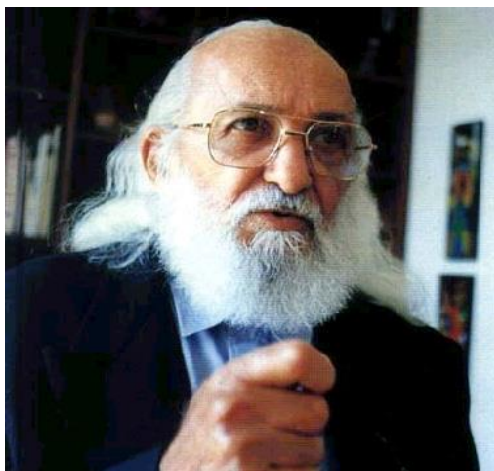


**Conscientização!** A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.



Master of Arts in Educating Adults Program

School for New Learning, DePaul University

Cohort #

### **Applied Inquiry Final Project**

**Conscientização!** A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

Area of Practice: Community-Based Learning

June 2018

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a reflective narrative of my personal journey of becoming an adult educator heavily influenced by the teaching principles of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. It documents my feelings about being an adult educator coming into the program and what I hoped to achieve. It is an in-depth self-reflection of myself as a popular educator and critical reflection of my practice in a popular education learning environment. I describe my learning about Freire and his popular education principles, the Social Reform Teaching Perspective, and how to facilitate adult learning in a way that 1) respects the learner and their prior experience; 2) enhances their critical thinking and critical reflection skills to change their ontological perspective; 3) equips them with tools to recognize and resist oppression and regain their humanity.

**Keywords:** Paulo Freire, popular education, praxis, social reform, humanization, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, banking of education, dialog, problem-posing

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## **Background**

I applied to graduate school to accomplish a life-long goal of getting a Master's degree. In the process of doing that, I also had hopes of facilitating learning to prepare marginalized and disenfranchised adults students to get jobs, better jobs, or go on to higher education. I articulated those hopes (see Appendix A) when I applied to the Master of Arts in Educating Adults (MAEA) program at DePaul University's School for New Learning in October of 2015. Now, two and a half years later, I have almost completed my graduate studies and feel that my initial goal and hopes have been realized.

I always thought of education as the great equalizer. In many ways, I believed that you could probably educate yourself *out of* or *into* anything you wanted. Education was supposed to be the way out for the marginalized and disenfranchised people in our society. But according to Rivera (2008), "education is generally held to be the primary means of social mobility, but those who lack a high school diploma are expected to work in 'any job,' which typically means low paying, service-sector jobs that will never lift them out of poverty ... one thing that is clear is that welfare policies continue to de-emphasize education." (p. 6). Being educated was supposed to keep you distanced from poverty, crime, homelessness, inadequate healthcare, and all the other societal ills that are common in poor communities. Not only did I learn that most of this is untrue, but I also learned that our systems – laws, education, politics, etc. – are not designed to help the poor improve their standard of living. In fact, according to Rivera (2008), "the majority of people see poverty as a 'private affair' whose causes are rooted in failed individuals, failed families, and moral degeneration rather than in a failed public economy and a discriminatory public policy" (p. 6).

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I came into this program with very strong feelings and long-held beliefs about politics, education, society, the American way, and even myself. Much of this changed when I took the first of my program's core courses – *Developing Professional Identity*. It was this course that allowed me to explore, identify and develop the adult educator that my degree would prepare me to be. We were asked to do a *Teaching Perspective Inventory* (TPI) to identify our foundational teaching perspective(s). Based on my limited prior knowledge, I assumed that mine would be the Developmental perspective (Pratt, 1998) because I had a strong interest in making sure learners had a deep *understanding* of new knowledge. However, when I took the TPI, it identified my main perspective as Social Reform with the Developmental perspective being second. Needless to say, I was surprised until I looked at what the Social Reform perspective was about.

Of course, as a person of color, I engaged in constant conversations about many of the elements that made up the Social Reform teaching perspective – I just never thought of those conversations as a way to organize myself (and certainly not my community) to act for social change. When I realized that this perspective even existed and that I could study it and use it to facilitate conscious awareness to adult learners, I was absolutely astounded. They would get a different perspective of their reality and possibly change it.

That is when I learned about the work of the Social Reform teaching perspective's major voice – Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. It was through reading Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) that I developed a new perspective on the realities of marginalized populations. I also saw an educational approach, which Freire referred to as *popular education*, to educating adult learners that I had never seen or heard of before. It was a way for them to recognize their oppression and regain their humanity from their oppressors. It

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was a way to respect them and their culture – a way to give them *voice*. Through this educational approach, they would gain a different perspective of their and their community's reality and possibly be motivated and inspired to take action to change that reality.

This was the beginning of my journey to becoming an adult educator with a focus on and passion for *educacion popular* (the Portuguese phrase for popular education) – a way to educate adults using their life experiences as the starting point; engaging participants in problem-posing instead of lecturing or problem solving; using dialog to build classroom community through reflection and action; co-teacher/co-learner learner centered learning environments; transformative and liberatory education; and education that is designed to disrupt the status quo (<https://www.thepraxisproject.org/>) -- and the teaching principles of Paulo Freire.

Join me here as I tell my story and that of some of the adult educators that I have met along my journey. I am eternally grateful to all of them – and to the legacy of Paulo Freire – for giving me the language of popular education, for the experience of becoming a popular education teacher, and the contributions they have made to enhance my journey.

## **Introduction**

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who taught poor adults in his country. He was possibly the most influential educator in the last half century. He believed that learners could use their life experiences to liberate themselves from the oppression they endured at the hands of those in power. Education was a tool by which they could develop their critical thinking skills through dialog and see their world as it really was. He wanted to give them tools to use to regain their humanity from their oppressors so they could become change agents in their communities. When I initially read his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), it was the first time that I had ever seen those ideas in a book. As an African American woman (thought of in

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the U.S. as a *double minority*) raised in the southern U.S. and reading Freire for the first time, I was captivated by his popular education ideology --

Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human... The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, ... This struggle is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a *given* destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed... being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so... the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both... the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well... The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves... Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both (Freire, 1970, p. 44).

hooks (1994) said “Paulo was one of the thinkers whose work gave me a language. He made me think deeply about construction of an identity in resistance” (p. 46). As I began to reflect on this, I realized that – because I had not ever read anything like Freire’s philosophy and I thought it was so profound, I too had a language to engage dialog with. I have had conversations with people, but never had the language, nor knowledge for that matter, to take those conversations to the next level. When engaging in dialog – “a process of learning and



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knowing” (p. 19) – according to Freire (1970), you must have “epistemological curiosity,” (p. 19) the unity of practice grounded in theory, otherwise it is ‘dialog as conversation.’ I did not have the valid knowledge that I needed to further the conversation.

I understand what Freire means when he says *dehumanization*; I understand what he means when he says *oppression*; and I understand what he means when he says *humanization*, it’s when you make the people in power respect you or at least give the appearance that they respect you. His words have given *me* the language and my graduate studies has given me the scaffolding to support my epistemological curiosity to effectively dialog with others.

Freire resonates very strongly with me because he speaks a truth about oppression that has been talked about before. For example, Malcolm X (1965) said “All of our people have the same goals, the same objective. That objective is freedom, justice, equality. All of us want recognition and respect as human beings” (p. 51). That is all that we want. Ironically, that has not changed over many, many years. In fact, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) said “Herein the longing of black men must have respect: the rich and bitter depth of their experience, ...” (p. 66). Yes, we all want the same thing and we still want the same thing – respect.

Freire did not want to see learners become victims of *hegemony*. Brookfield (2005) defines hegemony as “the process by which we learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us” (p. 93). All the years that I heard and saw things that ‘I just knew were not meant for *us*’ but we were told were not only **for** us but was also a **good** thing for us. So often, the poor are lured into a false sense of security, only to be led to believe that something is good for them, but in reality, find that it is not. By the time they figure it out, it is too late. That’s

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when I first saw the word *hegemony*. I was aware of the concept – but did not know that it actually had a name.

Freire wanted the masses to critically think about what they were told and not just accept it as truth. He called this the *banking of education* (Freire, 1970), i.e., when knowledge is poured into learners' heads and they accept it without question. Adult learners need to ask the question, *Why?* They need to be able to make meaning of new learning, without ambiguity (Taylor & Marienau, 2016). If they do not ask questions and critically assess what they are told or what they see, then they 'buy into' whatever those in power tell them and nothing changes. To this end, Baldwin (1963) writes "The paradox of education is precisely this – that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions (p. 1), ... It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person" (p. 4). I do think of myself as an educated person and will make it my great challenge to change society as much as I can – likely one person at a time.

The more I read about the Social Reform teaching perspective, and the work of Freire, the more committed I became to inspiring adult learners to action. But, how do learners act for social change when they have other priorities that are more pressing and closer to their reality? For example, being homeless (or about to be evicted from their apartment/house), being unemployed/under-employed, lack of adequate health care, lack of nutritional food options, crime/gangs affecting your family, clean and affordable housing options and any number of other major things that make up a person's reality. This was the overwhelming challenge that I saw as I pondered what I was learning.

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As I have gone through my graduate program, I have taken any number of classes that have fed into my passion for popular education as espoused by Paulo Freire.

