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We Make the Road by Walking

Conversations on Education and Social Change

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In the labor movement, for example, the international presidents of the unions wanted to come to Highlander and make speeches, because it gave them a certain appearance of being educators. But we didn’t have time for those speeches. We wanted them to send the students to Highlander and pay the bill, but we didn’t want them to come to speak, but they insisted. One time I remember we decided we had to give in to this, but we didn’t want it to take too much time, so we decided to invite five officials at a time, for one day of a workshop that lasted two weeks. They could say they’d been to Highlander, and we didn’t have to put up with their speeches so much. I never will forget. One of the old timers said, “In the time that has been allotted me, I can do no more than to give my name and part of my address.” And he meant mailing address not speech! We recognized that we had to have union officials’ support as part of our process, but we didn’t expect to educate them. They didn’t come to be educated. They came to be there, be present. So we gave them a chance to say they’d been at Highlander and write it up in their newspapers. When we had Martin Luther King here, we had him to speak. We had him at our twenty-fifth anniversary to make a speech. We didn’t try to make those speeches into discussions.

The staff understood that. We all worked those things out together, but we did have problems among ourselves. I remember one time I was holding forth in one of the workers’ sessions. A student sent a note up to me saying, “When you’re talking, you aren’t learning.”

They sent the note to me! I was talking, you know. So we had to deal with those problems.

“The difference between education and organizing”

MYLES: One of the unsolved problems, even I think here at Highlander, is the difference between education and organizing, and that’s an old question, it goes way back. Saul Alinsky and I went on a circuit. We had the “Alinsky/Horton show” that went out on the circuit debating and discussing the difference between organizing and education. At that time Saul was a staunch supporter of Highlander, and I was a staunch supporter of him, but we differed and we recognized the difference. We had no problem about it, and we tried to explain to people that there was a difference. Saul says that organizing educates. I said that education makes possible organization, but there’s a different interest, different emphasis. That’s still unclarified. In my mind I kept them separate because I could function much better having a clear cut idea about what I consider the difference in operating on that basis.

The reason it was such a debatable subject is because the overwhelming majority of the people who were organizing and who were officials of unions in the South had been at Highlander. So the public who only saw that didn’t know what went on at Highlander, and they assumed that we were an organizer’s training school. But I kept saying no, no. We do education and they become organized. They become officials. They become what-
ever they are, educational directors. Basically it's not technical training. We're not in the technical business. We emphasize ways you analyze and perform and relate to people, but that's what I call education, not organizing. When I wanted to organize—which I did at one period, something I'll go into later on—I resigned from the Highlander staff. I took a leave of absence from the Highlander staff because I didn't want organizing and education confused in the minds of the people. It was confusing enough as it was.

So Highlander's been in the situation where we were looked at from all kinds of different angles. We always had to watch not to accept the appraisal of other people, and try to make our own criticism relating to these critics. We just had to constantly keep clear about what we meant by education. One of the examples I used to use got me in trouble and still gets me in trouble when I use it. I'd say if you were working with an organization and there's a choice between the goal of that organization, or the particular program they're working on, and educating people, developing people, helping them grow, helping them become able to analyze—if there's a choice, we'd sacrifice the goal of the organization for helping the people grow, because we think in the long run it's a bigger contribution. That's still a hot issue. I used that illustration in a participatory research meeting when I was pushed on the difference. One woman there was organizing a hospital. She was just furious, because she thought it was inhumane to take that position, that my purpose was to develop people instead of particular issues. I would usually find there wouldn't be that contradiction, you see, but if it came down to it, then you have to make that distinction. That's how strongly I felt about separating the two ideas.

PAULO: Could I make a comment just about that. I think that mobilization of masses of people has or had, inside of itself, organization. That is, it's impossible to start mobilizing without organizing. The very process of mobilizing demands organization of those who are beginning to be mobilized. Secondly, I think that both mobilizing and organizing have in their nature education as something indispensable—that is, education as development of sensibility, of the notion of risk, of confronting some tensions that you have to have in the process of mobilizing or organizing. Knowing, for example, the dialectical relationship between tactics and strategy. You have to have some tactics that have to do with the strategy you have. You understand the strategy as the objective, as the goal, as the dream you have, and as the tactics you raise as you try to put into practice, to materialize the objective, the dream. In the process of mobilizing, of organizing, you need from time to time to stop a little bit with the leaders in the groups in order to think about the space you already walked. In reflecting on the action of mobilizing and organizing, you begin to teach something. You have to teach something. It's impossible for me not to learn. A good process of mobilizing and organizing results in learning from the very process and goes beyond.

