

Educational Practice

"The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy"

PAULO: Education always implies program, content, method, objectives and so on, as I said yesterday. For me it has always been a political question, not exclusively an educational question, at what levels students take part in the process of organizing the curriculum. I know that this question has to have different answers according to different places and times. The more people participate in the process of their own education, the more the people participate in the process of defining what kind of production to produce, and for what and why, the more the people participate in the development of their selves. The more the people become themselves, the better the democracy. The less people are asked

about what they want, about their expectations, the less democracy we have.

MYLES: I use questions more than I do anything else. They don't think of a question as intervening because they don't realize that the reason you asked that question is because you know something. What you know is the body of the material that you're trying to get people to consider, but instead of giving a lecture on it, you ask a question enlightened by that. Instead of you getting on a pinnacle you put them on a pinnacle. I think there's a lot of confusion in the minds of academicians as to what you mean when you say you have to intervene.

PAULO: Yeah, it's very good that you said this because I use intervention exactly in the way you use it.

MYLES: Yes, I know you do, but you'd better try to explain it a little better, because other people will misunderstand you.

THIRD PARTY: Myles, in those early days, how did you see your role? How did you evolve your technique of intervention? What did you do?

MYLES: Well, I take the same position as Paulo, that you have the responsibility, if you have some knowledge or some insight, to share that with people. If you have a conviction, you have a responsibility to act on that conviction where you can, and if you're doing education, you act on it in an educational context.

I reacted to the way I was educated, which I thought was miseducation. I thought there ought to be a better way. I've always resented being put down by teachers showing their knowledge and presuming that I didn't have any. The truth about the matter was that I was

in situations like this when I was in school in Brazil [Tenn.], where I knew more than the teacher, and I knew I knew more than the teacher. I started experimenting with ways to get my ideas across without putting people down, with trying to get them to think and analyze their own experiences. So I rediscovered what's long been known, that one of the best ways to educate is to ask questions. Nothing new about that. It's just not widely practiced in academic life. I guess the academicians give you a lecture on it, but they couldn't practice it. So I just found that if I know something well enough, then I can find a way in the discussion that's going on to inject that question at the right time, to get people to consider it. If they want to follow it up, then you ask more questions, growing out of that situation. You can get all your ideas across just by asking questions and at the same time you help people to grow and not form a dependency on you. To me it's just a more successful way of getting ideas across.

THIRD PARTY: Then it becomes their idea.

MYLES: It becomes theirs because they're the ones who come to that idea, not because I said it or because of some authority; it just makes sense. It makes sense because it's related to the process and the thinking they're going through.

THIRD PARTY: It's kind of subversive isn't it?

MYLES: Well yes, I guess, if you say being subversive is that you try to get your ideas across. I've never hesitated to tell anybody what I believe about anything if they ask me. I see no reason to tell them before they get ready to listen to it, and when they ask a question, then they're

ready to listen to it. I just don't see any point in wasting your energy trying to force something on people. We have a saying here. You probably have similar sayings in your culture in Brazil. We say you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink.

PAULO: Yes.

MYLES: This is a problem they deal with in academia by hitting the horse over the head and beating on him till they force his nose in the tub, and just to keep the blows from continuing, he'll try to drink. My system is to make him thirsty, so he'll volunteer to drink.

PAULO: Yes.

THIRD PARTY: But, Myles, did it take you some practice to get to the point so you always knew how to handle those questions?

MYLES: Oh, did it!

THIRD PARTY: Let's talk about that a little bit.

MYLES: See, when I tell something like this, you think I'm saying I was born with a gray beard, like I was born like I am now.

THIRD PARTY: It is confusing because you also said you didn't believe in experimenting on people.

MYLES: Not *on* people but with people. You experiment with people not on people. There's a big difference. They're in on the experiment. They're in on the process. At what point do you get good at something? I had a reputation for being good at leading discussions, but I didn't have that reputation in the first years of the school, when we were trying to figure out how to use our academic knowledge on people.

For example, we always had the practice at High-

lander, back when I was director, of having the staff acquainted with the area in which we were working. There were two ways. We would respond to a student's request for help or we'd just roam around the region to find out what was going on. We needed to know what was happening in the economic, social, and cultural realm where we were working, but we didn't come in and make a lecture on it or write a book about it. We used this knowledge to have insights out of which we asked questions and led discussions. So you had to be knowledgeable; you had to know your subject. You had to know more than the people that you were teaching or you wouldn't have anything to contribute. You didn't have to know more about where they were in their development. They knew more about that than you did. You didn't have to know more about their experiences. They were the world's authority on their own experience and you need to value that, appreciate that.

