

Synergy Center – What is being “synergized”

A starting point: Paulo Freire

The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) challenged educational institutions around the world with his insight that the assumptions underlying those systems come from worldviews held by the economic elites, those with power in society. Conspicuously absent were the worldview and experience of the impoverished majorities in society, who also were underrepresented in its political and social institutions. The result was education systems that socialized populations - the majority of whom were disenfranchised - to “fit into” a system that served the interests of a small minority. He called it “banking education,” where analysis serving elite interests was poured into the minds of the population, in essence preventing them from developing a “critical awareness” that would lead to action to make the system work for the great majorities.

The key to breaking this mindset was to make the analysis of the poor majority themselves the starting point for the educational process. In addition, the goal of the educational system should not be to “fit into” a system that benefitted the few, but to promote ongoing change to make the system be more responsive to the poor majorities. What became known as Freireian pedagogy¹ was based on a simple three step process: 1) Poor communities start with their own lived experience, look around their communities and families to focus on what is happening, what the problems are. 2) They then jointly analyze their experience. Why are things the way they are, what are the causes? 3) Then they act jointly to change a part of that reality. After they act to change, either part of their reality changes, or they “change” as part of the experience of working for change. This new experience leads to a deeper analysis, another proposed action, etc. in an unending, ongoing cycle. As long as this cycle of experience – analysis – action repeats itself, the result is no longer banking, but “transformative education.” Furthermore the educational process does not only result in individual transformation, but also the transformation of society and its unjust structures. Both the impact on the individual as well as the impact on society become essential outcomes of the educational process itself.

The Center for Global Education and Experience at Augsburg College (CGEE)

CGEE was founded to put US students in touch with the perspective and experience of the poor in the “third world”². CGEE intentionally arranged programming so that populations raised in the banking style of education in the global north would hear directly from poor communities in the global south. To facilitate and deepen that ongoing contact, CGEE opened permanent presences in Cuernavaca Mexico, Managua Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador in the 80’s, and then expanded in the 90’s to Namibia in Southern Africa. CGEE also did short

¹ See “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1986)

² We continue to use this term because it was coined by newly independent countries in their conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955 to signify not a place, but a project where they created their own agenda of peace, bread and justice. They later became the Non-Aligned Nations movement (see “The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South” by Vijay Prashad).

term trips to other countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In contrast with other study abroad programs, they did no programming in the “developed world.”

Freire’s pedagogy was the inspiration, as CGEE felt that the experience of the poor majorities was transformative for people from the north. Hearing directly from organized groups of impoverished sectors about their experience, analysis and actions to change their reality had a transformative effect on their foreign visitors³, who then were challenged by this experience to work for the same type of change upon their return to their own homes. Thousands of students from hundreds of colleges and universities have participated in CGEE semester programs, and tens of thousands of university students, professors, clergy, people from every vocation have participated in CGEE short term programs. Each program is custom-designed, matching up the participants’ interests with local people working on those issues, reflecting a variety of local perspectives. Always the encounters that have the greatest impact are those with grassroots people, where they can share their experience, analysis and work for change.

This experience was life-changing for CGEE staff as well, both those of US origin as well as citizens of the countries where CGEE worked. Given the demands of the work, staff surprisingly remained relatively stable.⁴ Listening to the experience of a wide variety of people in the global south for thirty years, as well as the broad diversity of their visitors, led staff members to the analysis that the time was ripe to take this to another level, in the Freirian framework, to take a new action based on what has been learned that will further the transformational learning process of the staff and that of the constituencies with whom CGEE works.

Winds of Peace Foundation (WPF)

WPF emerged out of the CGEE experience. Harold and Louise Nielsen participated in a CGEE trip to Mexico and Nicaragua in 1983, and using the same Freirian pedagogy, the analysis of their own experience led them to take the action of selling their hard-earned manufacturing company, Foldcraft, to their workers, and using the funds from the sale, started the Foundation. They immediately began to fund both CGEE – to increase the numbers of people in the north transformed by this experience - and efforts by local organizations in developing countries to bring about change. After 10 years of channeling its funding through US organizations, WPF’s analysis led it to the decision to directly fund Nicaraguan organizations, a step that required WPF to make institutional changes, including starting a permanent presence in country. WPF then decided to ally itself with CGEE to take advantage of the learning CGEE had obtained over years of direct contact with numerous communities, organizations

³ Two doctoral theses have been done recently on the impact of CGEE programming on participants: “Transformed and Transforming: U.S. and Mexican Voices on Vocation,” Ann Lutterman-Aguilar, January 2011; “Impact Of A Brief International Immersion Experience On Faculty And Staff Development For Jesuit University Mission,” Joseph Orlando, 2007.