### **The Course That Started It All**

When I took a class on *Educating for Social Justice*, I wondered what had happened to classroom management. It seemed as if my fellow students came to class and talked about whatever they wanted to, often without direction, for the entire class time. I remember thinking, “Gee, how am I going to learn anything in here?” Then, around the third class, the professor told us that the class was being conducted using popular education principles – where the teacher was a co-learner and the learners were co-teachers; learners would be respected for the experience they brought to the classroom; she would not exert any ‘power’ over us; we would have dialog and would discuss what was on our minds. As we progressed through that quarter, I saw a teacher using popular education principles and gained new respect for the way the class was being conducted. For example, if someone began talking about an incident involving racial injustice or police brutality that had happened in their community or was reported by the media, we engaged in dialogic sessions about the story. We discussed the power dynamics, disrespect, and in some cases inhumane treatment some of the victims received. As dialog continued, our critical thinking skills were being enhanced and we were able to see the themes that emerged from the dialog. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up! This approach was something I had never seen or experienced before.

One of the memorable phrases from the professor was *respect the knowledge in the room*. Freire (1998) said we must have “respect for what students know” and asked questions like --

Why not discuss with the students the concrete reality of their lives and that aggressive reality in which violence is permanent and where people are much

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more familiar with death than with life? Why not establish an “intimate” connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals? Why not discuss the implications, political and ideological, of the neglect of poor areas of the city by the constituted authorities? Are there class-related ethical questions that need to be looked at here? (p. 37)

Not only did that phrase become a very good reminder for me, but it also became my signature phrase with my colleagues in my cohort. They began to expect me to remind them that they **must** respect adult learners’ prior knowledge when we had discussions about the importance of adults’ prior knowledge and what they bring to the learning environment. I think it is easy to forget that adult learners are not like children – they have a lifetime of experiences to draw from and are often willing to share those experiences. Other learners can often learn from the shared experiences of their classmates.

### **A Man Named Myles**

We read about another popular educator and civil and labor rights activist, Myles Horton, who worked outside the established educational system at a grassroots level while Freire worked within the established educational and governmental systems. They are both highly educated men of faith and wanted to educate poor and working people but took different approaches. According to Horton, Kohl & Kohl (1998), Horton co-founded the Highlander Folk School (later named the Highlander Research and Education Center) in 1932 in Tennessee. It was initially founded in response to the industrialization of the southern U.S. Highlander would be a residential educational facility where union leaders could come together and be trained outside of formal educational institutions or government regulation.

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While Freire's earlier work was in mostly centered in Brazil and later became internationally known, Horton's work at Highlander was largely centered in Appalachia and the southern United States for over a half century. According to Horton, Kohl & Kohl (1998), "One of the most important elements of Highlander pedagogy is the recognition that the best teachers of poor and working people are the people themselves ... the goal is not reform or adjustment to an unjust society, but the transformation of society" (p. xx). Freire felt that the formal education system and the teachers within it needed to change their facilitation practices. He (Freire, 1970) wanted the poor to understand that they were oppressed and through that oppression, were dehumanized – "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49).

Through Highlander, Horton and his staff developed training and/or educational programs, at the request of organizations or former students, that lasted from a weekend to two weeks long at their facility. The group requesting the training would send attendees who would then go back to their organizations and train others. Freire (1970) wanted to make change in the way teachers interacted with their learners – he wanted a co-learner/co-teacher form of facilitation, "It is not our role to speak to the people about our view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialog with the people about their view and ours" (p. 96).

Highlander was not interested in dealing with individuals' problems; their focus was on problems that were of concern for groups of people. According to Horton, Kohl & Kohl (1998),

Highlander worked with people who were dealing with important issues.

Anything that one person can do alone is not worth doing when you're dealing

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with social problems...If the goal isn't something very difficult, all that people will learn to do is to tackle little problems. You can't develop any valuable leadership if you don't teach people that they can deal with big problems...At Highlander, we wanted people to deal with how to change society, not with smaller issues such as trying to get a street light, or a road closing sign installed.  
(p. 147)

In response to segregation in the south, Horton thought it was important to do something about racism (Horton, Kohl & Kohl (1998). They did not know how to tackle a social problem of its magnitude but decided to try and bring the two races together at their workshops and just let them talk. According to the King Institute at Stanford University, a young Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks, both working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), attended workshops at Highlander before the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. About four months after attending the workshop Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, which started the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/highlander-folk-school>

Another attendee at a workshop was Esau Jenkins, a Black entrepreneur who wanted to teach people to read so they could vote in South Carolina. He told how he would pick up domestic workers and try to teach them reading on their short bus ride to work, but there was not enough time. Highlander set up a program that would become known as the Citizenship Schools program and identified a teacher who, without any formal teaching experience, would use whatever she could find to teach others to read. The program grew and became very successful.

Highlander stepped away from programs they developed after they gained steam. That was the case with the Citizenship Schools. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. asked Horton if

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Highlander could develop an educational program for the SCLC. Since the Citizenship Schools program had become too large for Highlander and was the type of program that King had described, Horton told him that he would give him a program that was already established. After reviewing the program, its costs and other concerns, King accepted the program in 1962 and Highlander turned the Citizenship Schools program over to the SCLC and the program went on to train over 100,000 adults in basic literacy.

(<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/highlander-folk-school>).

Horton asked King to bring the keynote address at Highlander's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, which was attended by spies from the Georgia governor's office. During that event, according to Bell, Gaventa, & Peters (1990), "Pictures were taken of King, Horton, and others, turned into bill boards, and plastered around the south with the label, 'King at a Communist Training School'" (p. xxviii). This event catapulted King to the spotlight in the Civil Rights Movement and Horton emerged as the father of the movement through his efforts to empower Blacks in the South.

Like Freire was doing in Brazil, Horton was trying to increase literacy and raise the consciousness of the poor and working people of the southern United States. But, unlike Freire, he wanted to develop programs for others and let them run them. Highlander wanted to focus on the very large social issues, nothing on an individual level and nothing so small that one person could solve it by themselves. Freire wanted to increase literacy and raise consciousness through a changed educational system that respected learners and used dialogic, problem posing and co-teacher/co-learner facilitation principles.

Both Horton and Freire, through their empowerment efforts posed major threats to the power structures in their respective countries and were severely persecuted for it. According to

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Bell, Gaventa, & Peters (1990), following a governmental coup in Brazil in 1964, all rights were taken from members of the previous, including Freire. “He was arrested, jailed for 75 days and interrogated for 83 hours. The military government declared him an ‘international subversive, a traitor to Christ and to the people of Brazil besides being an absolute ignoramus and illiterate” (p. xxviii). Freire went into exile and emerged on the international stage as one of the most significant educators of his time.

Similarly, Highlander came under attack and according to Bell, Gaventa, & Peters (1990, “The Southern white power structure attempted to use the virulent anti-communist rhetoric of the McCarthy period to discredit Horton and the School” (p. xxviii). In 1951, the State of Tennessee raided Highlander and seized their assets and property. Horton renamed the school Highlander Research and Education Center and moved it first to Knoxville, then to its current home in New Market, Tennessee.

Although they had different approaches to popular education, they were two giants in education who respected each other professionally and admired each other personally.

### **Dorothy Stang Popular Education High School – My First Observation**

One of the requirements of the Social Justice Education class was to do an observation of an adult education setting. I was fortunate enough to select and be welcomed to a class at the Dorothy Stang Popular Education High School (referred to here as *DSHS*). The day that I observed the class was their last day of the semester in a literature class. The teacher began the class with a review of the previous week’s class meeting when they had a poetry workshop. They had discussed the poem, *To Roosevelt*, by the Nicaraguan modernistic poet Ruben Dario. The poem was Dario’s attempt to instill national and cultural pride in his countrymen. He wanted them to maintain connections to their heritage, culture, and native language. The learners were



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mostly Mexican and Central American immigrants, and most were bi-lingual. During the workshop, they had been asked to write poetry about their journey to America and the families they had to leave behind. The teacher asked for three volunteers to read their poems (see Appendix B).

After the readings, one of the learners said he would make sure that he kept his country alive in his home and in his heart. Then, a discussion began about being in this new country, America. There were reflections on the poems that the three volunteers had read – particularly *The False American Dream*. Many of the learners talked about how they had come here looking for opportunity, but once they got here, it was opportunity denied. I do not have words to describe how I felt when I heard that. As an African American, I understood exactly what they meant – but had never heard people of other ethnicities talk about it.

At the time of my observation, these learners had been in this popular education classroom for a whole semester. They had become accustomed to being respected, having their life experiences mean something, analyzing the power dynamics they had seen since coming to America, being in an environment of co-learners/co-teacher and other Freirean principles that were being applied in their classroom. It was evident by the way they spoke and the things they said.

They felt safe and were able to express their feelings openly without fear of reprisal. They were able to ask “Why?” They did not accept whatever they heard without critically analyzing it and coming to their own conclusions and realizations about how it impacted their realities. It was really eye-opening to see people that were not even from America understand that many things said by those in power were not completely true and needed to be questioned. I not only saw Freirean principles masterfully used by the teacher, but saw the learners not being

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victimized by the banking of education (Freire, 1970) – they were critically thinking about situations in their world and analyzing their meaning. They were looking at situations through a critically reflective lens and were able to see what was really going on.

I knew from this class observation that I wanted to learn as much as I could about Freire and his popular education principles. Again, I saw strong examples of how I might facilitate adult learning using some of them, namely dialog, problem-posing, co-teacher/co-learner, and dialog with critical reflection.

The Mission Statement of the Dorothy Stang Popular Education High School is:

To engage in a process of critical study that honors the authority of the participant through a curriculum that inspires and deepens knowledge and encourages moral and social responsibility and leads to a high school diploma.

