

# **Navigating our way: a compass for popular educators<sup>1</sup>**

Astrid von Kotze, Shirley Walters and Thembi Lockett  
University of Western Cape, South Africa

## **Abstract**

This article addresses the tensions and contradictions of applying a popular education approach in the current context of South Africa. It draws upon data from an eighteen month research project into traditions of popular education. It presents an extended discussion on the meanings of popular education, and their varied implications for practice. It presents a heuristic device in the form of a `compass`, to assist popular educators locate themselves in their work at different historical moments.

## **Introduction**

In 1976, the year that Soweto school children said 'enough' and got shot for rejecting apartheid education in South Africa, Junction Avenue Theatre Company made and performed their play, 'Fantastical History of a Useless Man'. The play depicted another view of history and began with the historical, colonial figures of Jan van Riebeeck and Simon van der Stel stepping out of the South African currency which carried their images, conveying the link between economics and politics. It ended with the 'useless man' looking back at the violence of colonial history and the deep relationship between wealth, poverty, power and politics. Weighing up different options for playing a useful part in the future of South Africa, the 'useless man' decided that building the future would be a project of 'the broad masses of the people who live voiceless', and thus, 'the most I can do is be the least obstruction'. In the background flew a huge banner that spelled 'revolution'. As it turned out, there was no revolution in South Africa – and the struggle for redistribution of wealth and a radically different future, unsurprisingly, continues.

The years after 1976 saw a mushrooming of popular education in South Africa in a range of sectors: from adult literacy to labour, culture to health, rural development to housing. Trade unions, non-governmental organisations, community-based structures and faith-based organisations ran conscientizing education classes, developed popular learning materials and readings, organized and mobilised groups for protest actions, within the broad anti-apartheid movement. Until 1994 there was a plethora of popular education initiatives in all sectors and areas, involving large numbers in

---

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge the support of the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) while recognising that the ideas expressed are our own. We also acknowledge and appreciate helpful feedback from Liam Kane, an anonymous reviewer and Anna James.

participatory democratic processes that built knowledge collectively; in the Gramscian sense, 'building the new in the womb of the old'.

Social, economic and political utopias motivated people to act in defiance of material conditions and inspired poets, writers and musicians to innovate. In the name of another future, people torched barricades and demanded radical change or they worked at redirecting resources for greater equity. This paper sheds light on some of those initiatives and on contemporary developments.

The paper is based on eighteen months research that seeks to recover 'traditions of popular education' in South Africa. The purpose of the research is to surface forgotten practices, reveal innovations, make sense of how, at different times and under changing circumstances, activist educators (re)invented education for social transformation. The study seeks to ascertain if any of the innovations in popular education during the hey-days of political struggle against Apartheid have survived the transition to formal democracy. It asks whether any of the practices might become the foundation for social transformation that can buttress and extend the embattled fledgling democracy. Twenty-one years after the first democratic elections many working people still hope for a more egalitarian society and a life of dignity. In the research we ask whether popular education is contributing to a realisation of this hope.

We begin by outlining the research design and methodology that reflects the contingent nature of popular education, and briefly present the findings from the action research. This leads to the proposition that 'tensions' rather than 'traditions' describe popular education over time. We then offer a 'compass' as a tool for navigating through different popular education orientations, as they emerge in response to, or in anticipation of, different conditions. Finally, we pose a challenge to steer towards supporting radical transformation for social and economic justice.

### **Research approach, design and methodology**

In order to have congruence between the means and ends of the research, we adopted a participatory approach, integrating investigation, education and action. Researchers and the 'subjects of research' worked together in a reciprocal learning and teaching experience towards defining new action. (Green et al., 1995) In this way, the research process had a particular commitment to the educational value of the findings. It is this specific commitment, which is tied into the 'investigation and action' components, that distinguishes it from some other forms of action research. (Walters, 1989; Walters et al. 2015) This aligns with the other purpose of the

study: to reignite interest in and active engagement with popular education. (Freire, 1982).

All three of the researchers are engaged and involved in the practice of popular education. Together with all the activist-educators who were interviewed and those who participated in discussions and workshops, the research drew on many years of popular education experience. We acknowledge our `insider` position with the strengths and weaknesses that this implies. Our histories informed the questions and threw light on the data as they emerged.

In participatory action research, as in popular education, knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue. Both research and education have developed tools and processes that allow all participants to speak and be heard. Importantly, whose knowledge counts and is deemed useful for the purpose at hand, is made explicit in both participatory action research (PAR) and popular education. Ongoing critical reflexivity is crucial in design and execution of both popular education and PAR processes.

Thus, the research approach was consistent with popular education itself. It was also consistent with the secondary purpose of the research, namely, to re-ignite an interest in and engagement with popular education in South Africa – as the process opened new perspectives, provoked debate and mobilized people to act more consciously in their practice as educators. (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001)

Multiple data gathering tools were used to ensure access to different cultures and popular knowledge sources in the country. The project began with a 'mapping' exercise: delineating institutions, sectors and organisations involved in popular education in the present. Through a snowballing process we firstly identified key people and organisations currently engaged in popular education; secondly, we reviewed existing literature such as promotional, informational and teaching materials, journals and books; thirdly, we interviewed key people in organisations, either individually or in groups, using semi-structured interviews that focused on the purpose, process and theoretical foundation of practices; fourthly, we observed education sessions within organisations.

We took advantage of fortuitous occurrences – for example, an evaluative meeting of Training for Transformation (TfT), an organisation involved in Freire-inspired popular education over the last forty years, which works in Africa and further afield. Thirty international practitioners gathered to reflect on and write about TfT practices; this afforded us the opportunity to both observe their work in process, and interview ten of them. Furthermore, we

conducted and filmed an in-depth interview with the two initiators of TtT, Anne Hope and Sally Timmel.

