

# The House of Popular Education

Theory  
Practice  
Practice

A  
Just,  
Humane and  
Truly Democratic Society

Brainstorm

Social dramas

Problem Tree

Priorities Matrix

Theater

Icebreakers

Games

Songs and Poems

Simulations

Discussions, Dialogues

Structured Debates

We value the integrated development of people and communities.

The construction of knowledge is a collective process.

Popular Education is part of a continual process of action and organizing.

Education empowers communities to resolve problems and transform their reality.

Education should be active, fun and participatory!

Education should teach us to criticize, question and always look for the "why" of the way things are.

In Popular Education, we begin from the knowledge, the stories and experiences of the people.

We are all learners and teachers.

Popular Education seeks the transformation of unjust systems in society and in educational spaces themselves.

In order to learn and to share, we should feel comfortable.

**POPULAR EDUCATION**  
**EDUCATION for SOCIAL CHANGE**

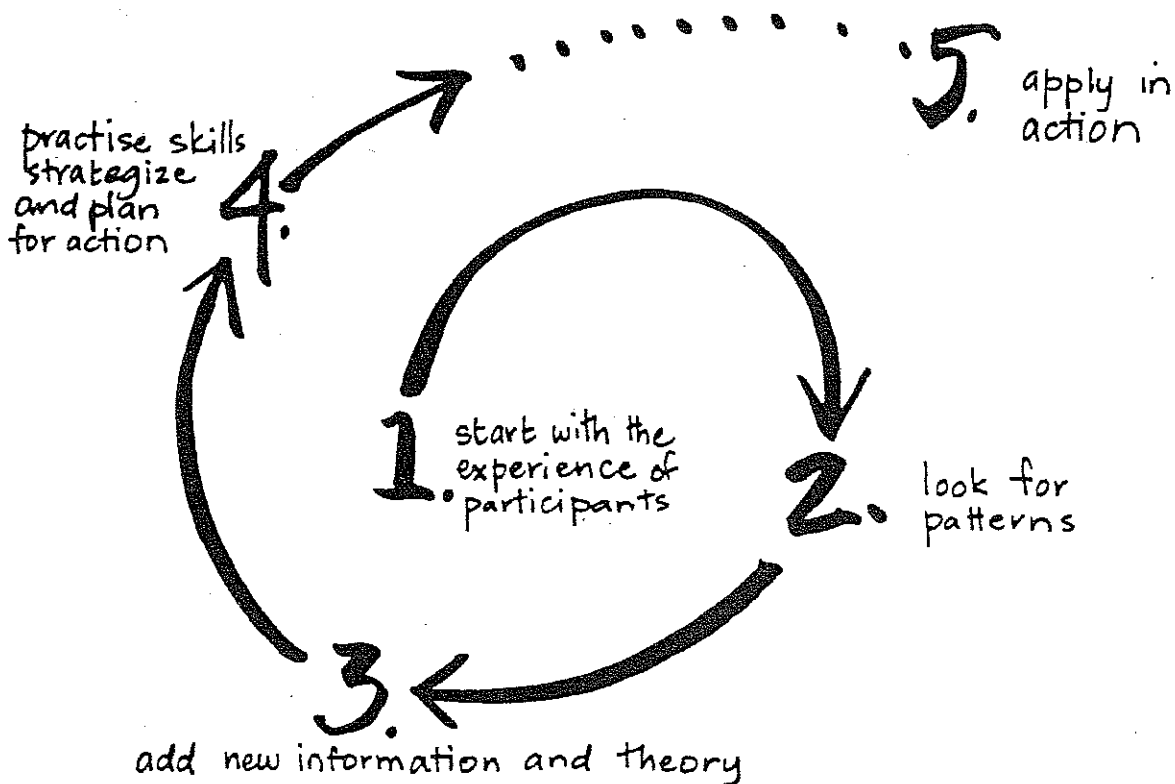
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Principles, Practices, Getting Started

From: Educating for a Change

In planning for a workshop together, three of us pooled our own best attempts at design models. We came up with one we call "the spiral model", which we now use in our work.

### The spiral model



This model suggests that:

1. learning begins with the experience or knowledge of participants;
2. after participants have shared their experience, they look for patterns or analyse that experience (what are the commonalities and what are the differences?);
3. to avoid being limited by the knowledge and experience of people in the room, we also collectively add or create new information or theory;
4. participants need to try on what they've learned: to practise new skills, to make strategies and plan for action;
5. afterwards, back in their organizations and daily work, participants apply in action what they've learned in the workshop.

An extension of this model is that later participants return to share the experience for further assessment and critique, and perhaps work to revise the strategies – moving through the cycle again.

What happens when we compare the assumptions in the spiral model with those in the expert model?

- ◇ The spiral model values not only the knowledge and experience of the outside expert, but also – and even more – the knowledge and experience of the participants.
- ◇ In the spiral model everyone teaches and everyone learns in a collective process of creating new knowledge, rather than only the teacher teaching and the students learning using the expert model.
- ◇ In the spiral model, education leads to action for social change, rather than to the maintenance and reproduction of the status quo.