The work done by this community of learners exemplified the Stang mission. They have asked “Why?” by challenging some of the hegemonic assumptions that have risen from their dialogic sessions. They had learned how to critically reflect on issues that impact their world and their view through this lens has changed their perspective. The ability to reflect will prove to be a powerful action as they go forward in their new awareness. Not only will they leave Stang with a high school diploma, but they also leave with a new way of looking at their world –

*Conscientização!*

Stang has accomplished its mission with that community of learners. There is not a current follow-up procedure in place to see what, if any, action for change took place after learners graduated. However, the goal of engaging learners in critical study – increasing awareness of their reality through critical reflection – was achieved and that, according to Freire (1970), is success – “Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as

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oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle” (p. 51).

### **My New Awareness**

I have always loved to read. To me, it was always the window to the world. I have never been particularly interested in travel, but enjoy living vicariously through travel stories in books, and the stories of relatives and friends who love traveling. I am sure that I will be a lifelong learner because practically every time I pick up a book, take a class or talk to someone, I learn something new. Reading is a way to learn about many things – you just don’t have the physical experience associated with different places and interacting with the people.

Many times, that’s how it was when I read books, articles and other materials for my classes. I had taken classes in the Liberal Learning phase of my graduate program and learned some things that could help adult learners and started becoming highly enlightened about just how crucial it was that they opened their eyes and scratched beneath the surface. They needed to get a grasp of what was really going on in their world. They needed to understand that what was happening with them was also likely happening to others in their communities.

I heard a phrase *compassion without ambition* (having compassion for the poor and doing things to help them – just to *help* them – with no strings attached and not expecting anything in return (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011). Of course, I learned that phrase in a class, *Values Effectiveness*, and it was one of the many phrases that will stay with me for a long time. There is a large amount of development and building going on in many poor communities in urban areas. Some of developers say the work is to help the poor, to build affordable housing, to decrease food deserts in those communities, etc. But, is that the real reason that the work is being done?

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Here is good example of needing to scratch beneath the surface and raise your level of consciousness. According to Freire (1970), the banking of education controls the thinking of the oppressed and inhibits their ability to see the reality of their world. He said,

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (p. 73)

The reality of the world they live in has been set up to keep them where they are, and as long as they look at that world through the lens created by the banking of education, they will not be able to see their world through a critical lens. If, on the other hand, they can reflect critically on their reality, they can regain their humanity from their oppressors and act to change their reality. According to Freire (1970):

The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves.’ Such transformation, of course, would undermine the oppressors’ purposes; hence their utilization of the banking of education to avoid the threat of student

*Conscientização.* (p. 74)

I also took a class on *Communicating for Outcomes*, where I learned that in as little as ten years, the person taking your order at a fast food carry-out drive through will likely be in another country (Paulson, 2013). The first thing that came to my mind was that many of those unemployed or under-employed poor people in this country will not be able to find suitable employment to support their families. Since many of our factories are closed, many of the jobs of

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the immediate future will be in the service industries, i.e., retailers, restaurants, etc. But even as I think about that, many of the brick and mortar retailers are closing and there is even more lost employment opportunity.

The new wave of employment opportunities seems to be on-line and many poor people do not have adequate computer skills or other necessary skill sets or levels of literacy to qualify for those jobs. Many of them have cell phones and are able to access the internet, but not necessarily able to do anything that would be required to enter or move up in the work force. For example, job seekers need develop a professional on-line profile, upload their resume, and search on-line job boards – but many marginalized people are not able to do this. This is a case of their lack of education holding them back. It can also be another way for employers to not hire them and it does not look – on the surface – like there is any bias that is being held against them. The companies could still post ads in the newspaper or just put up a sign saying, “We’re hiring.” What happens to the people who only know how to find a job by looking in the newspaper, checking for signs outside the business or word of mouth from a friend?

Everything I had read about Freire and how he had taught the poor made me think that I might be able to raise awareness through critical reflection and action, too. Adult learners need to be made aware of what’s happening, reflect on it and then act. Freire referred to this as *praxis* – action and reflection (Freire, 1970). I started thinking that if they were aware of what was really going on, they might be able to act to effect positive social change.

### **Raising Awareness as a Popular Educator**

During the next school year at DSHS, in their second semester, I was invited to teach an English class (spelling and vocabulary, specifically). Because of my observation experience with the school, I knew they used Freire’s popular education principles, however, since I still had

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not learned that much about them, I felt unprepared. I had been given the framework for the classes, i.e., mission statement, objectives, deliverables and requirements) but not a lesson plan, per se. I wanted my class to be encouraging as well as informative. I wanted the learners to feel valued and respected – emphasizing the importance of their prior experience. I invited them to participate in each class and contribute anything they thought would be useful to the rest of the class, including me.

I decided I would fall back on my experience in my *Educating for Social Justice* class, since it followed popular education principles. I began each class the same way – by asking the learners to tell us about one thing that had happened that week that they wanted to share. I then asked for three volunteers to read their responses. We dialoged with each other on the responses they had heard. I took copious notes of the themes and words that emerged. After about ten minutes, I asked the class to identify the themes that had emerged and wrote them on the bulletin board as they called them out. I never asked a specific person to do anything because they might get anxious. According to Taylor & Marienau (2016), “For many adults, being called on suddenly to answer a question or perform a task may trigger emotions more appropriate to a life-threatening situation than to learning. We may not only be anxious that we will not know the right answer or perform adequately; we may unconsciously be even more distressed that others might witness our vulnerability and failure” (p. 51). They were asked to take a sheet of paper and write the themes down, leaving room under each theme. I then asked them to say words (one by one) that either were used in the responses or could have been used. (I suggested words from my list when necessary). The learners were then asked to write those words on their paper under the appropriate theme. This was a spelling exercise and the papers were collected at end of the activity. I returned papers the next class – when words were spelled correctly, I said that.

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When they were misspelled, I gave the correct spelling and suggested they practice spelling the word aloud a few times. I also ended each class the same way – by asking learners to write a brief essay (about three sentences) about what they had learned during that evening's class.

The class engaged in dialog about the themes. One of the themes was healthcare or access to healthcare. For example, someone said that their daughter was stung by a bumblebee and they were not aware of an urgent care center in their community. This meant that they had to travel quite a distance to get care for their daughter. Others in the room began talking about services and resources that *were* available in the community that some of us were unaware of. This dialog led to everyone offering information and suggestions that were of immediate help to everyone in the room. During this session, I learned that the learners with children are generally more aware of community services and they also knew more about other things going on in the community.

Another theme that came up frequently was unemployment/underemployment. When it was a story of inadequate employment, there was usually someone that knew someone or an organization that could help. Some of the learners were entrepreneurs and had their own businesses. They exchanged information with fellow learners in the event that a job opportunity became available or if they knew someone that was recruiting.

I would then go to the bulletin board and write the present tense of a word from the themes and ask anyone to tell me the past tense of the word and to spell it out. I wrote it on the board in their spelling and asked someone to use the word in a sentence. The class was asked to write this past tense word on their paper and write the sentence down – but correct the word if they thought the spelling was incorrect or write it as presented if they thought it was correct. The last few minutes of the class were spent discussing what they would like to discuss in the following week's class.

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In the second part of the quarter, I started bringing in other elements to maintain learners' level of engagement and increase their learning which had actually been great up to that point. We had all had different experiences because of where we came from and where we were now. I wanted us to know more about each other and the things that made us who we were. According to Freire (2005), "our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live in is a task that the educational practice imposes on us: Without this we have no access to the way they think, so only with great difficulty can we perceive what and how they know" (p. 102).

In a class on a rainy evening, a learner wanted to talk about the stress brought on by the daily pressures that we all face and how to handle it. Everyone had comments about feeling powerless to improve conditions at work or home and were looking for good ways to cope. According to Freire (1970), when interviewing those he taught, he found that they were fearful of their boss and often took out their frustrations on those closest to them –

The peasant is a dependent. He can't say what he wants. Before he discovers his dependence, he suffers. He lets off steam at home, where he shouts at his children, beats them, and despairs. He complains about his wife and thinks everything is dreadful. He doesn't let off steam with the boss because he thinks the boss is a superior being. Lots of time, the peasant gives vent to his sorrows by drinking. (p. 65).

The discussion that followed evoked themes of relaxation, exercise, hobbies, and entertainment. Some learners were involved in exercise programs, sports or yoga; while others suggested hobbies and entertainment as good ways to reduce stress. A lot of the learners said



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they preferred to just relax by watching TV for a couple of hours, working on hobbies, or listening to, and in some cases playing, music at home or at their favorite bar. I told them about my love for arts and crafts - making things by hand. Music seemed to be the class favorite, so we began talking about how powerful music was and how it was a language that everybody seemed to understand. Some of the words from this discussion were musical genre, rhythm, pitch, and mindfulness. Learners were asked to write a three or four-line paragraph about their favorite music, artist(s), or song. Papers were collected at the end of the class.

Since so much of the class enjoyed music, this seemed like a good time to bring in some cultural influences through music. I identified two successful artists who were very active in the fight for social justice and used their voice to promote equality around the world. It seemed that the work and the stories of these two people would boost the spirits and bring some measure of hope to the learners.

I received my undergraduate degree from DePaul and receive quarterly mailings from the Alumni Association. I received a mailing that featured the Mexican-American entertainer and social activist Lila Downs in the fall of 2016. She had been selected to be the commencement speaker at the School for New Learning's graduation. When I saw this and read her story, I thought it would be inspiring to tell my class her story and let the class listen to some of her music.