Secondly, two national three day workshops of popular educators, 23-25 April 2013 and 27-19 June 2014, brought together some thirty-five and then twenty-five practitioners working in a broad range of popular education in five of the nine provinces of South Africa. Data were gathered at both, through participant observation, interviews and structured participatory activities. Furthermore, we facilitated three guided conversations with experienced popular educators with foci on definitional issues, the relationship between popular education and the state and traditions of popular education in South Africa. Other structured colloquia and workshops with visiting international popular educators provided rich sources of data.

Archives, libraries and collections of relevant materials, were identified, unearthed and collected. This included books, articles and various materials, such as printed text, auditory records and posters and other visuals from the past. To encourage both engagement with the data generated, and new contributions to data on popular education we designed a website and uploaded many of the materials ([www.populareducation.co.za](http://www.populareducation.co.za)) for ease of access. We also have linked this to an active Facebook page.

To find more in-depth 'stories' about popular education practice and to seek insight into the lives of people who combine organising and educating for change, we conducted structured interviews with sixteen prominent practitioners from South Africa, Mauritius, India, Malaysia, Uganda, Canada and the USA. Interviews generated data about the practice, motivation and role of popular educators, and helped to shed light on changes in response to national and global developments. Below, we have used descriptors rather than names, such as 'labour educator' or 'cultural activist' in order to refer to particular interviewees; dates in brackets indicate when interviews were conducted. Organisational profiles can be found on the research website; they were drawn up on the basis of interviews, in-house documents, information from websites and observations of organisational events.

The research helped us to formulate 'theories grounded in radical commitments' which in turn shaped and encouraged us to 'discover things scientifically that more conventional, establishment theories merely serve to hide from sight.' (Saul 2006, p.110)

### **Defining popular education in South Africa**

In the last twenty-five years, numerous attempts at categorizing popular education are testimony to the difficulties of identifying

coherent criteria for discerning a consensual understanding of what constitutes popular education. As Crowther (2013) has noted, popular education itself is a contested concept that embraces a whole range of different meanings that change, as we will show, along with the changes in the relationship between the state and civil society – and to the degree that educators have one foot inside, one outside the state (Kane, 2012).

There are numerous ways in which different kinds of popular education have been described and categorized. For example, Magendzo (1990) in his account of popular education in Chile distinguished between the dominant *education for social mobility* and oppositional *education for social mobilization*: the latter is popular education aimed at collective action for social reorganization. Chene and Chervin (1991, p.10-11) of Canada differentiated between *l'education populaire* and *l'education populaire autonome*, that is, education aimed at social transformation and working on the root causes of social problems rather than on their effects. Rick Flowers (2009), based in Australia, divided popular education into four traditions (without clearly defining what makes them 'traditions'): working class education in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'progressive and radical education' as education by educators who have sought to develop alternatives to dominant / authoritarian education, adult education for democracy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Freire, particularly his 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1972). Interestingly, Flowers did not mention explicitly a tradition of popular education engaging with social movements, although this may be subsumed in his four 'traditions'.

Boyd (2011) in the USA distinguished five different 'expressions' of popular education, with examples from the USA. Finally, Kane (2012) divided the history of popular education in Latin America into five broad periods of development, with Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' as 'the ideological backbone'. His history shows how popular education shifted its relationship to the state at different times and in different countries, ranging from opposition to the state to support for progressive movements for radical change – and how it is always firmly related to social movements.

South African popular education has similarities with all of these, notably a rootedness in the radical tradition of adult education and grounded in the philosophy of Paulo Freire. The overtly political nature of popular education, its concern with people's experiences and its orientation towards action are common distinguishing features. However, while a firm rooting in the anti-Apartheid struggle united individuals and organisations in the past, the link to social movements is now not as strong, and the overtly oppositional stance against the state has given way to more ambiguous relationships.

The research reveals that in a group of twenty-eight non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which ranged from those involved in worker education to community development, women's empowerment to health promotion, life-skills training, to policy revision and research, they all articulated some similar understandings of what constitutes popular education. For example, feminists JASS (Just Associates) define their popular education approach as 'starting with where women are at, the lived experiences of women, building a safe space of sharing and solidarity, moving from sharing to analysis of power relations, and then acting to build collective agency'. (20.8.2013) Training for Transformation explain that their work is 'popular education' because of its inherently political nature: 'TfT is highly political because it's all about how you are dealing with power and how you are shifting power from a certain level to another level.' (17.9.2013). Another local NGO, the Surplus People's Project (SPP) identify their work with popular education as it is integrally linked to mobilisation and mass action. SPP staff suggest that 'this is what distinguishes popular education from other forms of education'. (04/09/2013)

On its website, the South African Reflect Network (SARN) describes its work as 'a learner-centred approach that tries to build active participation, democratic spaces, critical reflection, and the powers and capacities of the poor to bring about social change. Popular education challenges the status quo.' The Children's Resource Centre(CRC) understands popular education as

'...creating an environment for socialization and learning – it is not about imparting knowledge and skills. An environment for the co-construction of knowledge is collaboratively created. (...) Popular education is understood as having an emancipatory intention, drawing on Freirean conscientisation processes and Gramsci's idea of the creation of a socialist person.'(16.5.2014)

The more recently established, university-based Centre for Integrated Post-School Education and Training (CIPSET) strives to build 'individual and collective capacity to analyse, to act, to bring about change towards progressive alternatives.

Generally, there appears to be consensus that popular education is concerned with conscientisation, in Freirean terms, as learning 'to read the word and the world' and action, confronting hegemony and working for transformation. Key elements that are stated as differentiating popular education from community education, are (i) it challenges the status-quo (but not necessarily the 'capitalist system'), (ii) it supports the co-construction rather than simply transmission of knowledge, (iii) the role of popular education is to

conscientise towards social action. This understanding overlaps substantively with the definition of popular education put forward by the Popular Education Forum for Scotland:

Popular education is understood to be popular, as distinct from merely populist, in the sense that it is rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people; it is overtly political and critical of the *status quo*; it is committed to progressive social and political change. (Martin, 1999, p.4)

Yet, a more in-depth investigation of the actual practices of organisations reveals a number of differences amongst them. These include, firstly, how they position themselves with regards to the state; secondly, whether and how they act for immediate or more long-term effect; thirdly, how they define and enact participation; fourthly, how they facilitate processes of knowledge transmission or co-production. If we accept that all popular education is an expression of, response to or anticipation of particular historical conditions within geographical contexts, it is not surprising that there is variation in the praxis. New times call for new strategies and practices. There are constant innovations and experiments that reflect or anticipate changing dynamics of power, with the use of emerging technologies as a contemporary example.