Highlander has a videotape of a workshop in which Mike Clark, the director at that time, asks one question, and that one question turned that workshop around and completely moved it in a different direction. Well, that was one short question, but Mike had years of experience in the region, out of which he asked that question. Now that's what I mean by using your content. Use your familiarity with your subject, but use it as a basis. First it's a matter of conviction that that's the way you should deal with people, that you should respect them and let them develop their own thinking without you trying to think for them. But how do you do that? You have to practice till you find out you know how to do

it, and then it's like anything else. Like a musician just learning, sit down at the piano and start playing. You just start doing it. It's natural. You don't have to give it a great deal of thought. You just intuitively say, "Well, what can I do here?" And it kind of comes out, but that's practice. That's practice.

PAULO: Concerning this question of not respecting the knowledge, the common sense of the people. Last week I was in Recife leading a seminar for a group of educators, and we were discussing precisely this question of respecting knowledge of the people. A teacher told us a very interesting story. She said that academic learning, the fact of being an academic, is not bad. It's just what *kind* of academic. A student went to a fishing area to do some research, and he met a fisherman who was coming back from fishing. The academic asked, "Do you know who is the president of the country?" The fisherman said, "No, I don't know." "Do you know the name of the governor of the state?" He said, "I'm afraid that I don't know." And then the academic, losing patience, said, "But at least you know the name of the local authority." The fisherman said, "No I also don't know, but taking advantage of asking these questions about names of people, I would like to ask you: Do you know the name of this fish?" And the academic said no. "But, that one you know, don't you?" The academic said no. "But this third one, you have to know," and the academic said, "No, I also don't know." The fisherman said, "Do you see? Each one with his ignorance."

MYLES: There's a mountain story, same plot but different story, of a traveling salesman here in the mountains. He

got lost and he didn't know which way to go. He found a little boy beside the road, and he said, "Hey there son, do you know the way to Knoxville?" The boy said, "No, sir." And he said, "Do you know the way to Gatlinburg?" "No, sir." Well, he said, "Do you know the way to Sevierville?" The boy said, "No, sir." And he said, "Boy, you don't know much, do you?" "No, sir, but I ain't lost!"

THIRD PARTY: It seems to me that you keep coming back in the conversations again and again to this point of the delicate relationship between teaching, giving knowledge, and learning knowledge. Paulo talks about going *beyond* the knowledge that the people bring. Now I suspect that you do that too. Paulo articulates going beyond the knowledge of the people, and Myles articulates beginning with the knowledge of the people, so somewhere in between there there's a practice that both of you have.

MYLES: I have a personal philosophy of what I think the world should be like, what life should be like. Now as I said yesterday I have no rights that shouldn't be made universal, and if I can understand this has any validity and authenticity, then other people can understand it. I start with that premise, so now the question is how you expose people, move people on to where they'll take a look at this. That's the whole purpose of what I perceive Highlander to be. You stay within the experience of the people, and the experience is growing right there, in what I call a circle of learners, in a workshop situation. They're growing because they've learned from their peers. They've learned not what they knew but knew they didn't know. They learned something from

the questions you've raised. You've got them to thinking, so right there before your eyes their experience is changing. You're not talking about the experience they brought with them. You're talking about the experience that is given them in the workshop, and in a few days time that experience can expand tremendously. But if you break the connection between the starting point, their experience, and what they know themselves, if you get to the place where what they know can't help them understand what you're talking about, then you lose them. Then you reach the outside limits of the possibility of having any relationship to those people's learning. So you have to be very careful in analyzing a group to know that they're ready to talk about ancient Greece, if that throws light on the subject, or if they're ready to talk about what's happening in Patalonia or Brazil, what's happened in the Soviet Union. Information that brings those things out may be a movie or may be a discussion, because it's still part of their experience. Their experience is not only what they came with. If it only stays there, there's no use to start.

Now my experience has been that if you do this thing right, carefully, and don't get beyond participants at any one step, you can move very fast to expand their experience very wide in a very short time. But you have to always remember, if you break that connection, it's no longer available to their experience, then they don't understand it, and it won't be useful to them. Then it becomes listening to the expert tell them what to do, and they'll go back home and try to do it without under-

standing it or even thinking they need to understand it, you see. That's no good.

