

ID 096: Popular Education at/as Work

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Abstract

Drawing on working lives of popular educators who are striving for socio-economic and ecological justice, we demonstrate how popular education is a form of care-work which is feminised, often undervalued and unrecognised as highly skilled work. It is relational work that aims to forge solidarity with communities and the environment. Given the state of the planet, the radical transformations that are needed, and the future projection of 'work' as including the care economy in large measure, we argue that popular education is a generative site for further exploration of research into work and learning. However, to move popular education as work from the margins means to rethink the current system of value. Addressing the contradiction that undervalues work for life / living, popular education engages transformative action motivated by a deep sense of solidarity and a focus on imagining alternatives as an act of hope.

Start of a day for Nonkululeko, popular educator, environmental activist, mother

It's still dark, when Nonkululeko is walking along the busy road past the big new mall that has mushroomed out of a wetland. The traders lost their livelihoods when they built the mall and she misses the morning aroma of grilled chicken and mielies¹. Instead, the smell of sewerage seeping from the mall assaults her nose. She has already reported this sewerage to the municipality twice, and alerted them to small children playing in it and getting sick. Nothing has been done.

In the distance, an abandoned mine dump catches the rising sun. Nonkululeko thinks about her colleague, Bulelwa, who works in that area, teaching people about the dangers of the coal dust, and organising awareness campaigns. Yesterday, Bulelwa told her that the mines had offered her a job, again. This happens often as a strategy to entice activists away from their commitments.

Nonkululeko wonders about the upcoming meeting. Transport to get there is expensive and she hopes this meeting will not be another waste of time: last week, a provincial minister from the government addressed them and talked and talked without even asking about their local problems. People sang protest songs and chased him away. In preparation for that meeting they had spent two days learning about air and water pollution. Thabo had taken them on a transect walk and they took photographs of the stream of acid mine drainage feeding into the wetland. Nonkululeko had shown them a film about coal mine pollution and they had a long discussion about why this happens; they talked about whose interests are served and who the main beneficiaries are from mining. Finally, Bulelwa had facilitated a role play in which they rehearsed how to address the minister with difficult questions and arguments for clean-up operations. They wanted their new knowledge to lead to direct action for change.

1 South African word for corn

Introduction

Nonkululeko's life echoes that of many popular educator-activists. In other places, popular educators perform plays about stigmatised infectious diseases, women set up programmes in 'war zones' to keep children safe, others support the establishment of alternative economic activity. Much of their work emerges as they respond to immediate needs while keeping in mind the longer-term outlook; while they engage locally, they deal with the effects of global capitalism. When done well, their work is invisible as movements take hold of the struggles and speak up and out through their actions; yet, from the dangerous environmental pollutants to the anger of people in power whose interests are being challenged², from the insecurity of personal finances to the high expectations of people they work with, their work is high-risk and difficult - not least, because it aims at transformation as it mobilises and galvanises solidarity action against a system that benefits the few.

In this paper we are responding, in part, to Willis, McKenzie & Harris' (2009, p. 1) suggestion that policies, systems, programmes are failing 'to adapt to the changing nature of work and society and are thereby missing a crucial opportunity to enable the growth of more sustainable and equitable communities'. Instead of looking at work in the context of the formal economy, here, we focus on work undertaken in the interstices of societies. We argue that the activities of popular educators constitute highly skilled care work that can be deeply transformative. Their 'training' is often on site, involving a long process of apprenticeship through collective action with more experienced popular educator-activists.

We will first address our research approach, then outline the conceptual framework with a discussion of 'popular education' as a distinct approach to (adult) education, characterised by a radical belief in social justice. Next, we elaborate our understanding of work as oriented towards creating and supporting life. We do so by drawing on the sustainable livelihoods perspective and literature around 'care work'. We then elaborate popular education as work with examples of popular education as/at work. We focus particularly on that aspect of work which 'forges solidarity' which, we argue, makes the work of popular educators transformative. We close with an argument for why we believe understanding the work of popular educators-activists, with its focus on building solidarity and its explicit outlook towards alternative futures is relevant within the contemporary researching work and learning frame.

Research approach

This paper builds on our individual and collective involvements over several years as popular educators and scholar-activists. More specifically, we draw on our involvement in a research and publishing process which culminated in the recently published book *Forging solidarity: Popular education at work* (A. Von Kotze & Walters, 2017). Over an eighteen-month period, 26 popular educator-activists from eight countries participated actively in the co-creation of the book through two writing workshops, a public seminar and supported, collaborative and individual writing of chapters. The book is part of an ongoing research project that began in 2014, *Remembering Traditions of Popular Education in South Africa*.³

2 Globally, environmental activists are murdered every week, and many disappear without trace. In this year alone, by August 2017, 117 have been killed (Umanu, Evans, & Brown, 2017). In Latin America, many of these are women who work as full-time activists and educators for the survival of their households, communities and the environment on which all depend.

