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Drawing on examples from adult writing groups the authors have taught in marginalized communities in Chicago and Minneapolis, they present an egalitarian approach to teaching and learning that promotes democracy and eliminates hierarchical roles and relationships in classrooms and other educational settings.

Democracy Is in the Details: Small Writing Groups Prefiguring a New Society

Janise Hurtig, Hal Adams

> Having written and read in a group, it leaves me with the sensation of having strengthened even more our bonds of friendship . . . I appreciate them, and I also thank them for having shared something about themselves with the group through their writings: the group that I feel happy to be a part of; the group with which I can get nervous, happy, sad; where I can cry, without fear, without embarrassment . . .
>
> —From "The Experience of Writing" by Dolores Nava (2002), parent writer at a small community school

> When I first came to the writing group I was very shy. I didn't like to speak in public because I didn't think I had anything important to say. By writing in the group I have learned from my classmates that the experiences I have lived are interesting. They are also important. I can see that I have many stories to tell about my life that I think others can learn from. Now, I like to go to public forums to speak out about issues in our community, because I am confident in what I know and what I think...
>
> —From "My Experience in the Writing Group" by Flora Salinas, parent writer at a neighborhood school (unpublished)

> In my opinion the greatest strength of the . . . Greek ancient democracy, was that it achieved a balance between the individual and the community that was never achieved before or since. That is one of the fundamental problems of politics: what is the relation of the individual, his rights, his liberties, his freedom, his possibilities of progress to the community in which he lives as a part.
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> —James, 1973, p. 5

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The title of this chapter was inspired by a conversation that transpired during a community writing workshop Janise was teaching to parents of children who attended a neighborhood elementary school located in an immigrant Latino neighborhood in Chicago. We were discussing the stories participants had written the previous week in response to the theme "A leader who inspires me," prompted by the upcoming Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Some participants had written about political figures or community organizers who had inspired them to participate in struggles for immigrant or worker rights; others had written about individuals who might not be considered leaders in the conventional sense, but who had the capacity to bring people together to work toward a common cause. Andrea wrote a piece in which she characterized her grandmother as a leader because of her ability to hold their large family together, keeping the peace among relatives who did not always see eye to eye. Marta chose as her model of a great leader the school's parent coordinator who was responsible for organizing the writing workshop and other parent programs at the school. Marta wrote, "I consider Doña Esperanza a great leader even though she does not really lead, at least not in the way we usually think about that word. She does not stand over us telling us what we should do. She does not exactly inspire us; she lets us inspire each other. She brings people together and lets all of us make common decisions. So everyone is equal."

The writing prompted the workshop participants to draw distinctions between the leadership practices of conventionally recognized leaders and others who were not necessarily recognized for their leadership. One participant declared that most conventional leaders are hypocrites. "There are so many so-called leaders that talk about equality, about democracy. But in their practice they are not democratic because they want to lead and us to follow. They want to have all the power and all the glory." Marta returned to her example of Doña Esperanza. "That is why she is a true leader. She doesn't just say we are all equal, she treats us that way. She encourages all of us to lead together. She is a true leader because her actions are consistent with her values." Responding to Marta's observations, Claudia offered the following: "So for me what Marta is saying is that all those words like leadership, or justice, or democracy, they sound like big ideas, things that depend on people with power. But really we are the ones who make those things happen. It depends on the way we act every day with each other, with our children, our husbands. What makes a real difference are the small things we do, the details."

The propositions these women put forth, emerging clearly from their experience, are really quite radical: namely, that the sources of social transformation can be found in the details of ordinary people's everyday practices, and that these practices should model the world we are working to create. These propositions, and the dialogic process through which the three women came to their understanding of leadership, convey the essence of what the Community Writing Project (CWP) seeks to enact as a form of

popular education. Popular education, often referred to as "education for liberation," is based in the understanding that liberation is a praxis entailing people's ongoing critical reflection and action upon the world (Freire, 1971, p. 66). In other words, liberation is not an accomplishment or end result; rather, it is an ongoing, collective process. By extension, the work of creating a more democratic and egalitarian society occurs through collective practices that express and prefigure such a society (Gramsci, 1971). The work of popular education is one such practice.