### Why we find the spiral model useful

#### ◆ The spiral model helps us work with creative tensions.

##### a) tension between practice and theory

We began designing and facilitating education programs by the seat of our pants. It was only in reflecting on our own education practice that we realized we needed some theory. We learned from books and other experiences, including those in Central America. This learning led us to develop our own approach, the spiral model.

This is not the usual approach to developing theory. In school we learned that theory is something developed by the experts, something that usually seemed quite unrelated to day-to-day living and working. In contrast, we are suggesting that theory involves going down into a deeper understanding of our own day-to-day existence, rather than up into the abstract.\*

So theory not only informs our practice but it also springs from it. In this way we are all theorists.

##### b) tension between action and reflection

Have you ever noticed how often social activists complain about having no time? In our result-oriented, "time poor" culture, time for reflection (or thinking) is not only limited but also often seems a waste of time. The spiral model helps introduce a dynamic relationship, between action and reflection, into the design of an educational event.

The starting point is experience (past actions). We reflect on and learn from this experience to develop new action plans for the future.

##### c) a tension between participant knowledge and new input

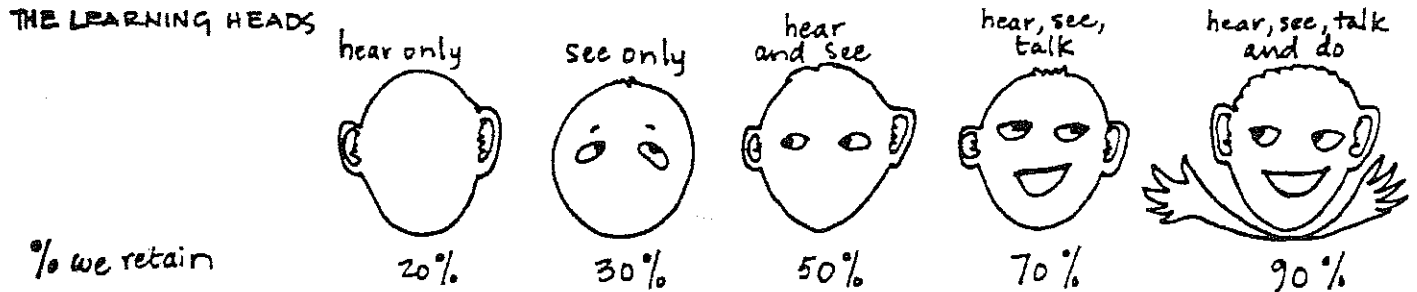
In our society, because we are taught to trust the experts, we don't usually learn to value lived experience as a source of knowledge.

In one trade union workshop, for example, an organizer shut off the video camera during a session when workers were talking about their experiences with a health and safety problem; and turned it on again when the U.S. expert arrived to deliver her presentation.

\* Thanks to Oscar Jara of Alforja in Central America for the concept of "profundización" (deepening).

In contrast, the spiral model places a great deal of value on participant knowledge. Indeed, it links new input to the experience of participants.

◆ The spiral model takes into account how people learn.



We use the learning heads in some of our workshops to demonstrate that people retain more of what they learn when they use more of their senses and can apply what they are learning. The work of some academics in the field of non-verbal learning – while we often have serious reservations about how this work has been applied – has helped us understand more about how people learn. The spiral model allows us to use this new information in the way we structure our education sessions.

◆ The spiral model uses what we know about effective adult education.

### Principles of effective adult education practice

or

### How we know effective adult education is happening\*

- participants see what they are learning as valuable
- the goals are clear
- participants can make mistakes
- the experience of all participants is valued and drawn upon
- new facts and insights are connected to what participants already know
- participants get direct and frequent feedback
- people share/debate/discuss what they are learning with others
- participants feel respected/listened to
- participants have input into how teaching and learning happens
- differences in identity and experience are acknowledged

\* Adapted from the Canadian Labour Congress, *Instructor Training Course Manual* (Ottawa: Canadian Labour Congress, 1983), with the additional input of Anne Marie Stewart and Barb Thomas.

But this list is not enough for social change educators. Although effective adult education has a lot to teach us about how people learn and we use these principles in our work, they are just the first step.

◆ **The spiral model incorporates the principles of Education for Social Change.**

Deborah Barndt, an author and popular educator based in Toronto, talks about a friend who once said: "I find it dangerous to know HOW to do something without knowing WHY and FOR WHOM." The expert learning model trains people to adapt – to fit better into society as it is. Education for social change has a radically different goal.

As social change educators, we add to the principles of good adult education.

**Principles of education for social change  
or  
How we know education for social change is happening**

**Social change education:**

- critically examines unequal power relations, not just differences (race, class, gender, disability, heterosexism, ageism)
- names and challenges ideas and practices that support inequality
- anticipates and addresses conflict
- encourages creative expression
- uses the mind, hands, and emotions
- is a continuing process, not a single event
- strengthens organization
- encourages collective action for change
- models democratic relations between learner and leader
- includes both reflection and action
- puts local issues into national and global contexts

**Education for social change is NOT neutral.**