Popular education in South Africa has emerged as a fluctuating, changing practice that resists easy categorization into 'traditions', demonstrating how, 'Popular education is a construct which emerges out of particular, cultural and material conditions' (Steele, 1999, p. 95). Steele has shown how it is always contextual and contingent, appearing in different forms at different times and places, constantly reinventing itself. 'What is more, it can be a deeply ambivalent formation: managed from above as an instrument of control or forged from below as an agent of emancipation' (Steele, 1999, p.95). Similarly, feminist popular educators Manicom and Walters (2012, p.2) have pointed out how 'a deeper appreciation of the complexity and difficulty of change, the elusive resistances, unsettling ambiguities, and unruly emotions that attend feminist praxis' is necessary if we want to better understand processes of learning and claiming agency, mobilising and organizing.

Current practices and voices of older, experienced educators whose commitment to radical transformation has not wavered, also alerted us to tensions that are evidence that popular education is constantly in flux - responding to and ushering in new directions.

### **Popular education in tension**

As in the past, there are currently organisations and people committed to popular education in South Africa. While 'traditions' suggest continuity of norms, beliefs, practices and concerns handed

down through generations of educators, we detected a shift in orientation and purpose in current practices. Partially, shifts and changes reflect the altered South African politics in the post-Apartheid era. Partially, they reflect global changes and constraints imposed by neo-liberal economics in which corporations rather than governments are inclined to determine priorities. We note that the orientation towards collective action seems to have given way to personal-political development agendas. The shifting orientation of current practices towards personal transformation without a clear standpoint for structural change, led to further investigation of the data and we identify five main tensions in current practices.

*Tension 1: Between popular education for social mobility and popular education for social mobilization*

This speaks to the purpose of educational practice with the question of how we hold the tension between empowering the self, with building collective consciousness for action. A feminist educator suggests that people can only become agents in the world if they have a clear sense of self:

if you don't recognise your own hurt and your own pain and your own 'stuff' that you've been through and 'give yourself a break', allow yourself to acknowledge what you need to work on in order to, in a way, feel more self-confident, acting collectively is difficult" (28.4.2014).

A community worker (29.5.2014) echoed this sentiment: "Creating a space for people to identify their full potential is the key (...) create the spaces and other things will happen. (...) Transformation does not happen if it doesn't happen here [points to herself and chuckles] - you start by yourself." And: "you can't change people if you don't change".

On the one hand, popular educators claim to support and build what they perceive and express as a lack in confidence and self-esteem. On the other hand, educators insist that essential to popular education is challenging and shaking up long-held beliefs as a first step towards constructing radical alternatives to the status-quo. This is the proposition put forward by the worker educator (15.4.2014)

Radical education encompasses a radical political purpose, analysis and reading of the world, starting from ordinary people's lived experiences. It is very much a kind of combination of working from people's experience but working with a set of key political economy concepts that the facilitators feel that workers need to engage with.

This tension between change targeting primarily the individual or the collective is often expressed in the tension between social mobility and social mobilization. Yet, the one intention does not



necessarily exclude the other. Personal change may precede or coincide with collective action. The first hurdle is “to get people to recognize that your individual lived experiences, whatever issues, are not an individual problem but a common collective problem” (Labour rights activist, 27.9.2013). Making connections between the personal and the collective may be one of the most important aspects of meetings, of training: ‘how much do people feel they are linked with each other when they come out of the training, – because you can’t do that alone – you can’t face the unexpected alone, you really need that link’. (Economist-activist 28.6.2014)

Ferris and Walters (2012), in working with HIV and AIDS, have argued that it is important to move beyond the binary of ‘either / or’, to the ‘both/and’. This view is shared by the labour rights activist (27.9.2013) who emphasises the need for both the personal and the public:

“Engage people so that they can relate ....by connecting what they are concerned with and bringing it together with the collective ... there must be some moments where there is an attempt to help people to socially analyse ... to see the issue beyond the individual as part of the societal ... and then trying to develop a strategy of action ... building baby steps.”

The economist-activist (28.6.2014) describes this shift less in terms of a tension and more in terms of a movement. According to him this movement requires careful attention to issues of power – and not simply individual, personal power:

‘When I talk to you about suffering of people, why do you jump into those overarching theories and then you trivialise people’s suffering? That’s our temptation on the left that you have overarching explanations. So how do we avoid trivialising people’s suffering? So ‘powerful knowledge’, for me this is key. At a certain time a partial knowledge becomes ‘full knowledge’ because of the powerful person using it. ‘

The well-articulated tension between the personal and political, as it relates to theories of social change, therefore continues to be reflected in this research.

*Tension 2: Between horizontal and vertical processes: power relations amongst educators and participants*

Learning and knowledge creation for radical change occurs through organising, action and in struggle. It is not simply the result of ‘sharing’ personal experiences and valorizing them through consent. As the worker educator asserted:

[Knowledge] arises out of activism and struggle, but it also arises out of study and particularly collective study ... the really, really useful knowledge is theoretical and it's critical and it's conceptual, but it has to have that connection with the real experiences of people, otherwise it's just terminology floating up there. And I think it's produced in struggle but as well as in and through study, debate and research.  
(15.4.2014)

Crowther and Lucio-Villegas (2012, p.62) have usefully drawn on Gramsci to illuminate the role of intellectuals and educators in struggle:

The relationship between the popular educator and the intellectual is a critical one for the emergence of a persuasive hegemony sufficiently robust to challenge common sense. Social movements do precisely this, but the problem, as Harvey (1971,p.418) highlights, is that single-issue movements fail to cohere into a joined up alternative which can mobilise mass support.'