It is a principle of popular education that the sources of imagination and insight into how to create a better society are to be found in the critical insights and creative expressions of the oppressed classes. As Bill Ayers (1995) put it, paraphrasing the work of Miles Horton, "the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions" (p. 35). In contrast to the deficit frameworks of mainstream education that portray the oppressed as objects of history, inadequate to the task of self-determination, popular education redeems the oppressed to their rightful position as subjects of history. Thus, popular educators recognize that the oppressed classes, through their experience of and struggle against oppression, have access to the insights and imagination that guide us toward a more just society (Freire, 1971; James, 1973). However, those insights are not always readily accessible. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971), the Brazilian radical educator Paolo Freire characterized mainstream education as "banking education," a "top-down approach to knowledge transmission through which the teacher is sole dispenser of knowledge and the students are its passive recipients" (Mayo, 1999, p. 59). The antidemocratic, authoritarian pedagogies that characterize banking education are among the cultural practices the dominant classes use to repress the critical, creative exploration, and self-expression of oppressed people, in part by conveying to learners that they have no prior knowledge or expertise to contribute to their own education, let alone to the education of the group. Such a message, intrinsically dehumanizing and disenfranchising, conveys to ordinary people that they have no stories to tell, no wisdom to impart, no counsel to offer back to their communities.

It becomes the role of popular educators to create educational spaces in which members of oppressed groups come together to reflect on their lives, give voice to their individual and collective experiences within and beyond the classroom, and find value in the stories they tell about those experiences. Such spaces are fundamentally democratic and dialogic, in which "the learner assumes the role of knowing subject in dialogue with the educator" (Freire, 1985, p. 49). In this way, learning becomes a dialectical process of distancing oneself from one's experiences and the dominant perspectives about those experiences to examine them critically. Through such critical examination, people who have perceived themselves as objects of history recognize their agency in the world. They also gain an understanding of how the imposition of dominant worldviews contributes to their alienation from that recognition. The popular education classroom must

also be a space in which learners feel respected and thus safe to take risks. As Freire put it, "it is a courageous endeavor to demythologize reality, a process through which men [sic] who had previously been submerged in reality begin to emerge in order to reinsert themselves into it with critical awareness." The small, personal narrative writing and publishing workshops we teach through the Community Writing Project aim to offer such a space (Adams and Hurtig, 2002).

For over 15 years, the CWP has formed partnerships with neighborhood schools and community groups to host writing workshops for adults living in marginalized conditions. Most workshops meet for about ten weeks, during which time participants write stories based in their experience, read and discuss them with the group, and edit a selection of their writings for publication in an issue of the magazine *Real Conditions*. The writing workshop sessions follow an apparently simple format, in which the writing that the workshop participants submit becomes the content of the workshop, and the group's discussion of the writing generates prompts for that session's writing. But every detail of the writing workshop pedagogy has a purpose: the ways the teacher comments on the participants' writing, the nature of group discussion of each person's story, the selection of writing prompts that respond to issues the group has explored, the process of collective editing for publication, and the distribution of a magazine of the writers' work. Each facet of the writing workshop method aims to foster collaborative learning relationships; celebrate self-expression; support critical and creative reflection on the world; recognize participants as intellectuals, artists, and leaders of their communities; and encourage the exploration of individual and collective action toward change. The excerpts from two parent writers that open this chapter convey their experience of this process. Through the sharing of stories, workshop members come to celebrate the unique contribution each participant makes to the group, while respecting the value of the workshop group as a community of writers. In this way the writing workshop seeks to strike the kind of balance between individual and community that are fundamental to democracy—as the opening quotation from C.L.R. James conveys.

Just as important, the pedagogy and methods of small writing workshops aim to engage teachers and learners in a process through which the students become educators themselves, actively adopting the workshop's democratic pedagogical practices and principles. We saw this sharing of the educative role in the opening story as the group explored the definition of leadership collectively and came to a mutual decision. The group, which had been meeting for several weeks at the time of that conversation, took charge of the content of their discussions and the decisions about the themes they would use as writing prompts each week. Popular educators have written extensively on educational practices through which a democratic classroom can be created such that teachers and students bring distinct knowledge and experience to the classroom and learn from each other.