⁴ Just the 6 CGEE program staff in Central America taken together have nearly 100 years of experience working for CGEE.

and movements in Nicaragua, and to be able to provide CGEE with more in-depth knowledge of certain communities and sectors in Nicaragua, knowledge that came from performing due diligence and follow up with local project partners.⁵

Alliances

Key to WPF's work has been its alliances. The alliance with CGEE has saved it years of startup work getting to know Nicaragua, its reality, key actors and institutions, and immediately enabled it to build on 10 years of CGEE presence in country, as one of CGEE's co-Directors took on the role of Field Director for WPF. Likewise its knowledge and practice of rural development and microcredit has come from long standing informal alliances with LDF/Nitlapan of the UCA and PRODESSA. In terms of the former, WPF has been an investor in the Local Development Fund (LDF) since 1997, and currently has annual investments worth \$650,000 placed there. The LDF was started by NITLAPAN, the research and development institute of the Central American University. Since its founding in 1988, NITLAPAN has been studying local communities to discover which actions are most effective, what obstacles block their progress, what other needed elements are missing, and then acting to fill the gaps and try to replicate successful experiences in other communities. PRODESSA specializes in methodologies that break the cycle of dependency of rural communities on foreign aid, empowers them to set their own development agenda, and then accompanies them as they seek to solve the problems that they have prioritized themselves. The work of WPF has built on the rich experience and learning which these two institutions have accumulated in over 25 years of working with change processes in small, rural communities.

WPF: CURRENT ANALYSIS BASED ON EXPERIENCE

Because of these alliances, and its network of local consultants with a long history of connections to other institutions, communities and grassroots groups, WPF has developed a wealth of knowledge of local communities. Especially important has been learning about the "topography" of local power relationships, the sociological dynamics in rural areas, how gender and generational aspects play out, and the impact that foreign aid from governments, NGOs and churches has on that local landscape. This is a unique strength WPF has among international funders, and is based on an investment in knowing the local dynamics that most international actors, for a variety of reasons, do not make. But what is clear in the globalized world of today is that there is nothing purely local without global influence, nor is there anything purely global free from local impact.⁶ This has led WPF to the conclusion that it is no longer enough to only

⁵This alliance began in 1994, and over that time period has contributed more than \$14MM in donations and loans to Nicaraguan organizations working on their own empowerment and development. Today WPF is contributing about \$1 million dollars a year to development projects in Nicaragua, focusing on 4 priorities in the north-central region of the country: indigenous peoples, rural women, cooperatives and education.

⁶ Rene Mendoza, one of the principle consultants of WPF, has coined the term "glocal" to refer to this reality.

work with local communities, because the impact of the actions of other international actors too easily distorts or negates healthy initiatives on the local level. Often this is an unintentional consequence of aid, because funders without enough knowledge of the local landscape fail to understand how their funding process or presence affects these local dynamics. All too frequently outside funding ends up reinforcing the power and control of local elites, who effectively block the empowerment and participation of the larger community in their own self improvement.⁷

FROM ANALYSIS TO ACTION: THE SYNERGY CENTER

The conclusion of WPF is that while it needs to continue to deepen its knowledge of local realities and dynamics, at the same time the work of disseminating more broadly the knowledge of these local dynamics with other international actors is essential. There is a need for a space for international actors to further study and share what is being learned about local landscapes, and to reflect on the impact of their actions, both those intended, as well as the unintended consequences of how and what they do. This is the purpose of the synergy center: to build on the current alliances with CGEE, with local organizations studying local dynamics like Nitlapan and PRODESSA, but intentionally to add to the alliance a US university which is interested in cultivating a research agenda focusing on these dynamics, and in disseminating those findings in the wider academic world and the world of international funders. This university would have immediate access to a variety of local actors through the CGEE-WPF alliance, and could build on the knowledge and connections already acquired for a multi-discipline research agenda addressing local empowerment. The current CGEE-WPF alliance would benefit from increased capacity for further research, and most importantly an outlet for the learning to have a greater impact on the actions of international funders.

In the end this type of alliance would provide international funders with a better understanding of the analysis and dynamic of poor communities as they attempt to address their problems, and provide insights into the types of interventions that are most helpful to their own process of change.

⁷ See Study Of The Multifunctional Cooperative Of The Union Of Organic Coffee Producers (UCPCO RL) by Rene Mendoza and Edgar Fernández at peacewinds.org as a recent example.