Popular educators often find that participants may struggle to articulate the knowledge and skills necessary for engaging in political and educational endeavours despite all their experience (Endresen, 2011). The ongoing racism, still much in evidence in the geographies of cities, cultural symbols and highly unequal relationships compounds the problem. , Therefore, an important first task in any popular education undertaking is the attempt to establish more horizontal relationships of power. These must be consciously established and continuously re-negotiated or else participants' reluctance to voice views and interpretations may be interpreted by the educator as a lack of confidence, and responded to accordingly.

The purpose of dialogue is to encourage the emergence of organic intellectuals - rather than continue the hegemony of expert knowledge transmission in a vertical teacher-pupil relationship. Similarly, educators run the risk of reinforcing unequal relations when they do not go beyond encouraging the 'sharing' of participants' experiences. Uncritical acceptance of what is said may appear as a process of valorising experience. Yet, it may well be a patronising attitude that stops critical questioning and analysis oriented towards understanding 'false consciousness' and imagining 'what might be possible'.

*Tension 3: One foot inside, one outside the state; an ambivalent relationship to the state*

In 1999, Martin (1999, p.7) noted the importance of recognising the 'ambivalence of popular education's relationship to the state'. Citing a number of examples that illustrate the role a state plays in relation

to its citizenry – whether repressive, authoritarian, predatory, or more open and supportive of citizens’ initiatives, he demonstrated how ‘popular education is essentially the educational dimension and the educational resource for the ‘popular movement’, the movement of the poor and dispossessed.’ Thus, ‘as the role of the state changes (...) so new spaces for popular education are opened up in the reconfigured relationship between the state, the market and civil society.’ (ibid p.8) Similarly, Crowther (2013, p.262) has asked what the prospects are for popular education in the context of the state today: ‘Since the original formulation of the in and against argument in the 1980s we have seen significant changes in the relationship between state, civil society and public spheres, which have important consequences for educational engagement.’

Kane (2012), in his history of popular education in Latin America, commented that the shape of popular education within social movements may depend on the association with the state, and he describes the relationship as a dance, with ‘one foot in’ and ‘one foot out’. In 2014, the Malta Popular Education Network (PEN) conference brought together popular educators from different countries and Mae Shaw and Jim Crowther (2014 p968) presented a ‘helpful framework for action in the context of the paradoxical times in which popular educators currently work’. Differentiating between strategic participation or non-participation with the state they juxtaposed a range of actions such as participating strategically by ‘making structures work more democratically and effectively’, or not participating by ‘providing convivial, open, inclusive democratic educational spaces’ for dialogue to affect change.

Since 1994, when the first democratic elections brought in the ANC-lead government in South Africa, this ambivalence towards the state, and, indeed, the system of capitalism, became very evident. In the tension between ‘inside’ and ‘in opposition to’ some educators focus on trying to affect a strategic shift in institutions, working from within to push and re-shape what they find, or identifying gaps to use institutional interstices to further what they see as the political purpose of popular education. Others enact a clear political agenda: the *raison d’être* for their work is the recognition that the material reality, the whole socio-economic system that creates and maintains inequalities needs to be transformed and this cannot happen within the institutions of the state. While some educators agonise over when and how hard to push beyond the familiar, how much discomfort is enough, others believe that the ‘cause’ warrants radical action and ‘no push is too hard’ ‘As a radical educator you actually do have to take political responsibility for your own position’, suggested the worker educator (15.4.2014).

When it comes to the political economy of the state as part of global capitalism, positions are more clearly drawn. A dialogue between local and international popular educators (9.2.2014) gave rise to the question of whether all popular education, by definition, must be anti-capitalist. The question arose whether capitalism could ever be commensurate with social justice and hence the central question for popular education: is it possible to have a progressive popular education that supports capitalism? How can such education be 'popular' in the sense of being in the interest of oppressed people and nature? One educator argued that capitalism thrives on inequality and the exploitation of natural resources, and that it is inherently patriarchal and exploitative, reinforcing daily gender-based inequality and inter-personal and structural violence. Therefore, how can popular educators not define their practice, necessarily, as anti-capitalist and as feminist?

A community activist suggests,

The real tradition for me has been the radical tradition in the interests of the working class and poor people...those of us who believed in an anti-capitalist movement felt that the movement just continues [post-1994 South African democratic elections] because we were still trapped within the capitalist society; some felt that we should continue when others had now positioned themselves very differently.' (29.5.2014)

Similarly, the worker educator asserts

I do feel what I want to achieve in my work is critical consciousness; it is an ability to critique capitalism and the status quo and gendered power relations ... and the turning people towards organisations, that the solution doesn't lie in whatever change of heart they may have, but in a collective solution ... allowing people to see things differently, imagine a different future'. (15.4.2014).

*Tension4: Between epistemologies: whose knowledge counts?*

The book of feminist popular education (Manicom & Walters 2012, p.11) reveals in multiple ways how knowledge is produced, not discovered, and is testimony to gendered imbalances of power and the 'politics of voicing and listening'.

The central idea that people's knowledge is the foundation of any educational work permeated all research interviews, as the cultural activist says, popular educators themselves have a lot

to learn “about co-production of knowledge and moving in millions of ways from the Viking model of extractive knowledge production”(4.4.2014). A children’s rights activist interviewed describes how he came to learn: “It was on the Island (i.e. Robben Island, the prison) that I, first hand, came to experience what is seen as an academic qualification [versus] socialization in struggle ... we realized workers have a lot to teach”. He continues, “Ordinary people are teachers already and carry useful and valuable knowledge with them to be shared with others” is an important starting point for him. (16.5.2014) Another interviewee says, ‘Working on the mines, realising that I could learn a huge amount from these men who’d never been to school (...)was a fundamental shift in my understanding of power relations of who actually has the wisdom around here, and the analysis, and recognizing that I knew very little in many instances’ (28.4.2014).