The focus tends to be on the roles and relationships of teacher and learners that foster dialogue, shared learning, and the coming into subjective self-awareness of the adult learner. Thus, while rightly insisting on the unique knowledge and insight that adult students bring to the classroom, descriptions of popular education classrooms tend to preserve the role distinctions of teacher and learner, rarely discussing the process by which the educative role is handed over to the students, such that learners become each others' teachers. This transformation, whereby students also become teachers, is an important element in establishing the classroom as an egalitarian space. Moreover, by affording participants the opportunity to take on the role of educator, they acquire the experience and confidence to become teachers of other workshops, bringing their expertise back into the community.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the intersection of these three facets of the CWP's small writing workshops that are at the core of its democratic practice: legitimating the experiences and stories of ordinary people as expressions of their cultural work in the world; fostering a mutual relationship of the individual and the group; and the transitional process by which the role of educator is increasingly assumed by the group, such that learning and teaching occur as a free exchange of ideas. In these ways popular education leaps from being a humanistic, progressive approach to education to providing a vision, however modest, of an egalitarian world. In the rest of the chapter we tell two stories from writing workshops we have taught to adults in marginalized communities of Chicago and Minneapolis. Each of the stories describes moments in which the writing group participants help an individual member recognize the value and significance of their story while collectively supporting the writing workshop as a democratic learning community, often moving fluidly between their roles as students/learners and teachers/educators. We conclude the chapter by reflecting on some of the challenges that we have faced in our efforts to create democratic educational spaces within writing workshops.

Everyone Contributes and Everyone Responds

The following story from a parent writing workshop Hal taught at Wright High School shows how the members of a workshop created an egalitarian learning community by supporting a new writer's entrance into the group's writing and storytelling activities.

The writing workshop for parents had been meeting since school opened in early September. Debra, the mother of a tenth grader, attended her first class in late October. She listened and watched, but did not contribute any comments as the group members wrote and discussed their stories. The process must have been interesting to her because she remained attentive, but she was confused about the lack of direction given by the teacher. "What's the topic?" she asked more than once. Hal explained, as he did at the beginning of each writing period that at this phase of the writing

members were doing "free-writing," that is, writing with the barest of an idea, and seeing what would happen. "See what you write yourself into," he said. "Don't pass judgment on your work at this point. Let it flow." "Like what?" Debra persisted. Hal responded, "Something small perhaps, like what you saw this morning on the way to class, an observation about a person you care about, an old family story, something you own that has meaning to you. It can be funny, sad, joyful, tragic—whatever you'd like."

Finally, in frustration, Debra turned to the group and asked, "How do I start?" By asking the workshop that important, earnest question, she took a step toward joining the group on the group's terms: namely, that a person must take initiative to join in. At this point, the rest of the class put down their pencils and gave their attention to Debra. Someone said to her, "Tell us a story." She stopped and started a few times as she talked her way into a story about her sister who died as a teenager. The story developed as Debra talked. "My sister was fourteen when she died. It hit us all hard. I guess death is always that way. We miss her so much." Some in the group jotted down notes; some asked questions. "How long ago was this?" "Where were you?" "Who was there?" Her classmates attended to her words with care and without judgment.

After a while, through the interchange with the group, Debra's story grew longer and more complex. She added characters, developed them, included dialogue, changed settings, and so on. "It's been five years. She would have gone to college by now. She was the smartest of us all. My mother cared for us all, but she favored our dead sister. Mother was the strongest of all at the end. She told us to remember, 'God has called her now and has left us to carry on.' But carrying on wasn't easy for some of us." Debra's initial question, "Where do I start," now became its opposite, "Where do I stop?" Sensing that the story was growing long and needed some focus, another student interrupted and asked Debra about her last statement. "Tell us more about carrying on. Who had the most trouble?" The whole group then took up Debra's story and worked with her on developing it. They asked questions, they made observations, they shared similar stories. Finally, the group complimented Debra and thanked her for a story they found compelling.

Not by being told, but by participating, Debra had learned a key principle of a democratic pedagogy, namely, that everybody contributes and everybody responds. By the time Debra told her first story to the group, the other students already understood that they, and not only the teacher, were responsible for the direction the class took and for transferring that information to each other. It was the group, not the teacher, that had taught Debra how to join in.

Debra's initiation demonstrates the advantage of a learning situation in which the students collectively take on a leadership role. On her first day participating in the workshop, Debra had a chance to observe through the

group's consideration of her story that her experience was complex, profound, and unique. At the same time, it was universal, and prompted an engaging discussion about death, family, adversity, and healing. That discussion came from the workshop members as they combined their individual perceptions to show how the group's collective experience was relevant to Debra's story. In this way, participants in small writing groups are encouraged to realize that profound ideas about the world can come from their individual experience and the pooled experience of people like themselves. It need not come from people they consider to be experts. Indeed, it shows them that they are the experts when it comes to their own lives. The workshop members' response to Debra showed her that she had introduced a topic the whole group could grasp and discuss in depth. The workshop members explored the universal elements of an individual's real story, and made sense of life events that can be overwhelming when considered only in isolation from other people.