I never feel limited by this process at all. I feel liberated by it. I feel I can raise questions that are much more far-reaching and much more in-depth and much more radical, much more revolutionary, this way than I could if I was talking to them and trying to explain things to them. I use it as a way to get in more, not less. I don't feel like I'm riding roughshod over people by trying to get them to share my ideas. I don't have any guilt problems about this at all. I think it's my responsibility to share what I believe in, not only in discussions but in the way I live and in the way the workshops run and in the way Highlander's run, the way life is.

Rosa Parks talks about her experience at Highlander, and she doesn't say a thing about anything *factually* that she learned. She doesn't say a thing about any subject that was discussed. She doesn't say a thing about integration. She says the reason Highlander meant something to her and emboldened her to act as she did was that at Highlander she found *respect* as a black person and found white people she could *trust*. So you speak not just by words and discussion but you speak by the way your programs are run. If you believe in something, then you have to practice it. People used to come to Highlander when there were very few places, if any, in the South where social equality was accepted. We shared it by doing it and not by talking about it. We didn't have to make a speech about it. We didn't even have to ask questions about it. We did it. So, it's all tied

together, doing everything you can to share your ideas. There's no such thing as just being a coordinator or facilitator, as if you don't know anything. What the hell are you around for, if you don't know anything. Just get out of the way and let somebody have the space that knows something, believes something.

THIRD PARTY: Are there specific examples in particular of that delicate balance between *bringing out* the knowledge of the people and *going beyond* their knowledge, as Paulo puts it, and how this is reflected in practice? Theoretically, that is something that people understand, but in day-to-day practice, it's very often hard to really come to terms with and to know exactly how to do it.

MYLES: It's quite obvious that you can't transfer an institution, like it was obvious to me that you couldn't take a Danish folk school and plunk it down in the mountains of east Tennessee any more than you could take a Danish beech tree and cut it off at the top of the ground and stand it up on the ground in the United States and have it grow. When you get down to this transferring level, helping somebody jump from one understanding to another, then it gets rather ticklish as to what the difference is between helping people grow in understanding and unfolding what's already there. There comes a point when you've got to ask if this idea really fits. Will this idea aid this process of growth? This is a problem that has always bothered me, exactly how far you could go in stretching people's experience without breaking the thread. In radical education, people who claim to

be Freirians to my mind make a lot of mistakes, making assumptions about people's experience and knowledge.

PAULO: I think that this is one of the main points of which radical educators have to be aware. If someone is an educator, it means then that this person is involved with a process or some kind of action with others who are named the students. This educator can be working, for example, inside of the school and he or she has systematized practice. He or she has a certain curriculum to follow, and he or she teaches a particular content to the students. It is the same for an educator who works out of the school, out of the subsystem of education. For example, an educator at Highlander does not have necessarily a curriculum, in the broader meaning of this. The Highlander educator does not have necessarily a list of subjects to talk about, to explain to students. Nevertheless, there is something that for me is impossible, and that is the absence of some content about which they speak. What must be the central difference is that in Highlander's experience, the contents come up from analysis, from the thinking of those who are involved in the process of education—that is, not exclusively from the educator who chooses what he or she thinks to be the best, for the students, but also those who come to participate. It is as if they were suddenly in a circle, like this house,* getting some distance from their

* The central meeting room at Highlander is circular in shape. Rocking chairs, a fireplace, and a spectacular view of the Smoky Mountains provide a comfortable atmosphere for workshops.

experience in order to understand the reasons why they are having this kind of experience. It means that also in this setting, the educator, even though he or she is different from a public-school educator, does not transfer knowledge to the group of people who come here. As far as I understand Myles's thinking and practice, with his team here, I see that in all the fundamental moments of Highlander's history—in the thirties, in the fifties, in the sixties, in the seventies, in every moment—the educators here have been educators but have accepted *to be educated* too. That is, they understood, even though they did not read Marx, what Marx meant when he said that "the educator himself must be educated."

MYLES: Yes. Bernice Robinson, the first Citizenship School teacher, says that the most important thing she did was to say the first time the people got together: "Now I'm *not* a school teacher. I'm here to learn with you." Now she didn't get that from Marx. She got that as a black woman from her experience.