The following week, I asked if they were familiar with her. Several said they were and most had not heard of her. One learner said he was very familiar with her music and knew she sang songs about revolution and injustice. I played her song *Balas y Chocolate* (Bullets of Chocolate) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7HRoqwdMZ4>) for the class. They said they really liked it and were going to download some of her music. Although she was not poor, some

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of the songs she sang were about revolution and in support of the poor. Her father was from Minnesota and was a professor at the University of Minnesota. Her mother was an Indian from Oaxaca, Mexico. Lila had a degree in voice and social anthropology from the University of Minnesota.

Most of the learners from Mexico were familiar with Oaxaca and knew that it was a poor region of Mexico. Downs had a strong connection to the place because her mother was from there. She had lived there and was very much aware of their struggles. The learning activity was spelling words that were related to revolution, i.e., conflict, battle, strife, hostilities, etc. Learners were asked to make up sentences using these words.

I had spent an entire semester working with this group of adult learners. We had shared joyous and poignant stories about our lives and, I believe, developed a certain kinship that I will cherish. I received a letter from one learner (see Appendix D) that almost brought me to tears! It spoke about how some of my words had been encouragement in her struggle. According to Freire (1970), “Dialog cannot exist, however, in the absence of profound love for the world and for people. (p. 89). I had tried to show love, humility and measures of my faith while working with these learners. I believe that through the type of dialog we had been able to maintain over this semester, we have formed a level of trust that has strengthened all of us.

At another class, I brought the music of Venezuelan conductor, Gustavo Dudamel, Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra. He is also a social activist and believes in music’s power to inspire, unite, and help children learn. He also believes that music can be a catalyst for learning, integration and social change. He was the first classical conductor invited to perform at a Super Bowl Half Time show (Super Bowl 50 in February of 2016) with Beyonce, Cold Play and Bruno Mars. When I asked if they were familiar

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with him, no one in the class knew who he was, but most of them knew many of the songs he had conducted, including the one I brought to class that night. It was Dudamel conducting Leonard Bernstein's *Mambo* (<http://www.classicfm.com/artists/gustavo-dudamel/guides/bernstein-mambo-simon-bolivar/>), from *West Side Story*, performed by the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra in Caracas, Venezuela in 2007. They all knew it and did not realize that it, as well as some of his other songs, were performed by an orchestra. The spelling exercise had words like orchestra, Philharmonic, Conductor, Aria, etc.

I devoted our final class together to encouragement because of discussions we had been having about dealing with the stresses of our daily lives. This was the last class before they would graduate with their high school diploma. We shared our dreams and goals for ourselves and our families. As we engaged, some came to tears as they talked about how they wanted so badly to succeed so their children would be motivated to try harder. I had made a keepsake key chain for each of them and passed them out. (To make the key chains, I found two encouraging quotes, turned them back to back, laminated them and punched a hole in one corner and put a key ring in it (see Appendix C). The quotes read:

On the front	On the back
Behind you, <i>all your memories.</i> Before you, <i>all your dreams.</i> Around you, <i>all who love you.</i> Within you, <i>all you need.</i> <i>Anonymous</i>	"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life." <i>Steve Jobs</i>

They seemed genuinely pleased with their little keepsakes. Many of them told me that no one had ever given them anything to encourage them or lift their spirits. I told them that life can

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be hard and that in spite of that, as long as you have life, you can have hope and with hope, you can be the best *you* can be. I shared my life mantra with them: *Never measure your failure by someone else's perceived success*. I told them that was my rule for life and I was giving it to them. They did not need to measure themselves against others because they didn't know what is behind the face that the other person showed on the outside.

I asked them to call out encouraging words (one person at a time) and everyone would write the words down. Then write a different word that meant the same thing (synonym). I collected the papers at the end of class. This was a vocabulary activity.

On this, our last class together, I realized a strong bond that had been formed. I am not sure if it was because of the Freirean principles I had tried to use during our time together – respecting them; using dialog to build critical thinking; building a collaborative learning environment; or encouraging them to ask “why.” My class went on to graduate – and get their high school diploma – in early December. I proudly attended and encouraged them one last time to pursue their dreams and remember, *don't measure your failure by someone else's perceived success*. One thing that I knew that day was that I and, I hope, my adult learners had been forever changed because of the experience.

My experiences with these learners had a transformative effect on me. I had not stopped to think about the types of issues that new immigrants have when they come to the U.S. generally, or in Chicago in particular. I not only gained new knowledge about the reality of their lives, their culture, their communities, and their home lands – but I gained new knowledge about *people*. They are just like me – trying to figure out how to make it from one day to the next without being mired in the oppressive forces that can sometimes be overwhelming. They had a strength that shone through in spite of what they are dealing with. They espoused the same

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values that I did – love of God and family – and find that through their struggles, those two things remain constant above all else.

I tried to facilitate a learning community where we learned about and respected each other's opinions. I was particularly careful not to try to impose my views and also to not let any one person try to dominate a discussion as a way to imposing their opinions. Freire said (1970) we cannot control what people think or how they feel about anything – “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialog with the people about their view and ours” (p. 96).

Our learning community was able to talk about anything they wanted to (one of the things I picked up from my *Educating for Social Justice* class). It was important that they knew the floor was theirs and their comments would be heard, valued, and respected. I encouraged everyone to *think* about issues in their world and talk those through with us. According to Freire (1970),

The important thing...is for people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades. Because this view of education starts with the conviction that it cannot present its own program but must search for the program dialogically with the people, it serves to introduce the pedagogy of the oppressed in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate. (p. 124).

I hope my facilitation with this learning community did that.

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### **Raising Awareness in the Classroom as Part of a Team**

My earlier experience at DSHS was unbelievable for me. I did not have a lot of experience working with adult learners but felt that at least knowing a few things about Freire was a good starting point. This year, I was invited back to DSHS to again teach English (again focusing on spelling and vocabulary). I agreed to return for a couple weeks and then I would work on my graduate project and perhaps return later. This time, they had teachers working in teams and I worked on a team with two other teachers.

One of my colleagues, Walter, was a teacher at a juvenile detention center here in Chicago and was a reading specialist. He began our class with a fifteen-minute writing assignment. The learners were asked to write about anything that had happened in their life recently that they wanted to share. The goal of this activity was to see the learners' writing skills. Papers were collected and reviewed. Walter would make copies of the papers that might have required spelling or grammatical changes and use them for examples to teach the following week's class. For example, we noticed that a few students used lower case letters when writing the names of cities or other proper nouns. Usage of capital letters would be a part of the learning in the next class. No papers were graded and very few comments were written on papers.

The class was scheduled to last one and a half hours. After the writing session, I and the other teacher, Jean, engaged the learners in a session on resume writing. I asked the question, "how many of you have a resume?" After a show of hands, we talked about why you would need a resume. After a good discussion involving almost everyone in the room, we then asked them to name important elements of a resume. They all knew the components that were normally found on a resume. We then talked about the different resume components and why they were important. For example, someone suggested contact information. We discussed each of the

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components in contact information, i.e., name, address, telephone number, email address, etc.

and what to avoid when giving this information. For example, the importance of using a professional email address like [jane.doe@gmail.com](mailto:jane.doe@gmail.com).

The last few minutes of the class were devoted to the ideas for discussions for the next class. We and the learners made suggestions and asked learners to raise their hands in support of the discussion topic they were interested in. The one with the most hands would be next week's topic of discussion.

## **Classroom Observation**

### **Jane & Sue – A Class Observation**

I observed a class, *Education for Action*, led by long-time co-teachers Jane and Sue. Jane began the class and told the learners two very important things: “There will be no grading of papers. This is more about sharing of ideas – more co-teacher/co-learner. We tell you what we think, and you tell us what you think. We want to thank you for sharing your thoughts.”

While Jane engaged the learners in conversation, Sue was writing on the bulletin board and moving around the room passing out handouts and offering additional commentary to statements that Jane made. Everything Jane said began with the English version, then she would translate it to Spanish and repeat it. She was beginning where the learners were without asking who did and did not speak English. I think the learners recognized that and appreciated it. They were not required to disclose their proficiency with speaking English.

Sue told the class that their learning would begin with their life experience. One way that they would learn would be through writing which would give them a different way of looking at things – you learn as you write.

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She assigned a free-writing, in-class activity – asking learners to write about a time when they had a learning experience with others. They were asked to write, without worrying about grammar or spelling, for about fifteen minutes. It was more about collaborative and peer learning. As I watched the learners, I was struck by the rather interesting dichotomy that I saw developing. Some of the learners seemed to begin writing very enthusiastically, while others seemed completely uninterested. Those who appeared uninterested talked during the assignment. I was not sure if they were talking about the assignment or not.

When the time was up, Jane told the class that there was no correct way to write their story. It was their life experience and was written in a way that was comfortable for them. Sue said that using Freirean principles to use their life experiences to teach others that they come into contact with. Sue then passed out two handouts on Freirean principles (see Appendices E and Appendix F).

Learners were asked to form small group of three to four persons for a collaboration activity. They were asked to write about a time when they worked with others. After about ten minutes, learners were asked about the important characteristics that emerged from their discussions on working with others. Some of the characteristics they mentioned were:

- learning from each other
- put our experiences together
- collaborate and respect everyone's opinions
- different people bring different strengths
- non-judgmental

These elements were written on the bulletin board as called out. While Jane wrote on the board, she and Sue entered into dialog with the learners. They began to develop a list of themes



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that were emerging from the learners' characteristics about working collaboratively, i.e., together, each other, respect, difference, listening, etc.