3 The research is supported by the South African based National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). The research is located at the University of Western Cape, and works across universities and civil society organisations. The project aims to uncover and recover forgotten traditions of popular education that generate knowledge within oppositional social movements and other civil society organisations. See www.populareducation.co.za for further

Animating the book's narratives of popular educators at work was a two-fold question: in what ways are popular educators in the 'south', and particularly in South Africa, responding to various economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions? And in so doing, are they planting seeds of hope for and imaginings of alternative futures which can connect individuals and communities locally and globally to achieve economic, ecological and social justice?

Conceptual framework

What and Why of popular education

Popular education thrives in times of heightened socio-economic and political contestation and in opposition to poverty, racism, misogyny, war, and climate injustice, amongst others. This is precisely when social activists, artists and popular educators respond with creativity and decisiveness to re-create connection and solidarity. The work of social activists, artists and popular educators is an essential, but often forgotten, part of the ecology of work and learning.

Popular education has come to mean different things to different people⁴. We concur with Martin (1999, p. 4) who argues that popular education is 'rooted in the interests, aspirations and struggles of ordinary people', 'is overtly political and critical of the status quo' and committed to 'progressive social and political change'. It is both a theory and a practice of social action, underpinned by the following key principles:

- Socio-ecological justice, both in process and in proposed outcomes;
- Grounding in the daily social, economic, political and cultural reality of people whose experiences throw up the questions and contradictions they wish to examine and reflect on in order to change them;
- Dialogue: all participants engage in dialogue and analysis and in the process develop their 'voice' to 'speak up and out';
- Action and reflection – what Freire called 'praxis'

Popular education is not about identifying skills deficits in order to better prepare individuals for the marketplace but rather, it seeks to draw on the collective knowledge and experiences of life's struggles and activism, on historical understandings, in order to develop coherent theory and practice to challenge the individualised, commodified, socio-economic world. Here, economics is part of the lived realities of, what Hart (2002, p. 199) calls 'the viewpoint of the 'survivors' of the war against subsistence'.

Popular educators see as one of their most important challenges engaging people critically with the ideas and analyses of power that shape everyday reality in unequal, uncaring and unjust ways. Understanding this is the basis for joining a struggle to resist and effect change. The difficulty begins with making visible what appears as normal and natural, then surfacing and naming interests and powers that shape and maintain those conditions. Structural and systems change require collective struggle. The learning that occurs in struggle may alter people's understanding fundamentally, as they experience their own agency and collective power in affecting change.

background information.

4 Definitions of popular education range from employing participatory methods for individual development, often referred to as 'empowerment', to acting as part of overtly political anti-capitalist projects (Astrid von Kotze, Walters, & Lockett, 2016). Increasingly, as Liam Kane (1999, p. 56) lamented, 'it has been reduced to a de-politicised, if not outright reactionary technicism in which "popular" simply means that the target group is the poorest sector'.

Furthermore, Cullors and Ross (2017), two of the founders of #blacklivesmatter, reflect on how being part of a movement that challenges oppression builds a sense of hope and belonging amongst the youth involved in the movement.

Forging Solidarity

The vignette of Nonkululeko describes the work of popular education as work that builds solidarity and nurtures hope through imagining alternative futures. Forging Solidarity: Popular Education at Work offers an array of examples where ‘forging solidarity’ is the primary focus of the education. Many of the chapters reveal practices as conscious efforts to build more collective political praxis in contrast to the dominant ideology of competitive individualism.

Solidarity has many possible meanings and can be idealised because, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2012, p. 46) suggests, it has been appropriated, diluted or substituted with concepts such as ‘social capital’ and ‘social cohesion’. Kip (2016, p. 318) concurs: as a result of the tensions among different interpretations, invocations of solidarity ‘...have been marked by ambiguity; descriptive and prescriptive aspects blur together’. We agree with Waterman (in Landy, Darcy, & Gutiérrez, 2014) that ‘solidarity is a relationship forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression’. Thus, what enables solidarity is a sense of common resistance. Explaining the collaboration between theatre groups in India and Palestine Deshpande (2017, p. 119) articulates clearly that solidarity has nothing to do with charity or aid, nor is it an erasure of complicity. Rather, solidarity is a reaction to a condition which afflicts certain ‘others’ independently of their personal or social character. When we see our fate in the fate of the other the reciprocal relation acknowledges ‘the possibility that one is or could be confronted with the same situation as the other, it means that his (sic) fate affects me in a significant way’ (Grieves & Clark, 2015, p. 293).