While all popular education arguably begins with a notion of collective knowledge construction through dialogue, this does not always translate into the reality of practice. The purpose of South African study circles, for example CALUSA (Cala University Students Association), is conscientisation leading to transformation. As a former educator explains, political education was “to equip youth with ideas that we would use to think about a different society”. (11.6.2013) Educators often operate with clear didactic processes. Here, participation is not ‘co-construction’ of knowledge but partaking in what could arguably be termed ‘banking education’, as the educator has a powerful role as leader and teacher of texts considered to be important in education for change. Similarly, social movements/campaigns in pursuit of the solution of immediate problems often take ‘short-cuts’ and transmit information deemed to be necessary for members’ engagement in public struggle- without leaving much space for critical engagement.

The tension of what and whose knowledge counts, when and where, is one that is alive amongst popular educators. Knowledge is not always created through action, and analysis of that knowledge does not necessarily inform decisions towards new forms of action (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001, p.75-6). The sometimes acrimonious debates around what and whose knowledge counts have been described at various times as ‘knowledge wars’ (Fenwick 2010).

#### *Tension 5: Between short-termism and longer-term social transformation*

The presence of many ‘weathered’ popular educators, still engaged in their work, attests to the presence of ‘revolutionary patience’. Feminist liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle (2003), coined the term "revolutionary patience" to describe an

attitude, a mindset, a complex virtue that holds in tension a sense of urgency consistent with the size of the problems we face and a resilience that meets setbacks and defeats with both hope and determination to remain in the struggle for the long haul. Some of the organisations we researched have been around for over forty years – their commitment to land reform, community activism, social justice is unwavering. All of these are in ‘for the long haul’.

Other organisations, arguably also often led by ‘old hands’ in activism and popular education, have shifted their focus to tackling immediate problems on the ground; they aim for results not just ‘in my lifetime’ but within reach. Writing about popular education more broadly, Choudry (2012, p.142) contends ‘that the dominant tendency of many development and advocacy NGOs is to compartmentalize the world into ‘issues’, and ‘projects’, and the practice of an ‘ideology of pragmatism’ which entails an unwillingness to name or confront capitalism directly.’ The educational work of many South African organisations illustrates this. Some work within the state, for example by re-drafting policy so that it serves excluded working people better; they use institutions, — like the Constitutional Court, — to challenge non-delivery of citizens’ rights. Other groups, stay in opposition and act through direct confrontation.

Sometimes, there is a tension between short and long term action, within one organization. For example, fighting for the distribution of anti-retrovirals (ARVs), the social movement Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) began by using strategies that engaged the state directly – using the country’s Constitution as a basis for battles fought in court – while at the same time mobilizing large numbers of people to ensure that the imperatives around HIV and AIDS would be in the public domain. This tension between short and longer-term orientation plays itself out mainly in the choice of strategies. With these, the role of education shifts – often from a broad political consciousness-raising around material conditions and their underlying causes to distributing information and holding meetings around specific short-term issues, which are of immediate concern.

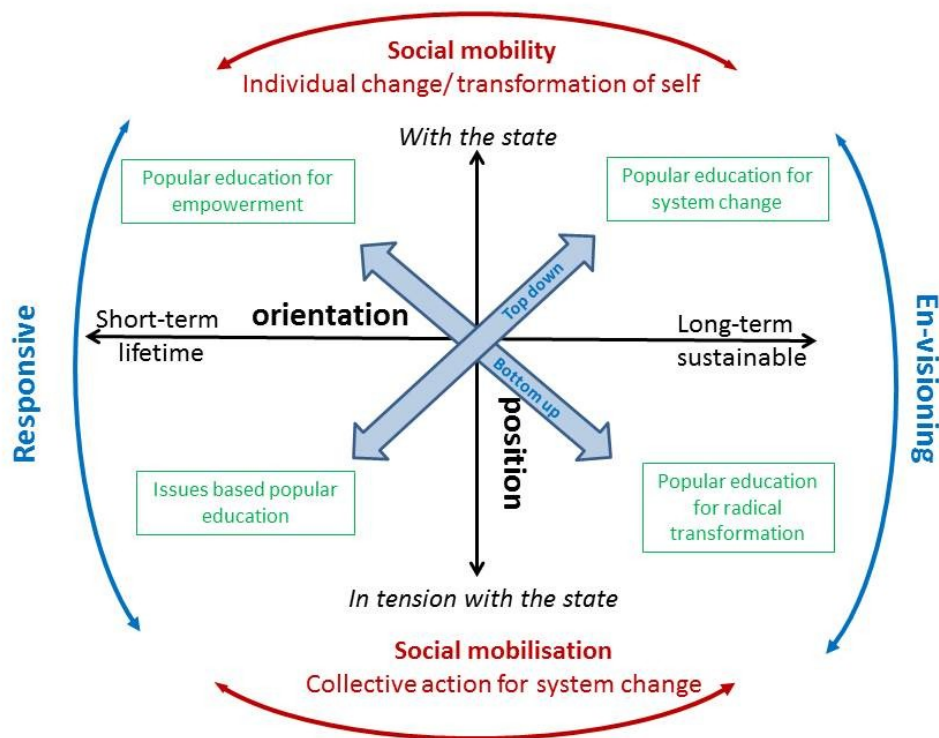
### **A compass for popular educators**

Popular education is implicated at different moments in time and in different places, as we anticipate and respond to changing pressures and imperatives. Speaking about popular education in Latin American countries, Kane (2012, p.73) identified three tendencies in the late nineties and early twenties:

One seemed to abandon class struggle as an old-fashioned concept and concentrated instead on the issues of democracy and citizenship, with new actors and spaces; another remained concerned about class and structural change but tried to develop its practice by opening up to new issues and 'subjects', as well as learning from past mistakes; another chose the practical route of just continuing to work with oppressed groups in the belief that appropriate 'paradigms' would emerge in the process.'