This interactive approach to telling and writing stories is sometimes referred to as "giving counsel" (see Benjamin, 1969). It can happen only when people engage in oral or written verbal exchanges. Giving counsel and storytelling never happens in isolation. The process, by definition, is communal, democratic, and egalitarian. This is education as we define it in our writing groups.

A Community of Equals

In the basement of a parish rectory that now houses Project Change, a community education and outreach center that serves a predominantly Latino immigrant neighborhood in Chicago, a group of eight Latina women are meeting with Janise to write and share stories about their lives. They also are talking about the writing group's process. It is their fourth meeting.

The session begins like most workshop sessions. Janise returns to the writers the pieces they had written at the previous session, replete with her written comments. The comments include affirmations of what was written, questions prompted by the writing, suggestions to expand the writing, and identification of compelling aspects of the story. The comments have several functions: they demonstrate that the teacher has learned from the writers' stories, model a pedagogy based in constructive and supportive feedback, and encourage the writers to develop their writing. At the same time, Janise provides a computer printout of all the stories so the participants can read along as each writer reads her work aloud.

After the writers have spent a few minutes reviewing their writing, Janise invites the first writer to read her story to the rest of the class. Maria volunteers. Janise asks the class to listen attentively to Maria's story. She reminds the group members that, after the author reads the story, they will have the responsibility of offering feedback on the story's content. Usually

when it comes time to write, the teacher suggests two or three writing prompts based on issues the group has discussed. She also solicits writing prompt ideas from the group. In this way, the content of the class emerges from the group's creative work of writing and discussion. However, at the previous session Janise had deviated from this practice. She proposed that the participants write about a place that had positive associations. She suggested they include detailed descriptions and significant characters within the story. She offered this prompt to encourage participants to write with great detail, as a way of supporting the development of their writing craft, and as a way of emphasizing that the insights and opinions we develop are based in the details of our experiences.

Maria reads a story about how every morning she and her father would go up to the roof of the house to feed the pigeons and rabbits that they kept in cages made of cloth and wire. She describes how her father fashioned the cages so that he could feed the birds and rabbits water and a bit of grain. Alicia points out that by describing the two of them doing something meaningful together, namely feeding the pigeons, Maria managed, without ever saying so, to convey how meaningful that time with her father was. Some participants point out words or passages they found especially striking. Others respond to Maria's account with similar stories from their childhood experiences of keeping animals as food or pets.

When Janise asks who would like to read next, the other writers are hesitant. Finally Martha says, "No one else wants to read. I can read mine. But I'm not sure I completed the assignment correctly. My story doesn't have a lot of details the way Maria's does." The group responds supportively to Martha's expression of insecurity, offering an alternative perspective on the writing assignment and the value of her work. "There's no such thing as a correct way in the writing workshop," they comment. "We want to hear your story the way you choose to write it." Martha acknowledges the encouragement and is emboldened to read her story about her family's ritual weekend gatherings in the patio of her aunt's home, which she describes with vivid detail.

As soon as Martha finishes the other writers begin to comment on her story. Rosario offers a comment that seems to respond to Martha's fear that her story was not detailed enough. "Your descriptions make us feel like we are on that patio." There is a flurry of discussion about the familial sensibility Martha has conveyed through her writing, and about numerous stories from other writers about family spaces or reunions. As the discussion subsides, Sandra returns to Martha's earlier comment about having gotten the assignment wrong. "The writing themes are meant to get people writing. Whatever you write is important, because it is your experience. Besides, it is interesting to see how different people respond to a writing theme."

This interchange among the writers exemplifies the kind of democratic work the workshop community engages in by recognizing the unique

experiences and expressions of each individual and the value those expressions have for the rest of the group. In doing so, this group of writers took responsibility for creating a space in which participants were able to develop new ways of engaging in the learning process. Martha had responded to the praise Maria's story received based on old classroom learning habits; that is, by comparing herself to another classmate. When Martha compared her story to Maria's, she found her story lacking. The writing workshop is based on noncompetitive, nonhierarchical relationships among learners and teachers, such that the classroom is recast as a community of equals in which each person is unique in what they bring to the learning environment. When Martha reacted based on old habits of competition, the writing group collectively reassured her that her writing was equally valuable and important. In doing so, they had also taken on the role of teacher.