Until some years ago, among the left groups and left parties, we had strong examples of how education was not taken seriously during the process of mobiliza-
tion and organization, which were seen just as political process. In fact they are educational processes at the same time. Why this attitude? I think that the answer should be found in the analysis of or the understanding of education as something that really is superstructure and a productive reproducer of the dominant ideology. It's very clear, for example, in the seventies, the writings about education's power to reproduce the dominant ideology. It was, I think, because of this that the left parties and the groups always thought, in Latin America, for example, that education is something that comes after, after we get power. When we get power through the revolution, then we can begin to treat education. In this line of thought, this vision was not able even to make a distinction between the schooling system as Myles has underlined and the activities out of the subsystem. In fact, nevertheless, even education inside of the subsystem of education is not exclusively the reproducer of the dominant ideology. This is the task that the ruling class expects the teachers to accomplish. But it's possible also to have another task as an educator. Instead of reproducing the dominant ideology, an educator can denounce it, taking a risk of course. It's not easy to be done, but education cannot be exhausted exclusively as the reproducer of the subsystem of the dominant ideology. Theoretically it is not exclusively this.

Today I think that the tension is expressed in a different way. I know many people in the left parties in Latin America who discovered through practice what political education is. I think that the tension is being treated in a different way today. When we're in the process of mobilizing or organizing, it begins to be seen also as an educational problem of process and product, because undoubtedly there is a different kind of education in mobilization before getting power, and there is also the continuity of that. That's a mistake committed before, that education should come just exclusively after organizing. Education is before, is during, and is after. It's a process, a permanent process. It has to do with the human existence and curiosity.

**Myles:** If you're into having a successful organizing campaign and dealing with a specific project, and that's the goal, then whether you do it yourself or an expert does it or some bountiful person in the community does it, or the government does it without your involvement because that solves the problem—then you don't take the time to let people develop their own solutions. If the purpose is to solve the problem, there are a lot of ways to solve the problem that are so much simpler than going through all this educational process. Solving the problem can't be the goal of education. It can be the goal of organizations. That's why I don't think organizing and education are the same thing. Organizing implies that there's a specific, limited goal that needs to be achieved, and the purpose is to achieve that goal. Now if that's it, then the easiest way to get that done solves the problem. But if education is to be part of the process, then you may not actually get that problem solved, but you've educated a lot of people. You have to make that choice. That's why I say there's a difference. So when I went to organize for a union, I got a leave of absence from the
Highlander staff. I wouldn't do that as a member of the Highlander staff because I don't think organizing and education are the same thing. I do think participatory research and education are the same thing, but I don't think organizing and education are the same. I think the goal is different.

Now a lot of people use organizing to educate people. That's what I was trying to do when I was organizing textile unions, but when it comes down to it, I wasn't free to make a decision not to get a contract, to sacrifice the contract and the organization for education, because I was hired to organize the union. Organizers are committed to achieving a limited, specific goal whether or not it leads to structural change, or reinforces the system, or plays in the hands of capitalists. The problem is confused because a lot of people use organizing to do some education and they think it's empowerment because that's what they're supposed to be doing. But quite often they disempower people in the process by using experts to tell them what to do while having the semblance of empowering people. That confuses the issue considerably.

**Third Party:** Your description of organizing is a description of what most of education is. Most of education is specifying a specific objective and reaching that objective regardless of how the process works.

**Myles:** That's right. Schooling.

**Third Party:** So most schooling is in fact analogous to what you call organizing?

**Paulo:** But, inside of the process of organizing, as Myles said, first we have education taking part of the nature of organizing. What I want to say is that it's impossible to organize without educating and being educated by the very process of organizing. Secondly, we can take advantage of the process of organizing in order to develop a very special process of education. Maybe I will try to be more clear. For example, when we are trying to organize, of course we have to try to mobilize, because mobilization and organization are together. But in the process of mobilizing and automatically organizing we discover as well, as in any kind of action or practice, that we must become more and more efficient. If you are not trying to be efficient in organizing workshops, the people will not answer you next year when you call. That is, efficiency, without being an instrument of enslaving you, is something that is absolutely necessary. Inefficiency has to do with the distance between what you do and what you would like to get. Do you see that we manage with efficiency in this place? I have my dream. Then what did I do in order to materialize my dream? Then my evaluation has to do with this.

Those who are engaged in mobilizing and organizing have to evaluate this process. In the process of evaluation, undoubtedly, there is an interpretive and necessary moment in which the leaders who are trying to mobilize and organize have to know better what they are doing. The organizers engage in critical reflection on what they did. In doing that the leaders start participating in a process in the next stage of mobilization and organization, because they change. They tend to change in their language. Do you see? If they don't do that they are not capable. They will change their lan-
guage, their speech, the contents of their speech to the extent that in mobilizing the people they are learning from the people. And then the more they learn from the people the more they can mobilize. It's expected. They can mobilize the people. Then because of that I always see that it's absolutely necessary for mobilizers and organizers to be quite sure about the educational nature of this practice.