## **Profiles of Popular Education Teachers**

I have met some very dedicated popular education teachers and reconnected with one from my earlier experience. Here, I present some of their stories and work in popular education classrooms.

### **Mary - A popular educator who learned from Freire**

Mary is a school administrator with many years' experience as a popular education teacher. She even attended several workshops conducted by Freire and was anxious to use some of his principles when facilitating adult learning. She has established, and in some cases operated, popular education programs for adults in several Latino and African American communities on Chicago's north side.

Mary's facilitation of popular education focuses on "interrogating power through reflections on student experiences. We will continue to explore power. We will look at global power as well as race and gender – we'll absolutely talk about social privilege." They dialog about how the law and the economy were formed and try to analyze them based on their power and competition. "I give them codes like *The American Dream* or *democracy and capitalism* and ask them to decode. The economic system is what shapes the democratic system." Other key qualities of popular education used in her classroom are:

- developing the critical ability to understand social reality
- understanding power – who it does and does not benefit
- the outcome is that people begin to believe in their own authority/agency and have also gained skills in being collaborators and know how to build communities
- Ethical – understanding the world and being responsible for the community itself

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- Developing critical consciousness – analyzing the world and their place in it

### **Olive – The language is still the same**

Olive is a high school math teacher from Spain. She has been in Chicago teaching Mexican adults in a literacy program and English as a Second Language (ESL) for two years. New to popular education, she focuses on trying “to make education significant by beginning with learners’ experiences and doing things to bring out the richness that comes from that experience.” She fills her classrooms with Mexican images, telenovelas, and artifacts to build a level of familiarity and community among the learners.

Even though they all speak Spanish, they sometimes have a problem understanding each other. They speak different dialects of Spanish – theirs from Mexico and hers from Spain. To compensate for that, using words they all understand and the images in the room, then have dialog about the challenges associated with not speaking English while living in this country. Themes that arise are their level of literacy; and knowing how and where to get information. This dialog allows the learning community to exchange information and resources, as well as to share experiences they have had.

### **Matt – a Popular Education Scholar**

Matt is a Chicago-based popular education teacher with many years’ experience teaching both youths and adults. He was raised in Latin America and often returns there to do volunteer workshops using popular education principles. He studied popular education while doing his doctoral dissertation. He has also run a non-profit, *Play For Peace*, in twenty countries around the world.

Matt focuses his classrooms carefully on popular education principles. Dialogically, they analyze social issues such as racism, classism, sexism - their origins and how to stand up to

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them; construct knowledge by communicating and critically reflecting; look at power imbalance; identify qualities that honor people's voice and helps them discover the real causes of social conditions. "Paulo Freire sought to find out the generative themes for a group of people. Educators should find out what those themes are. What were students' thoughts and feelings (reflections) related to the real world?"

No matter what form his facilitation takes, Matt strives to make sure it always includes three elements to help build self-esteem and confidence: *autonomy* - control of their own behavior; *relatedness* - being part of social group bigger than themselves where they contribute and fit in the group (this helps them get a voice and empowers them); and *competence* – their ability to achieve/accomplish. "They are ultimately responsible for their lives, but when you give them opportunities to talk about their generative themes, you honor their autonomy – respect their ability to construct knowledge rather than just give them knowledge."

### **Profile Reflections**

These profiles show how popular education teachers are using Freire's principles to facilitate adult learning. They feel it is important that the learners get a good foundational awareness about the U.S. power and class structures and how they can deal with them. Understanding these systems make their oppression clear and give them the agency and confidence to work to change them. Matt thinks that "popular education as a way to *see* people's oppression. Popular education is a way to help adults understand that and take action."

They do not use the *banking of education* method. Critical reflection, through dialog, is a big part of the facilitation used by these teachers. According to Matt, he always "honors them as autonomous adults. That's rewarding – they're not having things poured into their heads. It helps them become agents of change. People expect banking of education, but don't get it. They

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may not be used to that, it's new to them and they don't have to memorize anything. They feel like respected, self-determined adults."

Freire (1970) talked a lot about having respect and love for the learners. These educators showed love and respect for their learners through their facilitation. They were co-learners and their learners were co-teachers in the classrooms. Learners' opinions were respected and listened to. According to Mary "They may not quote Freire, but they know for sure that something is happening that's different. They're scared to come back to school when they're older. They come into a situation where they are respected and encouraged to share things about themselves. It's a learning experience for both teachers and students – learning to collaborate."

## **Coursework on Educating Adults**

### **Facilitating Adult Learning**

As I progressed through my graduate program, it seemed that every class I took helped me to get a better understanding of the Social Reform teaching perspective and Paulo Freire. The course, *Facilitating Adult Learning*, not only gave me many tools to use when facilitating adult learning, but also gave me psychological food for thought. For instance, we watched a short movie, *The Pygmalion Effect*, that gave me new respect for the power of words. So many times, people think the most important thing about words is *how* they are said. However, I think *what* is said may be equally as – or maybe even more – important. The movie shows how people do better when they are encouraged to do better and praised. However, when they are told that they will not do well, they do not do well!

As I watched the film, I remembered bell hook's story (1994) of moving from an all-Black school after school integration was introduced in the South in the 1960's. Prior to integration, when she went to her school she was able, through ideas, to become anyone she wanted to. She

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was encouraged by her teachers and considered school “a place of ecstasy – pleasure and danger” (p. 3). That all changed when she had to go to an integrated school –

Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority. When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. Now, we were mainly taught by white teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school. (p. 3)

As I sat watching the movie and thinking about her experience, I saw how fragile hope can be and how easily it can be lost for oppressed people and now understood why she lost interest. The scaffolding that is gained from a supportive environment is invaluable and without it, many people sink into a state of apathy and completely lose interest.

The goal of that course was to teach us how to facilitate to adult learners and, in addition to all of the tools we were given, I think this might have been one of its most important lessons – your words are extremely powerful and can impact those you teach in powerful ways.

### **Enhancing Practice with Theory in Adult Learning**

In addition to other courses I have taken throughout my program, one that heavily influenced the shape of my project was *Enhancing Practice with Theory in Adult Learning*. This course helped me to identify and understand the theories behind educating adults as well as how and why these theories benefitted adult learners. I had identified my preferred teaching

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perspective in earlier courses and was able to get a really clear understanding of how they impacted adult learning. These major themes emerged from that course: Conscientização! Spring into Action (Social Reform Teaching Perspective); Education: The Way out of Oppression or the Way to Maintain the Status Quo; Using Critical Thinking to Foster Self-Motivation and Self-Empowerment; and the Humanism Learning Theory.

## **Themes**

### **Conscientização! Spring into Action (Social Reform Teaching Perspective)**

The Social Reform perspective (Pratt, 1998) has Paulo Freire as its main voice through his teachings and his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). He went on to develop the term popular education (or, the Portuguese, *educacion popular*) (Glowacki-Dudka, et al, 2017). This perspective offers adult learners an opportunity to re-evaluate their reality and look it from a totally different perspective. As they become more aware of how those in power control their education, laws, politics, etc. – in essence, their lives – they began to realize that they need to act. They need to change the conversation and begin to bring about social change against the injustices and inequality that plagues their communities.

According to Freire (1970), when learners are given an opportunity to think critically and re-assess their assumptions, they will be inspired to take action to improve their lives. They will begin to realize that many of their life circumstances are not their fault and cannot be blamed on their unwillingness or inability to help themselves. They will come to understand that there are many embedded systemic biases are preventing them from improving their personal and community situation.

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### **Education: The Way Out of Oppression or the Way to Maintain the Status Quo**

Critical Theory looks at social conditions and inequitable power dynamics based on race, gender, class, age, etc. (Brookfield, 2005). One of its most important concepts is the *hegemony*, first written about by Italian political economist Antonio Gramsci, and defined as “the process by which we learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end up harming us and working to support the interests of others who have power over us” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 93). Although I felt that this was the case, I never knew that there was a name for it. I need to make adult learners aware of this. They need to think about what they are told and not just blindly accept it.

Education has been said to be the way out of poverty for many poor and marginalized populations. It opens doors of opportunities for getting jobs that have a higher pay rate and for on-the-job promotions to better paying jobs. However, this is not always true. According to Rivera (2008), many welfare reform policies in this country are designed to keep poor recipients marginalized. The less education a worker has, the more profit a company is able to make, i.e., they not only get to pay this worker a lower hourly rate of pay, but they also get federal tax incentives for hiring these workers.

Many hegemonic assumptions are embedded in the policies and curriculum in our schools. (Woodson, 1933). For example, when peoples of color have gone to colleges and universities, they are taught from curriculum that people of their race are inferior. They are encouraged to not go back to their communities to help because their neighbors could pick themselves up and become a success if they wanted to.

In many schools, students of color were not encouraged to learn because their very learning could mean a possible affront to the authority of the dominant class (hooks, 1994). This

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was one of the by-products of integration of schools after the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's.

### **Using Critical Thinking to Foster Self-Motivation and Self-Empowerment**

Social Reform Perspective supports challenging oppressive structures in our society. Freire, through his work with poor farmers in Brazil, encouraged them to think critically about what they were being told and challenge the assumptions that were presented as truths (Freire, 1970). He spoke against *banking of education*, where information is deposited into the head of learners without them critically thinking about it. He believed that if learners thought critically about what they were being told, it would be the impetus for them to rise up and take action to change their life conditions.