In order to try and capture the shifts in and different expressions of popular education in South Africa, we devised a 'compass for popular educators'. A compass is a tool for navigating; it offers a frame of reference that assists users to orientate themselves and 'find their way'. Similarly, a moral compass is a belief system that functions as a guide for actions: like the needle of a compass certain beliefs indicate the direction to take - or it shows how far we may have strayed from the charted path. So this compass is a 'thinking tool' that allows us to make sense of competing, often contradictory, claims of popular education. How is this compass constructed?

The graph below illustrates the compass:



The cardinal points of this compass reflect competing tensions: the vertical coordinates denote position: the northern point signals 'with the state' while the southern most point signals 'in tension with the state'. Horizontal coordinates indicate orientation: the western

point indicates immediate or short-term orientation, the eastern point longer-term purpose, including an orientation towards sustainability of the planet earth.

The top or northern half is more concerned with individual change or institutional change within the system, while the bottom or southern half targets system change through collective action. It is more concerned with social mobilization – often requiring ‘revolutionary patience’.

The western or left, side denotes responsive education, that is, education designed in response to, or addressing particular identified needs, problems, issues – ranging from life skills to sanitation or drug abuse. The right or eastern side is anticipatory, with actions envisioning alternatives, either within the existing system or necessitating a radical transformation towards a different kind of system.

The diagonal lines denote interpretations of participation, as in the importance of participants’ voices in knowledge construction or transmission. Top left and bottom right place emphasis on participants’ existing experience and knowledge and construct processes to identify and build on these in a ‘bottom-up’ way. Top right and bottom left work more according to expert or externally defined knowledge. Top-down processes signal a pre-given agenda underpinning the education. This either aims at immediate corrective responses (bottom left) or longer-term reforms often within parameters of policy and institution – as in the case of university-based initiatives (top right).

The coordinates create four quadrants, differentiated by varying notions of participation, purpose and power. While all aim at ‘the public good’ and support a participatory approach, not all recognise the need for addressing the power-imbalance between educator and participant in order to effect substantive transformation, and they differ in terms of their orientation and position with regards to the state. We suggest that popular education has shifted and continues to change, over time. Educators’ relationships to the state may move from direct open antagonism, to engagement with it, a willingness to cooperate from within its structures and institutions with the intent to reform those, to critical and if necessary oppositional action. Depending on a range of socio-economic, political pressures or personal understandings, educators consciously adjust or imperceptively orientate ourselves differently as we ‘read the world’.

The tensions outlined above are reflected in the quadrants – as shown below. For the purpose of description we will label the four positions as follows: north-west: popular education for



empowerment; north-east: popular education for systems change; south-west: issue-based popular education; south-east: popular education for radical transformation.

#### Popular education for empowerment

Inglis' (1997, p.4) distinction between empowerment and emancipation is still useful here: 'Empowerment involves people developing capacities to act successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analyzing, resisting and challenging structures of power.' Organisations running popular education that aims at 'life skills' are one example, here. Their starting point is perceived or identified needs or deficits in people. There is a shorter-term orientation that aims to include 'the excluded', to build capacity of people to operate within the system. This education primarily targets individual transformation; there is a notion of individual deficit that needs to be corrected through education with the hope and belief that this 'changed self' will be confident to act for the good of others. This outlook is consistent with 'education for individual empowerment' and it often shares similarities with therapeutic interventions.

Steele (1999) has pointed out that education has become increasingly instrumentalised and oriented towards short-term and under-resourced vocationalism. Education for empowerment is inspired by the dream to 'climb out' of present miseries and embark on a better life - the image often being one of a staircase leading towards the light.

However, popular education for empowerment runs the risk that participants do not make the connection between self and others and fail to use their newly 'empowered' status to assist others for collective change. 'This weakens the capacity of subaltern groups to achieve solidarity, organization and collective resistance.' (Crowther, 2013, p. 261)

#### Popular education for system change

After the first South African democratic elections in 1994, when the erstwhile liberation movement, the African National Congress, became the government of the day, many popular educators decided to work within the government trying to help change policy, structures and decisions from within. Engaging, for example, with education policy bodies and institutions they infused progressive ideas into old systems, introduced participatory rural appraisal strategies and attempted to shape the long-term future of education provision in the country. Others recognized the opportunities within the nooks and crannies of institutions, often working in the interstices in ways that challenge political and ideological

hegemony. In this way they used their base strategically to advance movements and actions 'outside' the system.

The curricula are a mix of expert knowledge and experiential knowledge: for example, there may be consultation with participants on the design and format of courses run through universities - however, accreditation and formal recognition still put pressure on officially certified programmes and this severely limits possibilities of collective knowledge construction and action. In his interview the cultural activist who works 'in the system' (4.4.2014) echoes this belief; sustained by the stories 'from people out there' he promotes moving away from 'the old extractive model of knowledge production' towards a co-production of knowledge, both in his research and his teaching.

Popular education for system change, thus, can combine participation with the state, and critique of particular systems and structures. However, the overt danger of working within state structures is of becoming compliant and being co-opted by the dominant political agendas. Furthermore, it is questionable whether a collective voice and action can ever be achieved.

#### Issue-based popular education

Organisations that run education sessions as part of campaigns are generally positioned in tension with the state on the basis of policy, promises and constitutional rights that have not been delivered on. Their starting point is material conditions that need to be addressed. They work either outside formal structures and institutions, or within them in order to exert the pressures necessary for delivery of rights and services. In both cases this is education for social mobilization. Their purpose is usually to address an immediate issue that has arisen within specific communities or constituencies, for example, 'the right to know', 'violence against women and children' or the lack of sanitation. The message is usually straightforward and unambiguous. The education is a necessary component of mobilization rather than a deeper study of underlying causes. Messages are often 'delivered' in declamatory style despite claims to the contrary; while critical questioning or challenges are invited they are rarely forthcoming - often, because time has 'run out'. In many ways this is functionalist, instrumentalist education that serves the interests of immediate action for particular change.