PAULO: But what is fantastic, Myles, in the history of this experience is that in learning with those who come here, you also taught them, that it should be possible for educators just to learn with the students. Both are engaged in the process in which both grew up. Educators have some systematic knowledge that the students necessarily don't have yet. . . . And now I think that I am coming near the question.

THIRD PARTY: Sneaking up on it.

PAULO: Yes, this is my way of working, of thinking. First I try to make a circle so the issue can't escape.

When the students come, of course, they bring with

them, inside of them, in their bodies, in their lives, they bring their hopes, despair, expectations, knowledge, which they got by living, by fighting, by becoming frustrated. Undoubtedly they don't come here empty. They arrive here full of things. In most of the cases, they bring with them opinions about the world, about life. They bring with them their knowledge at the level of common sense, and they have the right to go beyond this level of knowledge. At the same time—I want to be very clear, in order to avoid being understood as falling into a certain scientificism—there are levels of knowledge about the facts they already know, which unveil other ways of knowing, which can give us much more exact knowledge about the facts. This is a right that the people have, and I call it the right to know better what they already know. Knowing better means precisely going beyond the *common sense* in order to begin to discover the *reason* for the facts.

Right now I can tell a small story. One month ago I was talking at home with one of my friends, one of the directors of the working class institute I spoke about earlier. At the end of a course about workers' lives, a young man said, "When I came here I was sure that I already knew many many things about these issues, but I was not as clear about the *reasons* for them as I am now." What this young worker meant is precisely the central question you asked. That is, how, starting from where people are, to go with them beyond these levels of knowledge without just *transferring* the knowledge. The question is not to come to the classroom and to make beautiful speeches analyzing, for example, the

political authority of the country, but the question is how to take advantage of the reading of reality, which the people are doing, in order to make it possible for students to make a different and much *deeper* reading of reality.

The question is not to impose readings on students, no matter that they are university students, but how to put together critically, dialectically, the reading of the texts in relationship to the contexts, and the understanding of the contexts that can be helped through the reading of texts. This also is the question, how to make this walk with people starting from more or less naive understanding of reality. Starting from people's experiences, and not from *our* understanding of the world, does not mean that we don't want the people to come with us in order to go beyond us afterward. This movement for me is one of the many important roles of a progressive educator, and it is not always so easy.

I think that we have to create in ourselves, through critical analysis of our practice, some qualities, some virtues as educators. One of them, for example, is the quality of becoming more and more open to feel the feelings of others, to become so sensitive that we can guess what the group or one person is thinking at that moment. These things cannot be taught as content. These things have to be learned through the example of the good teacher.

MYLES: This is a problem, how we can have a body of knowledge and understanding and resist the temptation to misread the interest of the people because we're look-

ing for an opportunity to unload this great load of gold that we have stored up.

PAULO: Not to do that, Myles, is one of the other virtues.

MYLES: Now that blinds us sometimes, it seems to me, from observing the action of the people, the nonverbal language, because we are thinking verbally, and we're only looking for verbal reactions and we don't read anything else.

PAULO: The bodies.

MYLES: We don't want to see that because it wouldn't encourage us to agree that they are with us. Now that's a real problem that I have to struggle with. I've observed that I have two roles, one as a what you might call an educator in relation to the situation and one as a person who has subjective experience I'd like to share with people, knowledge that I've picked up one way or another. I've got to keep those two things separate, but in my enthusiasm, sometimes I mix the two.

One of the things I've found is that if any one of a group of people with similar problems asks a question, then there's a good chance that the question will reflect some of the thinking of the peers. Even if it doesn't, everybody in that circle is going to listen to the answer to that question, because one of their peers asked it. They can identify with the questioner. It's a *clue* that there's some interest there. Short of questions, I have found that I'm secure in a discussion when people actually say what they perceive a situation to be. Then I know where I am. But there's always gradations, from the certainty up to the guessing, the temptation to guess

in favor of your subjectivity, *your* experience instead of *their* experience. How do you deal with that?

PAULO: Yes. There is another obstacle for such an attitude vis-à-vis the object of knowledge and vis-à-vis the students as cognitive subjects, which is the dominant ideology introjected by the students no matter whether they are workers or students of the university. That is, they come absolutely convinced that the teacher has to *give* a class to them.

MYLES: They have the answers.