Critical thinking skills are essential to help adult learners identify and question the assumptions that they beliefs are based on; be able to research the epistemology and determine the validity of those assumptions; with the new information, look at those assumptions from different points of view and finally take actions based on the more informed assumptions. (Brookfield, 2012, 1987).

I had heard the terms critical thinking, social justice' and 'social reform' but had never thought of them as ways of educating adult learners. However, once I began investigating the literature, I found these three phrases were often prominent in the writing of many scholars who were also interested in raising the consciousness of adult learners. These scholars also wrote about critical theory, critical race theory, feminist theory, motivating the adult learner, and other elements of social reform that were simply fascinating. I was amazed that someone had studied oppression and ways to rise above it through bringing your awareness of it to your conscious mind. As I said before, I have sit around and had discussions about a lot of oppression and social



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reform, but I guess we had not taken those conversations far enough because we did not get to a point of action. Now, when I talk to some of the people I previously had these conversations with, I let them know that there is a way.

### **Humanism Learning Theory**

Humanism focuses on the development of the adult learner as a person. It takes the whole life of the person into consideration, i.e., “body, mind, and spirit, and the potential of humans for growth and development” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 29). Humanism psychologist Abraham Maslow developed his *Hierarchy of Needs* as a visual representation of how adult learners have to have their basic needs met before they can begin to reach their full potential. Once those basic human needs, i.e., physiological, safety, love and belongings, and esteem – the learner can then go on to reaching their highest potential, or self-actualization (Merriman & Bierema, 2014).

Three adult learning models that align with this theory are andragogy, self-directed learning, and transformative learning and are discussed below:

Andragogy, or a model of assumptions about adult learning, was initially introduced by German educator Alexander Kapp in 1833, and further developed and by American adult educator Malcolm Knowles in 1980. Through his research, Knowles identified five assumptions about adult learners and how they learn (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). These assumptions are the foundation of andragogy and say that as adults mature, they:

- Become less dependent and more self-directed in their learning,
- Accumulate life experience - providing a good base of knowledge to build on,
- Are ready to learn when the learning is relevant to their lives – socially or professionally,
- Have an immediate problem that new learning will help them solve or address,

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- Are motivated by internal factors, personal to them, more than external factors,
- Need to know why they need to learn what is being taught.

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) takes place when the adult learner begins to take responsibility for their learning and was written about extensively by Knowles and others (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Adult learners are responsible for making decisions about their lives on a daily basis.

They can use that same process with their self-directed learning. It is a process that is best achieved when woven into the life context of the learner. They develop a sense of agency and decide not only what, when and where they want to learn, but also how. (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). In addition to other gains made by adult learners, SDL also allows the adult learner to:

- Develop critical thinking, reflective practice, and problem-solving skills,
- Build self-confidence, self-discipline, and independence with new learning,
- Take responsibility for self-managing themselves and making sure they have time to complete their learning.

Transformative Learning is learning which changes the adult learner's perspectives and actions.

These changes can easily be recognized by the learner as well as those observing his/her actions.

Jack Mezirow identified the characteristics involved when transformative learning takes place (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168).

- A disorienting dilemma
- Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
- A critical assessment of epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions
- Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
- Planning of a course of action

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- Acquisition of knowledge and skills from implementing one's plans
- Provisional trying on of new roles
- Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

### **Reflective Observations**

My journey has been fascinating and left me with new respect for adult learners, those that teach them, as well as those that conduct research to offer suggestions for better practice. I commend them all for their commitment to approaching the learning environment with an open mind, a grateful heart, much respect, and boundless curiosity.

In the classroom observations, I saw skilled popular education teachers engaging learners dialogically to get to the generative themes that were a part of their reality. For example, in one class, there were a number of themes that came out of learner dialog about working collaboratively with others. Themes of working together, respecting others, respecting differences, listening, etc. emerged from those discussions. Upon getting these themes, the teachers were able to discuss with learners the importance of collaborative learning.

In another class, the power dynamics in this country took center stage. Learners, recent immigrants, had been asked to write a poem about their American experience at that point since arriving here. There were a number of learners that challenged the hegemonic ideals about some of the components that make up the *American Dream*, i.e., equal opportunity for all, economic equality for all, people could send their children to college, etc. A dialog session followed and learners were asked to think about the generative themes that had emerged. There was another

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discussion about power in America – What is power? Who has it? Who does not? Learners began asking questions and the process of critical reflection began.

It was interesting to see that the teachers all found ways to work with the learners starting where they were. Some teachers spoke both English and Spanish in their classrooms. Some focused on developing their writing skills, while others began with developing critical thinking skills and figuring out how to scratch beneath the surface to see the reality of their world and the world around them.

I heard a lot about power dynamics, the imbalance of power, and the construction of knowledge. A couple of the long-time popular educators had various ways of engaging learners that they had developed over the years. For example, one teacher said that they “interrogate power” in her classroom – this involves discussion about the law, politics and other systems of power in the U.S. She opens the discussion with information on the power structures, trying not to show personal bias or support, so the learners can critique them.

Another teacher created activities to help his learners construct knowledge by communicating together, talking and dialoguing, and critically reflecting. When learners reflect on experiences, their learning is reinforced. It is important for learners to reflect – it gives them an opportunity to examine how they feel about an experience, what the impact of the experience was, and what they might do differently if they had to do it over.

It has been very encouraging and enlightening to see Freire’s popular education principles in action in the classroom, as well as when interviewing educators that I did not get the opportunity to observe. It is my hope that they will have continued success and maintain their commitment to the many adult learners who are currently benefitting, and those who have benefitted in the past, from their work. It is my further hope that future adult learners who have a

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desire to learn and rise above the oppression they may be living in will have an opportunity to work with some of those dedicated teachers that have been inspired by the wonderful work of Paulo Freire.

### **Final Reflections on Popular Education**

My journey continues. I have learned a lot but have much more to learn. My work and study experiences over the past couple years will be invaluable as I facilitate future adult learning. I feel really fortunate to have had this experience.

After honestly reflecting on my journey, and the project of writing this paper, I have discovered several elements in my thinking that I plan to change in order to effectively facilitate adult learning using Freirean principles. These are some of the pitfalls I need to avoid in the future:

- The learner does not need me to *help* them learn. They need me to facilitate dialog sessions where they can collaborate, share their ideas, and speak their minds.
- The learning community should be one of co-learner/co-teacher. I have to be more aware of what *I* am learning.
- I do not feel that I am an expert but do think that I know best in some situations. I must not impose my opinions.
- From my coursework, I must remember that these are adults and they not only come with a wealth of knowledge, but also prior experiences.

In addition to the pitfalls listed above, given everything that I have learned about popular education over the past two years, I think the biggest challenges for me will be:

- Non-prescribed curriculum. Always remembering that the learning environment is learner centered and that dictates class discussion.

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### **Final Reflections on Popular Education (cont'd)**

- In meeting learners where they are, I need to learn to speak Spanish because I might work with Spanish speaking learners in the future.
- Using popular education principles in an academic learning environment. The subject gets in the way.
- The level of *authority* the teacher has in the popular education classroom.

In my future popular education practice, I would like to work in informal community settings. My purpose would be learners' increased awareness which would promote critical reflection about their reality. The intention would be their scratching beneath the surface and recognizing hegemony when it is present.

Some of the things that I would like to specifically use with the learning community would be:

- Use codes more to allow greater generative theme development.
- Use examples of relevant current events to foster dialog and its resulting critical thinking and reflection.
- Use more problem posing to foster more critical reflection.
- Find ways to use more technology to enhance dialog.
- When possible and practical, bring in guests who learners might enjoy to joining in dialog with.

It is my great hope to develop into a popular educator with the humility, understanding and teaching ability of Freire himself.

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## **Appendix A. Graduate Program Application – Essay Questions**

October 13, 2015

Graduate Program Application – Essay Questions

- A. Why are you interested in pursuing graduate study within the MAEA Program? (Please briefly explain your choice of this particular graduate program.)

I am interested in pursuing a graduate degree in Educating Adults because I believe that education is often the great equalizer. It presents many possibilities and opportunities that would not be available otherwise. The business arena is rapidly changing, and many adults will require substantial retraining in order to effectively compete for available jobs and perform required duties once they have them. I would like to help the marginalized and disenfranchised members of our communities reach a place of sustainable self-support.

This degree will prepare me to develop educational programs that can provide the foundation for lifelong learning as well as motivation, encouragement, and the vision to help adult students improve their personal circumstances and become a success. My personal motto is *“Do not judge your failure by someone else’s perceived success,”* and I would like to share it with adult students to help them understand that they can be their own picture of success. Many people do not believe they can be as successful as others in our society. I would like to help adult students realize that they, too, can learn and be successful, if they are willing to work hard and not be afraid to ask for help if they need it. I would like to be that beacon of light, and perhaps hope, to those adults that are interested in improving their personal circumstances through education.

- B. What area of practice--relevant to educating adults--do you plan to pursue? (Please briefly explain what this area is.)

My Focus Area in my undergraduate program here at the School for New Learning (SNL) is Community Relations and Development. I believe that I would like to pursue opportunities at the community level through service agencies or community colleges. It is important that adult learners in the community believe that they can become well-educated, support their families and become productive members of society. I would like to reach these students where they are and help them develop new skill sets that will help them to succeed in the business world. In addition to particular job skills, they will also need well-defined critical thinking and writing skills to articulate their ideas in the workplace.