Curricula are designed by experts within the organisations and informed by clear ideological standpoints, and knowledge is rarely co-constructed. Of all the popular education practices these are the most active, public, confrontationist - and often the strategic campaigns are 'noisy', supported by large numbers of people which are successful often in achieving their short-term goals. The image that popular education for mobilisation conjures is that of a loud-

hailer: calling people to join the struggle. The hope that sustains action is firstly, a successful intervention, secondly broader changes that may flow from victory and thirdly, the building of collectivity.

The risk of issue-based activist popular education is that it engenders uncritical followers with a shallow understanding of how issues relate to a bigger picture - participation with energy but lacking depth. It can however provide a basis for inducting large numbers into being active citizens who become ever more radical.

#### Popular education for radical transformation

Inglis (1997, p.13-14) has distinguished education for empowerment from education for emancipation thus:

While empowerment is focused on creating self-confidence, self-expression, and an interest in learning, 'education for liberation and emancipation' is a collective educational activity which has as its goal social and political transformation. If personal development takes place, it does so within that context.

Practices that are positioned critically and in antithesis to the state, with an orientation that goes beyond individual life-spans and includes long-term responsibility for both future generations and the survival of the planet, are in the fourth quadrant. Education for radical transformation has a strong organising component; it speaks to collective learning through and in action and, is contingent upon timing within particular contexts.

This is education for 'development', which we interpret here closer to its origin: the Latin *dis+voloper* = undo + wrap up. Develop hence means unfold, unwrap; making visible. Conscientisation and action for radical transformation is the ultimate goal.

The process involved is one of 'decodification' - explained by Freire (1972, p 33) as the operation by which the knowing subjects, grasp and explain relationships which were previously not perceived. Here, education is a co-construction of knowledge where everyone is at different times a teacher and everyone is a learner, upsetting the hierarchical order of expert and layperson. By removing the swaddles and affording insight into the conditions and relations that have been presented as 'normal', people begin to name how things came to be as they are, and what might be necessary in order to change them. Unmasking the workings of power, interest and control allows participants to begin to chart their way out of conditions of oppression and plan alternatives. This is what Freire called education as the 'practice of freedom'.

At best, as Scathach (2011) has suggested, people's analytical understanding of how unequal conditions are sustained and

reproduced go hand in hand with also wanting to act on that understanding:

“Consciousness and the will to act are acquired simultaneously and are facets of the same process. In order to build a political awareness, learners and educators need to participate in a mutual process of unpacking each others’ ontological assumptions.”

However, it is not enough for groups to act as isolated collectives but they do need to join with larger collectives or social movements to strengthen possibilities for deep rooted transformation.

The hope that sustains educators working in popular education for radical transformation is the belief that ‘another world is possible’. The risk that lies within this quadrant is two-fold. Firstly, history has shown that educators and participants run the risk of personal attacks, incarceration, even death. Secondly, there is the threat of inertia. Spending time and energy on being forever watchful, critical and questioning delays decision-making and actions. Often, the result is paralysis and at times non-action.

### **Navigating our way: popular educators using the compass**

Popular education in South Africa is a ship rocked by the waves of change in the vast sea of injustices and oppressions, blown by the winds of conflicting demands made by the state, the market and peoples’ hopes and convictions for an alternative. We offer the compass as a thinking tool for popular educators to help reflect on our individual and collective praxis, to navigate and steer our paths. As popular educators we need to be very aware of the importance of keeping track of how our politics impact the choices we make within the maelstrom of contradictions and tensions. On the one hand, we are leaders, on the other hand, listeners; we are both responsible for initiating potentially unsettling, disturbing processes, and for fuelling action that may have consequences beyond our reach.

We can use the compass to ask ourselves questions such as: have we drifted towards individual empowerment akin to Silver’s (cited by Flowers, 1965:236) ‘popular education that aims at pacifying the masses by producing men (sic) with particular skills for particular jobs and positions thus maintaining an unjust system? Or are we still putting our energies into a popular education that encourages people to analyse and oppose exploitation, sustained by the imagination for alternatives to the status quo? Are we keeping alert to the dangers of cooption – an easy downfall given the appropriation of radical language by neo-liberal politics – designing pathways within the system that may benefit some and leave the majority out, battered by storms and cold? ‘

Given the winds of change – those that blow us as much as those we fuel – we must weigh up the possibilities and communities' capacities in relation to their aspirations and the actual reality in which they and us are embedded.

If we take the revolution that Junction Avenue's 'useless man' announced for the future to mean 'radical transformation', it is yet to happen in South Africa. This is where popular education for radical transformation comes in. Crowther (2013, p.268) has warned, 'conflict, antagonism, distrust and fear amongst marginalized groups are barriers to solidarity'. Popular education can play an important role by both creating awareness of how the interests of the powerful are served by disunity, and opening spaces and supporting processes for building solidarity in action. Furthermore, it can:

'...serve as a pre-figurative experience of the type of social relations that would lie at the heart of a transformed society – relations, moreover, that would also be integral to the process – the struggle – that will be necessary to create that society. It is through the process of struggle that women and men, and children too, will create their social relations and thus themselves as a necessary and fundamental requirement for building a new social order'. (Allman 2001, p.163)

Social and material justice requires us to identify clearly and express explicitly our common interests. For this, it cannot rely on individuals as agents of change. South Africa's mass democratic movement's strength in the eighties and early nineties lay in the very clear target of overcoming a commonly defined enemy. What is inclined to happen today is that there are ever splintering and fracturing opposition groups that fight over scarce resources, are unable to put aside small ideological differences in order to build progressive alliances. This frustrates the formation of solidarity, from the ground up, and the forging of a social movement for transformation.

Mark Heywood, well-known activist who started with the Treatment Action Campaign, has pointed out:

'...the starting point for a freedom fighter must be certainty; certainty about good and evil, right and wrong, who is the oppressor and who is the victim. So, far so good! But for many of us, this evolved into certainty about ideology and the organisations we believed espoused that ideology. (...) When a freedom fighter is fixed on the difficult road ahead, and particularly if that road is a burdensome and hard one, certainties that morph into ideologies cause us to stop looking

at what is going on at either side of the road. We miss the changing landscape.'