However, solidarity cannot be simply declared - as a political relationship it has to be created. This may involve, for example, taking an ‘inventory’ of who we are in relation to others, at a particular point. It means entering into an ongoing dialogue and negotiation that is mindful of power differentials and common or disparate purposes. This ‘forging’ process involves the preparedness to give (up) and be open to re-moulding as part of a solidarity grouping. This is a slow, sometimes painful, but also energising process that involves careful strategising, patient mobilising, critical engaging, and active experimenting; nowadays combined with savvy media campaigns. Robins (2014) calls this ‘slow activism’: he shows how media focus on extreme forms of brutality, the politics of the barricades that often reflect the very violence that is to be rejected. Everyday oppression and suffering is not newsworthy; the structural conditions that lead to a protest do not make headlines. Education and learning are crucial parts of the slow, often invisible work of mobilising and organising, so that participants understand the causes of suffering as structural violence rather than individual deficits. What builds collective power, says activist Zackie Achmat, is the work you do before a protest: ‘the leafleting, the poster work, the house meetings, the mobilisation that you do in the community, the media [briefing] leading up to it, the media posting that reinforces it, and the day-to-day work in the community’ (cited in Robins, 2014, p. 100).

Work for Living

A livelihood approach to work is people-centred: it acknowledges and values mutuality and interdependence and hence is oriented towards the collective. It focuses particularly on all the diverse activities necessary for daily living, including building relationships, caring for others, and mobilising for action (Von Kotze, 2009). Here

work is ‘work that is expended in the creation, re-creation and maintenance of immediate life’ (Bennholdt-Thomsen & Mies, 1999, p. 20).

The care economy builds on conceptualisations of work for living (not a living). In a recent lecture, Ghosh (2017 September, 7) elaborates that ‘care work’ concerns everything that helps others to function - it’s primarily relational work that is essential to the functioning of families, communities and society as a whole. Because care work is highly gendered and involves emotional labour, there is a capacity for overwork and exploitation. While it is often highly skilled and precarious, this is seldom taken into account. It is work that refuses to polarise ecological and social well-being and therefore includes the work required for deep sustainability that is just and democratic in the face of changing socio-ecological systems.

Care work has a contradictory position with respect to the mainstream economy: it is central to the ‘apparent’ functionality of the capitalist system, however, it is marginalised in capitalist logic of value. It can therefore be referred to as an externalised cost: as with the exploitation of natural resources, care work is barely recognised in its contribution to the economy. We argue that it is this contradiction in the idea of work that popular education confronts at multiple levels. This makes it transformative, as we illustrate below.

Popular educators at work

Nonkululeko’s environmental justice activism has many of the characteristics of care work as described by Ghosh. She is both ‘the Earth’s comrade’ (Burt & Lusithi, 2017) and a caretaker for her family and community. Her work is grounded in daily, socio-economic, ecological, political and cultural realities of people and it is deeply relational. She sends out a strong signal that care work is not just about concern for a messed-up present but the creation of an-other future. She is working to raise the consciousness of community members about the degradation of the environment, its causes, its effects on health and livelihoods as well as nature, with hope that there is another way to live - yet ‘officially’ she exists, at most, as part of the statistics of the unemployed (and unemployable).

Nonkululeko is an organiser and an educator. From the short vignette above we can glean that she has multiple and diverse capabilities. Given the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) of environmental degradation, her knowledge and social practices are crucially important. The environmental crisis is directly linked to the current economic system where humans and the earth are little more than resources for a market, and a political system that props up this market, whose sole logic is based on the criteria of efficiency to maximise growth. Here, suggests de Sousa Santos (2006), only the criterion of efficiency is seen to have any value. Environmental justice activists who are struggling for food security and access to clean water and energy are needed in their droves to reveal this slow violence, as well as have courage and agency to imagine different livelihoods based on a value of caring for ourselves and the earth. Nonkululeko works long hours against many odds in solidarity with members of the community, and her family; yet she is most probably viewed by many in the formal economy as ‘unskilled’. Importantly, her knowledge emerges from the struggles she engages in and is nurtured directly through precipitating and responding to particular challenges within specific contexts and power relations. Her practices show the ability to adapt and innovate, negotiate and support, where necessary, in response to rapidly emerging new conditions and needs. She demonstrates what Chambers (2017, p. 153) has demanded, namely:

More and more we have to think, live, work, and learn in and through the paradigm of complexity, adopting and adapting its words and concepts, values and principles, methods and procedures,

behaviours and attitudes, relationships and mindsets. This means countering and transcending much current practice. The new professionalism of practice has to combine knowing better with doing better.