## **Appendix A. Graduate Program Application – Essay Questions (cont’d)**

**Conscientização!** A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

Another area that I would be interested in is corporate training. I have been conducting computer software training for my colleagues for the past year. I would also like to develop training courses and materials for adult students. I have begun developing a computer software training manual for our office and am certain that my learning in the MAEA program will prepare me to design a very effective product. There are many adults who require retraining in order to retain their employment. Many organizations offer training and/or retraining to their employees. I would like to get a solid foundation of knowledge on teaching adults and designing and developing appropriate curriculum tailored for the adult learner.

- C. What experience do you bring to this area of study? (Please describe your background pertaining to educating adults.)

I have always had a passion for teaching adults skills that would help them support themselves financially. Over the years, I have developed a number of classes for adults in various needle crafts and designed curriculum for classes lasting from one week up to six weeks. I have taught adult classes at Michael's Arts and Craft stores on beadwork (using Indian seed beads); jewelry making; knitting, crocheting and needlepoint; and pricing and selling your work. I developed and taught adult and teenage sewing, knitting and crocheting classes as well as the class on pricing and selling your work at my church and at a community center. I have also conducted several computer software training classes at work.

There were two takeaways from all of those classes: 1) the students could not believe *they* were actually making items that looked as if they purchased them in a store and 2) they were encouraged, and had developed confidence, to pursue other learning – in some cases, they decided to return to school to pursue higher education. A number of the students said that since they could learn to do the crafts, they might be able to study and learn in school. Naturally, my immediate response is “of course you can study in school and learn. You just have to apply yourself and you’ll be able to do anything you want.” I believe people just want someone to encourage them and to present information to them in the way that *they* learn. I would like have a mental toolkit, acquired through my studies in the MAEA program, to use to educate adults so that they will really benefit from the teaching.

- D. What work or volunteer site do you propose to use to apply learning from the Program while you are enrolled?

I have been assigned the project of attending professional computer training classes off-site and then conducting those same classes for my co-workers upon my return. I am also developing a computer software training manual as a training tool for current and incoming staff. My current position provides many opportunities to develop curriculum and teach adults. My studies in the MAEA program would help me develop my skills in assessment, design and evaluation.

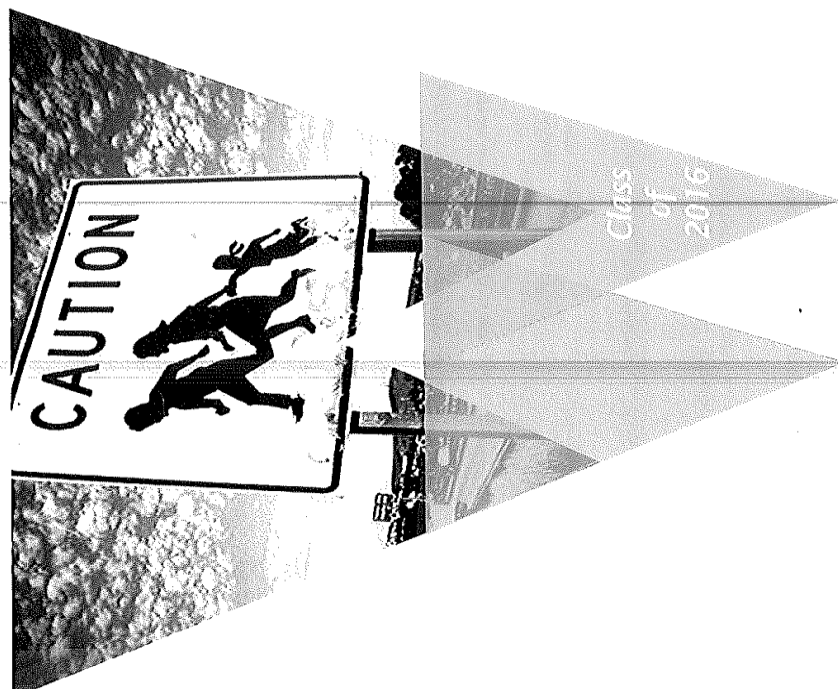
**Appendix A. Graduate Program Application – Essay Questions (cont'd)**

**Conscientização!** A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

I still volunteer at my church when I can. I am a member of the Scholarship Committee and conduct classes to our graduating high school seniors on preparing for college, i.e., completing college applications, applying for scholarships, requesting reference letters and responding to and meeting posted deadlines. I am also a member of our Senior Club and have taught classes to our senior citizens on how to use a computer, cell phone features including texting, and how to locate and identify necessary city services. These classes are generally one two-hour session. I will continue to conduct these classes when my schedule permits.

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## Appendix B. The Immigrant Road: Dorothy Stang HS Poems.



### The Immigrant Road:

Dorothy Stang HS Poems

#### INTRODUCTION

This year, Juan Felipe Herrera, the first Latino US Poet Laureate, said, "it's beautiful to be migrants, because migrants are trailblazers and pioneers... We can tell the stories of our family and write them, and give them a second voice, a voice that lives forever". These poems of and by immigrants reveal the immigrant road, a road of travail and courage, of dreams and disappointments. A road invisible to most Americans. These poems record that danger road.

Herrera has said that immigrants are "following family networks and trails...but somewhere along the line we became illegal aliens, and we don't accept that". Targeting immigrants and refugees is, Herrera says, distressing because "our 500 year penance was not long enough".

Here are the stories of trailblazers and pioneers.

Renny Golden  
September, 2016

Dorothy Stang Popular Education Adult High School would like to thank The Resurrection Project for their support and generosity and for printing our poetry booklets.

Special thanks to DSHS teacher Swapna Joseph for her photography and booklet design and to DSHS Administrator Elizabeth de la Ossa for production of the project.

## Appendix B (Cont'd)

### THE FALSE AMERICAN DREAM

I was 14 when I began  
my journey to el norte  
I saw the sky crying  
like my parents' tears when I left.  
I was naive and irreverent.  
I arrived at the border.  
The wind howled.

The migra lurked.  
And in the paws of death,  
with luck, I crossed the desert.  
Beneath flashes of stars,  
aware of ricocheted bullets,  
and flying steel.  
bird-helicopters  
wanting to truncate my path.

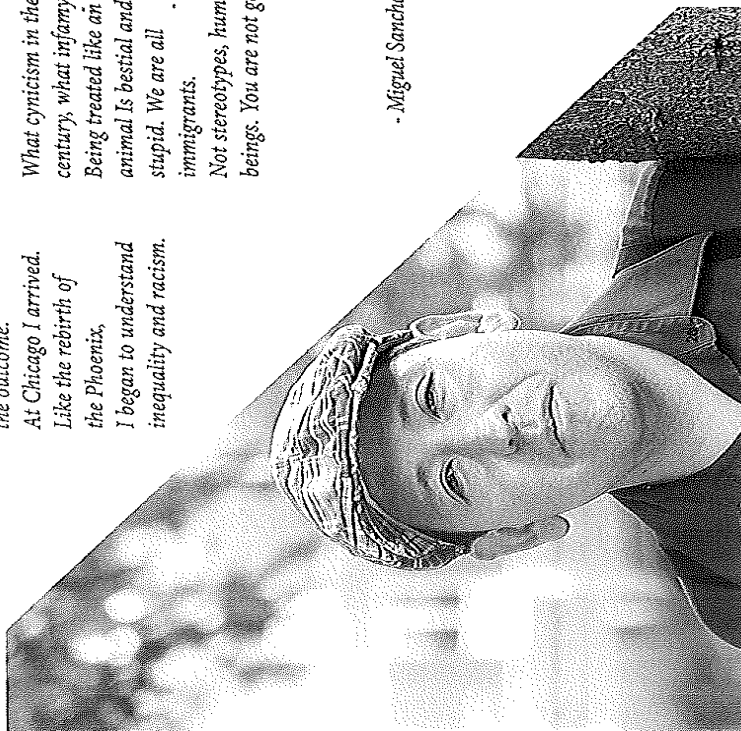
Singing crickets gave  
me comfort.

From Sonora to Arizona  
seeing the bones of the  
deceased is heartbreaking.  
Through darkness and enigma  
with faith and fear  
I kept going not knowing  
the outcome.

At Chicago I arrived.  
Like the rebirth of  
the Phoenix,  
I began to understand  
inequality and racism.

What cynicism in the 21st  
century, what infamy.  
Being treated like an  
animal is bestial and  
stupid. We are all  
immigrants.  
Not stereotypes, human  
beings. You are not god.

- Miguel Sanchez



### LOOKING FOR DREAMS

1992

I left Guanajuato looking for dreams  
praying to God  
to guide me to my destiny.

Getting to the border in the morning  
my mind was full of doubts.

My heart felt so lonely

I almost started crying

because at the border

I had my first leg cramp.

We reached San Diego at dawn,  
left the migra behind.

Getting to Los Angeles  
with my leg almost broken

because of twenty people in the minivan,

I was lying in the back  
with a lot of people on top of me.

Took me a month to  
arrive to Chicago.

It was in the fall.

I looked at the Sears Tower and

I started my dream for my family  
guiding my daughters to school,  
feeling they will succeed.

And now it is my turn.

I call my dream education.

