas, concepts, and experiences in order to end social and economic inequalities.¹ The program supported youth in being active in their struggle for social justice by using popular education as a tool to work together in order to see what was wrong in the world, develop projects to transform it, and learn from their actions. Quilombo NYC existed from 1998 to 2004.

Through Quilombo Summer, I saw firsthand how a community education project could provide a transformative educational experience. The youth I worked with created a pamphlet on what they learned in the summer program and attempted to discuss these issues and concepts with other youth in New York City. This experience developed my facilitation skills and helped me realize that while I was having an impact on the community, the community instilled in me a commitment to social justice, love and respect of my fellow community members, and speaking truth to power. In order to see the community as having worth, value, and perseverance, I had to embody these values in myself as well. I had to actively wrestle with concepts, actions, experiences, and feelings to become an engaged community member and to facilitate this transformative educational process with other community members.

After I became a librarian, I wanted to use these experiences and incorporate popular education concepts into library instruction in an academic setting. As a reference and instruction librarian, I am tasked with providing one-shot library instruction sessions for a variety of subject areas. I have struggled with taking on a critical pedagogical position in these sessions because I see students only once a semester for up to two hours. These library sessions depend on the instructor fitting them into the course schedule and inviting me to incorporate a course research assignment into my teaching. These time constraints and course expectations ultimately limit the potential experience I can create. Against these limitations, there are opportunities to use dialogue to contextualize and examine key concepts. One-shot library sessions are a work

in progress and an experience that I'm constantly reflecting on in order to improve the teaching and learning process. Using Paulo Freire's most influential text as a framework, this chapter will give a brief introduction to Paulo Freire, cover a few important popular education concepts, and share their importance in one-shot library instruction.

Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire, twentieth-century Brazilian educator, critical pedagogy philosopher, and author of the classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, advocated for a learner-based, participatory, liberatory model of popular education that would lead to transformative action taken by the oppressed.² Freire worked on literacy campaigns in poor and working-class neighborhoods in Brazil, where he created popular education programs that developed literacy skills as well as politicizing economically deprived communities. He is most known for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, from which I'll highlight two important concepts.

The *banking concept* describes an instructor's act of sharing information for students' consumption as an act of depositing knowledge into empty containers or receptacles. It is prescriptive in nature and cannot truly support the development of critical-thinking skills in students. Students come into our classrooms with valuable information and knowledge about themselves and the communities they come from, and the instructor has to place value on this kind of knowledge.

The other important concept is *critical consciousness*, which is a deep understanding of oppression in the world around us and necessitates taking action against oppressive systems. Freire uses the term *conscientization* to refer to the process of developing this complex understanding of oppression. He argues that after oppressed people become self-aware of oppression and see themselves as political actors and not just subjects, they can act against unjust conditions and liberate themselves. Students developing critical consciousness would be an outcome of incorporating popular education concepts in academic institutions.

As popular education challenges the banking concept through dialogue in order to get students across the critical consciousness threshold, it's also important to contextualize the rise of popular education as a pedagogical process. The term *popular education* comes from Latin America and refers to education of the common people. Freire developed a popular education-based literacy campaign with Brazilian workers in the 1960s. Popular education supports participants in examining the communities they are a part of and acting on creating better social conditions within these communities. The process

examines power and privilege in order to eradicate oppression. It is ultimately about taking action once conscientization is achieved. Eleonora Castaño Ferreira and João Paulo Castaño Ferreira propose that popular education takes on a three-step process: finding the issue, analyzing the issue, and acting on potential solutions.³ The addition of a fourth step, reflecting on the action taken, transforms it into a continuous loop. This allows for the continuing identification of issues and the replication of the process.

All four steps require an examination of one's own experience in order to apply theory practically: a process also known as praxis. Academics, including librarians, often view theory as outside of the scope of practical actions because the practical approach may conflict with what ideally should take place. When oppressed people fight back against injustice, though, they rarely do so without any theoretical underpinnings grounding the action. The juxtaposition of this continuous process against a mapping or landscaping of social issues that are repeatedly shifting and transforming requires praxis to be dynamic, engaging, and self-reflective.

Teaching librarians need to reflect on pedagogy and praxis. Heidi Jacobs argues that if librarians do not use theory as a means toward self-reflective praxis, instruction becomes an ungrounded activity that doesn't transform social conditions.⁴ While these ungrounded activities may seem productive and may address social issues peripherally, praxis is the grounding foundation that ties instruction to critical learning. This is a practice that I've developed through my experiences as an educator and activist through post-instruction reflections after library sessions, debriefings after completing summer youth programs, rereading and reinterpreting pedagogical texts, and joining or creating collectives that provide a space for self-reflection. It is with this lens that I have attempted to incorporate Freire's philosophical and pedagogical proposals into my one-shot library instruction sessions.