In a second aspect we can show, in an analysis of the process we call mobilizing and organizing—which implies organizers getting more and closer contacts with groups of people—that the organizers are engaged, if they are good, in a kind of participatory research.

**THIRD PARTY:** If they're good.

**PAAULO:** If they are good. It's necessary to say, if they are good. And if they are good in being involved in participatory research, they necessarily are grasping some issues that have to do with the expectations and frustrations of the people, some issues that have to do with people's lack of knowledge. Then it should be possible, starting from the process of mobilizing, to begin to create workshops, for example, for the people in which educators could illuminate the issues coming from the people. I see too that through educational moments in a mobilizing process, one takes part in the very process of mobilizing. The other one is something that comes up from, and because of, the mobilization process.

**MYLES:** Yes. I think certainly you can learn from mobilizing, but you can learn to manipulate the people or you can learn to educate the people. There's two kinds of learning that come out of the same experience. In both the civil rights movement and the labor movement, there's no other identifiable source that produced as many organizers as Highlander did. There were so many organizing in the labor movement who came from Highlander that people called it an organizer's school. There weren't many organizers in the South. We were starting without much experience, so we had to develop a lot of organizers. I always said that Highlander was not a school for organizers. It was a school to help people learn to analyze and give people values, and they became the organizers. The reason so many of Highlander's people were successful organizers was because of that. Not that we trained them in techniques of mobilizing and organizing, because we didn't do that. The same training that people got to be an organizer, they got to be an official of the unions, they got to be a committee member, they got to be a shop steward. It was all the same. It wasn't technical. We didn't tell people how to do things. But they became successful organizers, and people who wanted to be organizers knew they came from Highlander, so they'd come to Highlander so they could be organizers. We taught them our own way, and the reason we did that was because we wanted them to be educators as well as organizers. Instead of just mobilizers we wanted them to educate the people. They were the people who insisted on having the educational program in their unions. When they'd organize the union, they'd immediately set up the educational program because they understood that was part of a union, whereas some of the people would operate from the top. They didn't want an educational program be-
cause they wanted to control it from the top. Now that was a different kind of organization. When I say the difference between education and organizing, I don’t mean to say you can’t have educating and organizing because that’s what we try to do. An organizing experience can be educational. It can be. But it has to be done with the purpose of having democratic decision making, having people participate in the action and not having just one authoritative leader. Otherwise it won’t work.

I’m not critical of organizations. In fact Highlander is based on organizations. In the old days, for example, we wouldn’t take anybody at Highlander who wasn’t a product of an organization, who wasn’t involved in an organization, who didn’t come from an organization. So to separate Highlander’s thinking from organizations is a mistake, because we think organizations have to be the first step toward a social movement. What you do in that organization is different if you just think of organizing or if you just think of the way Highlander works. It’s a little confusing, but in practice it seemed to work out pretty well.

PAULO: Organizers who hope to educate must increase their historical and cultural sensitivity. An educator or mobilizer without that vigil should change professions. Secondly, without the sensitivity of intuition, it’s impossible to become an educator, but it is also impossible to become an educator by stopping at the level of sensitivity. I must be intuitive, but I cannot stop with intuition. I have to take the object of my intuition as an object of my knowing and grasp it theoretically and not because it just exists, you see.

MYLES, I remember that some time ago you talked to me about a difficult situation you had in the thirties with a worker-leader who wanted you to say what they should do. Do you remember?

MYLES: We had been successful at Highlander earlier in organizing a county in which we lived, organizing the unions, and organizing the county politically. We took over the county politically by using education, so I knew how to do that. I knew how education could be used as a means of building organizations, union and political organizations, but I didn’t know what you could do in a short period of an organizing campaign, which has for its purpose getting a union organized and getting a contract. That’s the purpose in setting up a union.