- Juvenal Centeno



05

"MY HEART FELT

SO LONELY I

ALMOST STARTED

CRYING"



# Consientização! A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

## Appendix B (Cont'd)

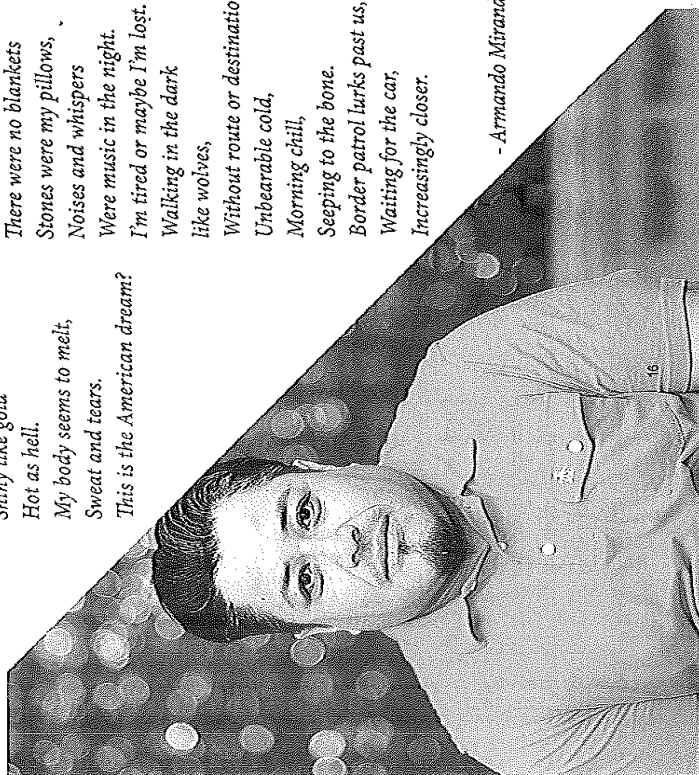
### WHEN I SAID BYE TO MY FAMILY

Hard to say bye  
Leaving everything behind  
Heart broken  
Shedding tears  
Begin the journey  
Memories in my head.  
Trying to go back,  
Already too late.  
Continue the journey  
These are not vacations.  
Strangers on the road  
And towns I didn't know.  
To reach the border.

Time to cross the border,  
Waiting for border patrol to  
switch the shift.  
Time is up  
Run fast, don't stop  
Be guided by the moon,  
Hide in the bushes.  
Walk and walk  
Sunny day,  
Shiny like gold  
Hot as hell.  
My body seems to melt,  
Sweat and tears.  
This is the American dream?

Questions and more  
questions in my mind  
Where is my bed in this desert  
of snakes and coyotes?  
The dark night covers me.  
There were no blankets  
Stones were my pillows,  
Noises and whispers  
Were music in the night.  
I'm tired or maybe I'm lost.  
Walking in the dark  
like wolves,  
Without route or destination.  
Unbearable cold,  
Morning chill,  
Sleeping to the bone.  
Border patrol lurks past us,  
Waiting for the car,  
Increasingly closer.

- Armando Miranda



16

### STILL FIGHTING FOR MY DREAMS

Born in Mexico, Guerrero,  
a town called Huerta Grande  
My father went to the U.S at the age of 17.  
In a couple of years he came for my mother.  
We were young my brothers and I.  
We lived with our grandparents.  
We were poor but happy at all times.  
My parents came back after 3 years for us  
from youngest to oldest.  
I was only five but I remember we walked in  
the desert for a few hours.  
Thanks to GOD we made it.  
Living the dream.  
It's hard but not impossible.

- Esteban Ortega



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## Appendix B (Cont'd)

TERESITA'S JOURNEY	IMMIGRATION
<p>For love she followed him Carrying new life inside her Carrying his dream for their future</p> <p>She left behind her dreams She left behind her family She left behind her friends</p> <p>To live a life of fear Hoping not to be discovered Dreaming of the return back home And seeing that dream farther away each sunrise</p> <p>She is a warrior of life Standing by her family Who she sees shine everyday Even if hers is in shadows</p> <p>Over 37 yrs have gone by Not once has she returned With the hope of staying home. Her hair started to turn white Those beautiful eyes look tired They still hold deep inside The hope of one day To never leave again the land That saw her leave.</p>	<p><b>"SHE IS A WARRIOR OF LIFE. STANDING BY HER FAMILY"</b></p> <p><i>It was a cold dark night the dessert was lit by stars. Luiz sat on a rock and thought of all he left behind. "He picked up a handful of dry hot sand, as it slid thru his sweaty fingers he couldn't help but feel sad and empty. Tears ran down his face at the thoughts of his mom's gleaming brown eyes and big smile.</i></p> <p><i>A long journey thru the desert to Chicago, where his uncle anxiously awaited. At that moment a feeling of different emotions rushed thru him like a bolt of lightning He thought, no matter what he would walk, the 3 nights and 3 days even if with only a gallon of water.</i></p>
<p><i>I must continue not only for me but for my family Luiz felt his legs like jello from exertion. He asked to rest but no one answered, only the silence of night. Luiz reached in his pocket in search for something to kill the hunger but found only a button and a worn out note. He opened it and it said, "My precious child I love you and will never leave you. During your trials and testing when you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you".</i></p> <p>- Ana Palacios</p>	 <p>-Elizabeth Lopez</p>

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**Appendix C. Keepsake Key Ring That I Made for My Class at DSHS**



**Conscientização!** A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

Appendix D. A Letter from Elida.

Oct-18-2016  
Hi Ms. [REDACTED] I am [REDACTED] I just want to let you know that today day you leave one beautiful mark in my heart, because the words you said today about as or any body struggling to survive in order to get better, you words blow love to my deep part of my heart. You just said ~~some~~ some words, that I think the whole world deserve or should here your speech that you told us today.

My Wish for you is blessingblessingblessing from god to you.  
[REDACTED]

You helped me to see the brightneess of my burned fire inside me. 😊

I wish I will heard this words from my Mother.

**Conscientização!** A Narrative Reflection of how I became an adult educator with a focus on and passion for popular education and the teachings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

## Appendix E. Six Principles and Practices of (Freirean) Popular Education

### Six Principles and Practices of (Freirean) Popular Education

(Adapted from The Praxis Project "Six Key Freirean Principles")

#### Principles

<p>① Education is always political; it is never neutral</p> <p>Education can be designed to maintain the status quo by imposing on the people the values and culture of the dominant class</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Education can be designed to liberate people, helping them to become critical, creative, free, active, and to determine their own values and culture.</p>	<p>② Popular education is education for transformation, for liberation</p> <p>Popular educators believe that education should work to transform the quality of each person's life, the environment, the community, the whole society. Education for liberation is not an individualistic academic exercise, but a dynamic process in which education and action are interwoven.</p>
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#### Classroom Content and Roles

<p>③ Content comes from the participants/students</p> <p>People will engage with those issues about which they have strong feelings and to which they can relate from their experiences. Education that starts by identifying the issues which participants speak about with excitement, hope, fear or anger will have greater success in reaching people.</p>	<p>④ Equal roles in the process of dialogue</p> <p>The teacher does not have all the answers; the students do not have only questions. Each person has different questions and answers based on their own experiences. To learn critically and discover valid solutions to shared problems, everyone needs to be both a learner and a teacher. Education becomes a mutual learning process.</p>
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#### Classroom Practices

<p>⑤ Problem-posing and creative education</p> <p>Participants/students are thinking, creative people with the capacity for action. A teacher can help participants learn by providing a framework for thinking and creativity. By posing questions instead of lecturing, by supporting creative acts like story-telling, the teacher engages the participants in learning in an active way</p>	<p>⑥ Building a classroom community through reflection and action</p> <p>By continually engaging in a cycle of exploration, reflection and action, the classroom can come together as a community, celebrate their successes, analyze critically their learning experiences and group process - and use this information to take action on how to continue learning together. This allows a group to become more capable of effectively transforming their daily life.</p>
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## Appendix F. Principles of Freirean Popular Education



### Principles of Freirean popular education

(derived from *Problem-Posing at Work: Popular Educator's Guide*, Nina Wallerstein and Elsa Auerbach, 2005)

- Education is never neutral. It always has a value, a position, a politics.
- Popular education is education for the masses, for the marginalized and oppressed sectors of society
- Popular education for the masses, resists and challenges the existing social forces – including mainstream education -- that aim to keep the masses, “el pueblo,” passive.
- The purpose of education should be human liberation.
- Education contributes to human liberation to the extent that people reflect upon themselves and their condition in the world – the world in which they find themselves.
- To the extent that people become more conscious of their condition and role in the world, they will insert themselves as subjects into their own history.
- Learning should be an active, not a passive process.
- To be a popular educator means above all to have faith in the people, to believe in the possibility that the people can create, understand, critique, and change things.
- Studying is a form of reinventing, recreating, rewriting. This is a task for a subject, not an object, of learning.
- Popular education should be a dialogical process in which everyone participates as co-learners.
- The goal of dialogue is critical thinking (consciousness raising; conscientización) and action.
- Critical thinking (consciousness raising; conscientización) starts from perceiving the root causes of one's place in society, and continues with analyzing the interaction of our personal lives within these socioeconomic, political, cultural, and historical contexts.
- Critical thinking (consciousness raising; conscientización) continues beyond perception, towards the actions and decisions people make to shape and gain control over their lives. This includes developing an understanding of the barriers to, and supports for, change.
- Knowledge evolves from the continual interaction and cycles of reflection and action. This cycle is known as praxis.
- Knowledge occurs when human beings participate in a transforming act.
- Forms of popular education (small writing groups, problem-posing circles, action research groups, etc.) all entail a group process that draws on personal experience to create social connectedness and mutual responsibility for change.
- Through popular education, the content of learning comes from the students' (the writers', the community researchers' or organizers') lives, which are situated within the larger historical, political, and social context.
- As participants engage in the praxis of popular education, they become increasingly responsible for the structure of learning as well.