'Squeezed between the 'rock' of the market and 'the hard place' of civil society the task of popular education is increasingly difficult and increasingly urgent.' (Crowther, 2013, p.269) We offer the 'compass' to assist popular educators navigate their/our way towards radical alternatives. This requires a long-term plan enacted through a range of tactical and strategic actions. But, first and foremost, it needs a strong common vision. Utopia is not a place and time but a process of becoming, together. (von Kotze, 2013, p.111)

## References

Allman, Paula (2001) *Critical education against Global Capitalism*. Westport, Bergin & Garvey.

Bloch, E (1970) *A philosophy of the future*. New York, Herder and Herder.

Boyd, D (2011) *Under the Radar: Popular Education in North America. A White Paper*. <http://www.popednews.org/downloads/Under%20the%20Radar%20Abstract.pdf> accessed 23.10.2013

| [Centre for...CIPSET \(http://cipset.nmmu.ac.za/\)](http://cipset.nmmu.ac.za/)

Chene, A & Chervin, M (1991) *Popular Education in Quebec: Strengthening Social Movements*. <http://aeq.sagepub.com/content/42/3/180.full.pdf> accessed 23.10.2013

Choudry, A. (2012) Building Counter-Power from the Ground Up: Contesting NGOisation through Social Movement Learning and Knowledge Production. In: Budd L. Hall, D.E.Clover, J. Crowther & E. Scandrett (Eds) *Learning and Education for a better World: The Role of Social Movements*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei. pp 141-155

Crowther, J. & Villegas, E.L. (2012) Reconnecting intellect and Feeling: Marx, Gramsci, Williams and the Educator's Role. In: Budd L. Hall, D.E.Clover, J. Crowther & E. Scandrett (Eds) *Learning and Education for a better World: The Role of Social Movements*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei. pp 57-69

Crowther, J. (2013) Reflections on popular education in the UK and Sweden: Changes in the state, public sphere and civil society. In: Laginder, A.M., Nordvall, H & Crowther, J. (Eds) *Popular Education, Power and Democracy*. NIACE, Leicester pp 259-275

Ferris, H. and Walters, S. (2012) Heartfelt pedagogy in the time of HIV and AIDS, in Manicom L. and Walters S. *Feminist popular education in transnational debates: Building pedagogies of possibility*. NY, Palgrave Mc Millan

Fenwick, T. (2010) 'Let the river run: Education futures and globalization' Keynoteaddress to the Vice Chancellor's Annual Julius Nyerere Lecture on Lifelong Learning, University of Western Cape, South Africa, October 2010.

Flowers, R. (2009) Traditions of Popular Education. <http://die-bonn.de/doks/report/2009-geschichte-der-erwachsenenbildung-01.pdf>. Accessed 22.10.2013

Freire, P (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London, Penguin.

Freire, P. (1982). Creating alternative research methods: Learning to do it by doing it. In B. Hall, A. Gillette, & R. Tandon (Eds.), *Creating knowledge: A monopoly?* (pp. 29-37). New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research in Asia.

Gaventa, J. & Cornwall, A. (2001) Power and Knowledge. In: P. Reason & H Bradbury (Eds) *Handbook of Action research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London, Sage Publications. (pp70-80)

Haywood, Mark. ([www.dailymaverick.co.za/2014-08-04/](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/2014-08-04/))

Inglis, T. (1997) Empowerment and Emancipation. *Adult Education Quarterly*. 48,1, Fall 1997, pp3-17

Kane, L. (2012) Forty years of popular education in Latin America: Lessons for social movements today. In: Budd L. Hall, D.E. Clover, J. Crowther & E. Scandrett (Eds) *Learning and Education for a better World: The Role of Social Movements*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei. pp 69-87

DELETED. forthcoming

Magendzo, S & Vaccaro, L (1990) Popular Education in Chile. *Harvard Educational Review*, v60 n1 p48-78 Feb 1990

Manicom, L & Walters, S (2012) *Feminist Popular Education in Transnational debates. Building Pedagogies of Possibility*. Palgrave, Macmillan.

Martin, I. (1999) Popular Education and Social Movements in Scotland today. In: Crowther, J. Martin, I. & Shaw, M. (Eds) *Popular Education and Social Movements in Scotland today*. Leicester, NIACE. Pp.1-29

| [South African Reflect Network \(SARN\) http://www.sareflect.org/](http://www.sareflect.org/) .

Saul, J. (2006) *Development after Globalisation. Theory and Practice for the embattled South in a new Imperial Age.* London & New York, Zed Books and Scottsville, UKZN Press.

Scathach, I. (2011) *Popular education as a doomed project?*  
<http://libcom.org/library/popular-education-doomed-project-inga-scathach> accessed 4.5.2013

Schumaker, J.F. (2006) The happiness conspiracy. *New Internationalist*, 391,

Shaw, M. & Crowther, J. (2014) Review of the 2014 Popular Education Network conference. Thinking dialectically in popular education. *Concept* vol 5, No2, pp 1-9 <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/>

| Soelle, D. (2003) *Revolutionary Patience.* Wipf & Stock Publishers.

Steele, T (1999) With 'real feeling and just sense': Rethinking popular education. In: Crowther, J. Martin, I. & Shaw, M. (Eds) *Popular Education and Social Movements in Scotland today.* Leicester, NIACE. pp.95-106

Von Kotze, A. (2013) Composting the Imagination in Popular Education. In: Budd L. Hall, D.E. Clover, J. Crowther & E. Scandrett (Eds) *Learning and Education for a better World: The Role of Social Movements.* Sense Publishers, Rotterdam, Boston, Taipei. pp 101-113

Walters S. (1989) *Education for democratic participation*, Bellville, University of Western Cape.

Walters S., Daniels F., and Weitz V., *Building Common Knowledge: negotiating new pedagogies in Higher Education in South Africa* in Anne Edwards (Ed) *COLLABORATING ON COMPLEX PROBLEMS: CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF RELATIONAL WORK* (forthcoming)