Within that framework I was interested in going as far as I could in helping people develop the capacity to make decisions and to take responsibility, which is what I think is the role of an educator. One of the things I was doing was working through committees to get the committee members to take the responsibilities and learn how to do things. We had a relief committee that needed a little help at first in how you handle relief problems and funds that come in. I finally got this committee and the others to the place where I didn’t even need to know what was going on, and I felt that was kind of a measure of success. If they didn’t come to me to ask me or to tell me, then I thought they’re doing pretty well. But the strike committee was one of
the toughest; they had to think through the strategy of a strike. We had the local police force, the county sheriff, the state militia against us. So it was a tough job. They were trying to break the strike. The highway patrol had begun to usher scabs through the picket lines and they were beginning to really break into our solidarity. The strikers said: “We’ve got to try something new. We’ve got to do something.” One guy said, “Why don’t we just dynamite the damn mill?” “Then we won’t have a job,” they said, “that won’t work.” We were having a little meeting up in my motel room. There were very few places we could meet where we wouldn’t be listened to. The room was probably bugged, and the telephone was. They kept throwing out ideas, and I’d raise questions to get them to think a little more about it. Finally they said they couldn’t come up with anything, any strategy, or anything to do. They were getting desperate. They said: “Well, now you’ve had more experience than we have. You’ve got to tell us what to do. You’re the expert.” I said: “No, let’s talk about it a little bit more. In the first place I don’t know what to do, and if I did know what to do I wouldn’t tell you, because if I had to tell you today then I’d have to tell you tomorrow, and when I’m gone you’d have to get somebody else to tell you.” One guy reached in his pocket and pulled out a pistol and says, “Goddamn you, if you don’t tell us I’m going to kill you.” I was tempted then to become an instant expert, right on the spot! But I knew that if I did that, all would be lost and then all the rest of them would start asking me what to do. So I said: “No. Go ahead

... and shoot if you want to, but I’m not going to tell you.” And the others calmed him down.

PAULO: This is a very beautiful story, if you consider that the educator has to educate and then because of that, the educator has to intervene. When I speak about intervening, some people symbolize this as if I, the educator, should come with some instruments to cut trees, and so on. For me it’s a fantastic example of how the educator radically educates.

Myles: Sounds a little radical all right.

PAULO: The best way you had to intervene was to reject giving the solution and secondly to be honest. Say first, I don’t know; and secondly, if I did know I would not tell you because doing it the first time means I would have to do it the second, third, the fourth. You see, it is the intervention of the educator. That is, you did not reject being the educator. It is beautiful.

Myles: That’s why I make the distinction between organizing and educating. Now an organizer’s job, one who wasn’t an educator, would be to get that contract the best way he could. That wouldn’t have been a problem for him—to tell them what he thought was the best way to deal with that situation. His purpose was to get the organization’s goal achieved, you see. And that’s what an organizer’s job is. An organizer’s job is not to educate people as a prime consideration. His job is to accomplish a limited, specific goal. I’m not saying it isn’t a wonderful goal for the people. I’m not saying it isn’t valuable. I’m just saying there’s a difference between organizing and educating, and I think there’s a very
important distinction. And an educator should never become an expert, and an organizer quite often finds that that's his main strength, being the expert.

"My expertise is in knowing *not* to be an expert"

THIRD PARTY: Myles, is that sort of the same philosophy that you and Highlander used to exclude people from workshops who the people perceive as experts? I know we've had very similar discussions around other ways that people perceive authority. For instance, in the occupational health movement, when coal miners came to Highlander to learn about and talk about occupational disease, we didn't want doctors in the room. Is there something similar at work here between experts and charismatic leaders doing the same thing in a workshop process?

MYLES: I think we've had a lot of experience with that. Often when I say you start with people's experience, people get the point that you start and stop with that experience, but of course all of you know better. There's a time when people's experience runs out. I'll give you an example. We were working with a group of black parents here in a Tennessee town where only about 5 percent of the population is black. The schools had merged. They weren't integrated; they just absorbed the blacks and made whites out of them without schools changing any of their all-white, racist ways of doing. So the black kids were miserable. The parents at first insisted on them fitting in, and then they finally realized what they were doing, really brutalizing the kids by setting up situa-

tions in which they were discriminated against. So they came down to Highlander for a couple of workshops about this situation. They decided that they were going to have a lawsuit, go into court. Well, pretty soon they exhausted what they knew. At that point, I said, "Would it be helpful if we got a lawyer, a friendly lawyer, to tell you the processes you'll have to go through?" They said, "We'll welcome that." Now that's what I call an extension of their knowledge, their experiences, which stays well within the framework of where they are in their thinking. It's their idea. So at that point you can feed in a lot of information that they don't have.

I asked a friend if he could come out—as a teacher, not as a lawyer—to teach them about what having a lawsuit meant in terms of time, cost, likely results and so on. When he got through, they realized that the solution could be ten years off, because there could be appeals, and their kids would be out of school by the time that was over. It would cost a lot of money and, in the meantime, they would more or less just sit on their hands and do nothing. So it would in fact kill their organization. Now he was very sympathetic. He was very pro-integration and he was anxious to be helpful and what he did was extremely helpful. But he wanted to go ahead, go on and advise them about what to do. I stopped him at that point because I didn't want the expert to tell them what to do. I wanted the expert to tell them the facts and let them decide what to do. Now there's a big difference in giving information and telling people how to use it. I had to really just get a hold of him by the arm and lead him out of the room. He