PAULO: Do you see? They come just to receive answers for any questions they asked before. As you said, this is an obstacle—how to confront a group of students who, in perceiving that you are interested in knowing what they know, think that you are not capable. Is it clear that the students . . .

MYLES: . . . View you as an authority figure.

PAULO: Yes. They expect you to give the first class in an old style, and you say no, I would like first of all to talk a little bit about the very content we should study this semester. And then one of the students can say to himself or herself, this professor is not capable, above all if the professor is a young person. Several graduate students in São Paulo told me how they were obliged to start immediately, giving a list of books and speaking a lot, because the students felt insecure. I think that in such a case, the teacher, understanding the situation, should be 50 percent a traditional teacher and 50 percent a democratic teacher in order to begin to challenge the students, and for them to change a little bit too.

With regard to popular groups, I think if they did

not have too much experience in the school system, the situation is a little bit different. Of course they can be frightened because they think that the educator is a so-called intellectual and they don't see themselves also as intellectuals. They cannot understand that. They think that they don't have culture because the cultured man or woman has first to come to university. Then it's necessary to exercise this discipline you talked about, the discipline of controlling a second intellectual taste that we intellectuals always have, which is speaking about what we think that we know. In the works by Amilcar Cabral there is something very interesting that sometimes shows up very clearly, which is the dialecticity between patience and impatience. Based on Amilcar I always say that, in effect, we should work "impatiently patient." There is a moment when we can go a little farther and say something, and there is a moment in which we should listen more to the people.

MYLES: Yes. Sometimes I think of it in terms of a figure. You try to stretch people's minds and their understanding, but if you move too fast then you break the connection. You go off and leave them, and so they aren't being stretched in their thinking. In popular education, my experience is that working and poor people all come with an expectation. Since they've been told they can learn something, and what they're to learn is the answers to their problems, they expect an expert with answers. Even if they haven't been in school in a long time, they're socialized by society to look for an expert. So I start out by acknowledging that that's why they've come. Then I say, you know you have a lot of prob-

lems. And I just use that as a jumping off place, so to speak, to ask them to talk about their experience. Let's see what's in your experience and not in the experience of experts.

You set the stage for doing something that they're uncomfortable with. You know they're uncomfortable with it, and you have to work through that business of getting them to be comfortable with trusting themselves a little bit, trusting their peers a little bit. They hear Mary say something and Susie says well, if they listen to Mary, maybe they'll listen to me. It's a slow process, but once the people get comfortable with it, then they begin to see that you aren't going to play the role of an expert, except in the sense that you are the expert in *how* they're going to learn, not in *what* they're going to learn. It's a slow and tedious process but it seems to work.

Now I'll admit at times in situations I've had to do what you said, Paulo, do part of the old and part of the new. I remember one time here in Tennessee, I was trying to help a group of farmers get organized into a cooperative, and they announced that I was coming to speak at this country schoolhouse. Well, I knew their expectation was that I would speak as an expert. I knew if I didn't speak, and said "let's have a discussion about this," they'd say that guy doesn't know anything. So I said, what I have to do is make a speech because I don't want to lose the interest they've built up, and I can't change them instantaneously. So I made a speech, the best speech I could. Then after it was over, while we were still there, I said, let's discuss this speech. Let's dis-

cuss what I have said. Well now, that was just one step removed, but close enough to their expectation that I was able to carry them along. So the discussion ended without resolving a lot of problems that I had raised. They were analyzing what I had said. I couldn't get them to talk about their *own* experiences because they were still looking to the experts. Before I left I said, now it'd be good if we could talk about *your* experience. We've talked about my experience, now let's talk about yours. Could we come back next week? And you will be the speakers. In this way I was able to get started with them. I never had to make another speech. You do have to make concessions like that.

"Highlander is a weaving of many colors"

THIRD PARTY: Myles, I'd like some more examples of what Paulo's talking about in terms of the practice with popular education. I know with the labor schools, for instance, at Highlander that you would do classes on parliamentary procedure and how to put out a newsletter and very specific things that I know grew out of requests. With the civil rights movement, it was different. Would you talk about how you got to those two different places. Or maybe they're not different places at all. How did you determine what to do in working with the labor movement? And then how was it different with the civil rights movement, if it was.

MYLES: No, the labor period was the first experience we'd actually had in a structured sort of program. We had to start with what they perceived their problems to be. Our