Is a Democratic Classroom Enough? Small Group Writing as the Basis for Community Action

There is a passage in Paolo Freire's (1985) *The Politics of Education* in which he identifies the liberatory role of literacy when it is a creative and critical act. He also identifies the limits of critical literacy, noting that "without any illusion of triggering liberation, it will nevertheless contribute to its process" (p. 17). Freire's comments could be interpreted as meaning that the educative work that takes place in democratic classrooms like the small writing workshops initiates a stage in the process of liberation, but is not the end in itself. This formulation could be read as either contradicting or refining another proposition of Freire's we presented at the beginning of this chapter, namely that liberation occurs through the process of working toward it.

For Freire and other radical educators, the kind of critical reflection on experience that takes place in the writing workshops is one phase of the cyclical process of exploration of an issue, critical discussion and reflection on the issue, and the taking of action based on that discussion . . . followed by another cycle of exploration of the issue and the actions taken. Nina Wallerstein and Elsa Auerbach (2004) refer to this cycle as "participatory praxis" (p. 13). This model of education for liberation poses a conundrum when we think about the role of small writing workshops in the larger movement for human liberation that certainly requires participatory praxis. On the one hand, we have never framed the writing workshops as action-oriented. That is, we consider the activity of writing and publishing to be the goal of the workshops. On the other hand, there are instances in which group members, either collectively or individually, are moved to take action on an issue that comes up in the group.

One such action was taken by members of a group Hal taught to parents in the elementary school their children attended, located adjacent to a massive public housing complex where many of the writers lived. During

the city's relentless dismantling of the projects, the group members' stories often concerned their fears about the uncertainty of their housing situation. For several years, Tandra, one of the writers, and her family had lived rent-free because her husband James had a verbal agreement with the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) to be on call 24/7 to do emergency maintenance in their building. When the informal maintenance agreement was rescinded, CHA officials extended permission to the family to remain in the building.

Then, Tandra and James received an eviction notice. They were the last family remaining in a condemned, thirteen-story building. The isolation in itself was frightening, but the prospect of being homeless was worse. CHA officials now claimed they were squatters. An earlier court order required CHA to give a year's notice of eviction to those who held leases on their apartments. Because of the informal but verbally sanctioned agreements, Tandra and her family had no lease. The eviction notice gave them three weeks to evacuate, or CHA would remove the family and their belongings. They had the right to appeal within a week. It seemed they were doomed, but Tandra's writing group, along with the school principal, had not yet swung into action.

On the morning of the hearing, group members, the school principal, Tandra, and James took the "El" to housing court in downtown Chicago. When their case was called, the principal, Hal, and one group member accompanied Tandra and James to the bench. Tandra and James presented their case persuasively. The judge noted the presence in court of community members, and the Johnson's long-standing record of service to the school and community. She rejected the CHA lawyer's argument. "These people aren't squatters," she said. "They're a central part of this school and residential community." She ordered the CHA to give them their rightful year's notice of eviction. She urged Tandra and James to strike a bargain with CHA, which was eager to clear out the last family from a building that was scheduled for immediate demolition. CHA gave them a moving allowance and an apartment in another building not scheduled for demolition for some time. It was no ultimate solution to poverty and housing issues, but it provided some much needed breathing room.

To offer another example, parents have periodically compared the writing workshop practice in which the instructors offer enthusiastic comments on participants' writing in purple, green, or blue ink, with classroom teachers' uses of "red ink" to correct and markup writing. Through the experience of receiving encouraging and engaging feedback on their writing, one group of parent writers were prompted to explore in stories and discussion, the ways their own teachers' use of red ink had intimidated them and alienated them from the writing process. Drawing on their childhood school experiences and critical discussion of the issue in the group, the parents came to perceive the approach those teachers were taking to their children's work as undermining their children's confidence in their writing, and discouraging

them from doing their schoolwork. The writing and discussion led two parents to approach their children's teachers about the deleterious impact of "red ink" on their children's relationship to writing and to school work more generally. One writer presented the essay she had written, entitled "Red Ink," to her son's teacher.

Although we discuss and support the actions that writers choose to take as a result of participating in the group, we have never thought of the workshop process as a vehicle for organizing or advocacy work. We leave the reader with a series of questions we have posed to ourselves. Is it enough that the writing workshop serves as a model of a democratic society, a space in which past experiences and new possibilities can be freely explored? Is the lack of an explicitly action-oriented purpose to the group a shortcoming of the workshop method as a form of liberatory education? Or is it possible that the creative and critical activity of writing and publishing stories from the community is an instance of liberatory action in its own right?

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