Grandma Jane, introduced to us by Makan (2017, p. 95) who tells of the struggles in Blikkiesdorp (meaning 'tin can town' in Afrikaans), is another activist. She lives in an emergency housing site on the outskirts of Cape Town which, began with forced removals for the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa. Rows and rows of one-room tin houses stretch as far as the eyes can see, past the glare of sun on tin, and not a tree in sight. Grandma Jane is a leader in the Joint Committee, an organisation fighting for decent housing. Years after the World Cup residents have limited police security and feel unsafe where unemployed youth are increasingly recruited into gangs, gender-based violence is rife, dysfunctional sanitation systems and compromised health are the norm.

Struggles in Blikkiesdorp escalated in 2015 when residents were told that Cape Town International Airport planned to build a new runway and the residents of Blikkiesdorp might have to move. The questions arose: where were they to be moved now, would it be more or less decent, and why was their move only in response to infrastructural development demands? Grandma Jane invited a local activist organisation, Right2Know, to support the building of leadership capacity in the Joint Committee. Through Right2Know they met with other activists, learnt how to structure press releases and participate critically in the environmental impact study for the proposed airport development. The collective decided on a process of engagement with all stakeholders, moving methodically up the decision-making ladder until they got the answers from the local municipality with respect to their future.

Just like Nonkululeko, Grandma Jane is an organiser and educator. In the process of struggle she and the committee learnt the value of sharing technical information so that it becomes useful knowledge for local people, and to use such knowledge in negotiations with powerful officials and interests. This process resonates with Freire's (1972) argument that knowledge is a dialogical act; a political act of knowing (Makan, 2017, p. 103). Grandma Jane's story also highlights the solidarity that is possible between educators and activists from different geographical and social class locations where everyone is learning 'on the job' through a slow process of listening deeply and compassionately, learning from others' perspectives, and producing meaning, together. Solidarity, here, is expressed as a social justice NGO accompanies community-based educators and activists, with each bringing their expertise and experience, working dialogically as political allies in the interests of greater socio-economic and ecological justice.

Pulling threads together

The vignettes of Nonkululeko and Grandma Jane show that popular education is work for dignity, for justice, for living even if it is largely unrecognised as work and mostly unpaid.

We suggest that this work can be seen as part of the care economy: 'Care is the pillar of the well-being economy', run by all the caretakers, such as parents, garbage collectors and environmentalists (Fioramonti, 2017, p. 208). Ironically, much of this work is undertaken by those who can least afford to expend time and energy on education and activism, yet are driven by a deep and firm belief in the interdependence of people and the environment and the conviction that they must lead actions to confront the abuse and exploitation, the violence and destruction, for the sake of all our survival.

Ghosh (2017), argues that much of the work in the future will be within the care economy. This raises major issues for the future of work and society. It also emphasises the importance of trying to understand more deeply

what ‘work and learning’ mean within the care economy, particularly that which is concerned with socio-ecological justice.

‘Future work’ is another arena of popular education as work that is transformative. Activist educators kindle anticipatory hope, imagining different ways of organising and being together. As de Sousa Santos (2006) argues, in the face of capitalism’s rejection of alternatives it is more important to affirm the possibility of alternatives than to define them. Part of activists’ responsibility is to light the fire of resistance to injustices and to keep it burning. For this, they require an ever-evolving idea of what that alternative might look like. Gorz (1980, p. 4) asked: Will it be ‘a capitalism adapted to ecological constraints; or a social, economic, and cultural revolution that abolishes the constraints of capitalism and, in so doing, establishes a new relationship between the individual and society and between people and nature?’ There are many ways of imagining radically different futures. Gorz (1980, p. 8) projected a wishful picture of people spending no more than 20% of their time in necessary employment, spending the rest in constructing their world. Popular education is arguably stronger in critical analysis and collective struggle against the status-quo, than the work of imagining and future-building. Utopia is not a place and time, but a process of becoming – we make the road by walking.

Popular Education as/at Work?

In summary, we argue two main points. Firstly, that popular education is a form of work that is highly skilled but undervalued and rarely recognised and remunerated. The essence of this work is relational, it is revealing as transformational praxis; as a form of education it is about learning for living and not only for upskilling to make a living and it is work that nurtures hope by keeping alive an ever-evolving yearning for alternative futures.

Secondly, we argue that given the state of the planet, the radical socio-economic-ecological transformations that are needed and the future projection of ‘work’ as including the care economy in large measure, popular education is a generative site for further exploration of research into work and learning. We have argued that the work of popular education is not widely acknowledged. However, to move popular education work from the ‘margins’ means to rethink the current system of value. Through addressing the contradiction that is the undervaluing of work for life, popular education implies transformative action that comes with care work that is motivated by a deep sense of solidarity and a focus on imagining alternatives as an act of hope. The transformational nature of this work mirrors back onto other categories of work and asks, how does this work contribute to living? It implies that care work is embraced by all as citizens of the planet not just those who are bearing the cost of the de-humanising effects of capitalism.

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