Popular Education in One-Shot Library Instruction

As discussed above, the four-step popular education process involves finding an issue, analyzing the issue, acting on potential solutions, and reflecting on the action taken. The incorporation of popular education concepts and activities into one-shot library instruction sessions has the potential to engage students through participatory educational experiences and develop information literacy skills as a tool for social justice. It is limited, though, by the amount of time spent with students. One way to navigate that is by focusing on the first two steps, finding and analyzing issues.

In line with popular education principles, I developed an alternative and collaborative one-shot library instruction session for a critical-thinking- and ethics-based business course. The library session focuses on the evaluation and analysis of a nonprofit organization's website to determine the mission of an organization or campaign, its organizational or campaign goals, its target population, and the criteria used to specify the target population. The session is tied to a case study assignment where students have to analyze a local nonprofit organization and present solutions to issues facing the organization. In order to have students think critically about people experiencing homelessness and to go beyond basic responses to the target population question, I intentionally selected Picture the Homeless, a citywide, multiracial, bilingual organization based in New York City with a constituency that includes homeless people living in shelters as well as those living on the streets.⁵ Picture the Homeless was founded and led by homeless people and works with individuals within the shelter system. I use Picture the Homeless's website as an example and have students analyze the site for the organization's mission statement and target population. The goal of this exercise is to have students think critically about issues facing the local communities, as well as to think critically about the issues facing local nonprofit organizations responding to oppressive systems.

A popular education activity that can be used in library instruction is the problem tree. I have used this activity at Quilombo Summer to identify root causes of high dropout rates for working-class youth of color. Ferreira and Ferreira use a problem tree to discuss root causes of social issues, identify the symptoms of these social issues, and name the outcomes of the social issues.⁶ This exercise also supports the first two steps of the popular education process: finding and analyzing an issue. Each issue is written on the trunk of a tree, and the participants discuss what systems of power make up the roots of the tree, describe general outcomes of each issue as individual branches on the tree, and share specific examples of how the issues affect them as a leaf on a branch. This activity can be used to help students identify a research topic and search terms. Students can identify the main point of the research topic as the trunk of the tree and use the issues on the tree branches as potential search terms.

The focus on identifying and analyzing an issue can lay the groundwork for the student's engagement with taking action and reflections on actions taken. Acting on potential solutions and reflecting on actions taken would involve multiple sessions. Again, this highlights the limitations of incorporating popular education concepts in a one-shot library instruction session. Offering multiple library instruction sessions or credit-bearing library courses would be a more holistic approach to incorporating the entire popular education process, but unfortunately it is not an immediate option at many academic institutions. One strategy for approaching the popular education process is to work with service-learning courses, which already have community engage-

ment as a learning outcome, or with instructors who incorporate community engagement in their courses.

Conclusion

Time constraints and course expectations limit the incorporation of a complete popular education process in one-shot library instruction. The structure of this instruction session limits the adaptation of the four-step popular education process (identification, analysis, action, and reflection), and therefore the session may focus on only identification and analysis. Librarians may find a more holistic approach to conducting a popular education-based one-shot library instruction session through partnering with service-learning courses, which should have action- and reflection-based learning outcomes.

The possibilities of incorporating Paulo Freire's text and popular education concepts and activities to discuss social justice topics in a one-shot library instruction session focus on conscientization, or the process of developing a deep understanding of oppression. This deep understanding cannot be achieved in one library session. By focusing on the first two steps in a popular education process, students can begin to identify and analyze an issue. This introduction to conscientization can serve as an important first stage in the development of critical consciousness by students.

My personal process with critical consciousness and my engagement with community education projects have helped me develop as an educator, activist, and librarian. The collaborative and reflective nature of the popular education process informs my library instructional practices, which attempt to connect learning to issues that affect students and the communities they come from, engage students with the possibility of taking action against oppressive systems, and have students reflect on their educational experiences as part of their own conscientization-raising process. My commitment to social justice, taking a stand against injustices, and doing so in a loving and caring way is what I strive for and bring to library sessions and community education projects. It's a responsibility that we have as educators and community members to model what we want in our universities, local communities, and the world we live in.

Notes

1. Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, "A Dialogue with Paulo Freire," recorded 1988, Brecht Forum Archive, MP3 audio file, 97:22, <http://brechtforum.org/dialogue-paulo-freire>.
2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed., trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2000).
3. Eleonora Castaño Ferreira and João Paulo Castaño Ferreira, *Making Sense of the Media* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997).

4. Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (2008): 256–62, <http://scholar.uwindsor.ca/leddy-librarypub/23>.
5. Picture the Homeless website, accessed January 1, 2016, <http://picturethehomeless.org>.
6. Ferreira and Ferreira, *Making Sense of the Media*.

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