

“Educating for Social Change: Approaches to Pedagogy in El Salvador”

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I tried to approach my summer in El Salvador holding on *just* tight enough to my initial plan. I proposed to study five educational spaces including the University of Central America, a rural NGO, a community radio station, a Christian base community and a public high school. The fundamental question of my research was: How can/ does Salvadoran civil society develop and employ a pedagogy to form active citizens committed to a society of justice and peace. I was very excited about learning from these spaces, but expected that certain expectations and appointments would fall through and that I would find other unanticipated opportunities. So I left the country with the expectation that I would let my first encounters teach where my research would go.

Before I went to El Salvador, I did a good bit of directed readings. I focused on the educational theory of Paulo Freire, hoping this would be a groovy theoretical basis to engage the individuals I would meet. I also read some social psychology material and socio-historical articles to give me a head start to think about the social reality of the individuals I would find.

The first week focused my study quite quickly. A rather jarring, patronizing encounter with the vice-rector of the University of Central America on my third day (July 3rd) in the country caused me to react hard against “formal” educational spaces. Conversations with a friend that afternoon increased my curiosity in spaces of “popular education” in the country. From that day, pop. ed. became my focus.

Before I jumped into the world of popular education, I followed certain contacts that I made while I was still in the States. I spent a day (July 5th) in the legislative assembly speaking with two representatives to the assembly and several administrators and lawyers, attempting to

gather their vision of where the country should be headed in terms of action and formation of its citizens. It was very interesting and just really fun. They bought me lunch.

On Friday of the first week (July 5th), Providence swept me into a most fortuitous conversation. I met Ana Bickel, co-director and veteran teacher of FUNPROCOOP/ Red ALFORJA, a series of popular education/ political formation schools started in the 1960's. We talked a little bit about the history of the organization and of the theory and ideology of the school. Then she, with a bit of prompting, invited me to participate in their week of political formation classes at Red ALFORJA, up in the north of the country. I enthusiastically accepted.

The following Monday, the "Escuela Red ALFORJA" began. The whole week was wonderful. I was one of thirty students. They hailed from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The theme of the week was "Power Relations and Identity in the Countryside" and analyzed the students social reality especially in regards to economic and gender power relations. I was able to see the theory and methods in action that Ana had introductorily described the Friday prior. I was invited to participate fully and shared when appropriate.

The week was packed so I was only able to ask the students a random pointed question during meals and breaks; I would have loved to have had more time for intentional conversation. But the method of popular education invites a hefty amount of experience sharing from the students so personal interviews and conversations were not so necessary. The three teachers and thirty students constructed an awesome environment mixing lecture, sharing and playing. I had so much to think about the trip could have ended there.

FUNPROCOOP/ ALFORJA was one of two pop. ed. giants that welcomed me this summer. The other is named "Equipo Maiz" and toward the end of my trip (June 30th), I was invited to participate in a day-long training. We traveled to a community in the south of the

capital and worked with a group of young leaders. The theme of this day of training (it was the third in a series of five) was community organization but we also touched sub-themes of gender and economics. I was very thankful for another vision into the construction of a popular education space, how the teachers manage the space etc. Maiz's approach to political and personal formation is distinct from that of ALFORJA and this was a very useful contrast.

In between my experiences with ALFORJA and Equipo Maiz, I spent time with two rural NGOs that work in support of the agricultural sector of the population. Though they are not popular education schools by name, they do use similar methods and social analysis. I first spent a week with OIKOS Solidaridad, an NGO based near Usulután. I worked with this NGO last summer. Since I knew the social workers and their spheres of work so well, I could jump into new, deeper conversations about how they approach their work and the theory behind their methods.

During the week with OIKOS, I was able to return to the community radio station, Radio Izcanal, and learn more about the hope and intentionality behind the work that I saw last summer. The staff shared with me more about the history, hopes, community outreach and programming of the radio. I was very thankful to integrate this perspective into the whole summer conversation.

The name of the second NGO is The Permaculture Institute of El Salvador. Generally, they are dedicated to the sharing and spreading theory and practice of a "permanent" or "sustainable" agriculture for a permanent or sustainable culture. Permaculture theory is a pretty messy, technical business and they have developed a unique method of education especially through practice and sharing. I was able to speak with the man who "brought Permaculture" to El Salvador as well as teachers and students of the institute and attend two trainings.

In the final days of the trip, I was able to do a bit of review. I had three excellent conversations with Ana, the teacher at ALFORJA, as well as the teacher from the Equipo Maiz class and a friend from last summer, Javier Rivera, who worked with popular education during the civil war. These conversations were wonderful, as the summer experiences gave me more context for discussion and better-rooted questions.

So I came back with a lot of stuff. I had participated in several popular education classes. People shared their thoughts about the theory of pop. ed. in general. I constantly engaged my participation and overheard wisdom with my readings of Freire. Individuals shared their vision of the social reality and gave texture of Freire's worldview in which the oppressed and the oppressor interact. In all of these encounters, I was thrown a *lot* of book titles, especially regarding theory and methods of popular education.

This summer has put me in a delightful position to write my thesis. The thesis, like my summer, will drag me places where I will not expect... but my current, general idea is the following. I hope to begin with the worldview and general theory of Paulo Freire as a lens with which to see my summer experience. I plan to keep reading the books handed to me this summer and develop my vision of the "how" of personal transformation in popular education. I hope my thesis will end with a robust discussion of the epistemology of education in conversation with what I saw this summer.