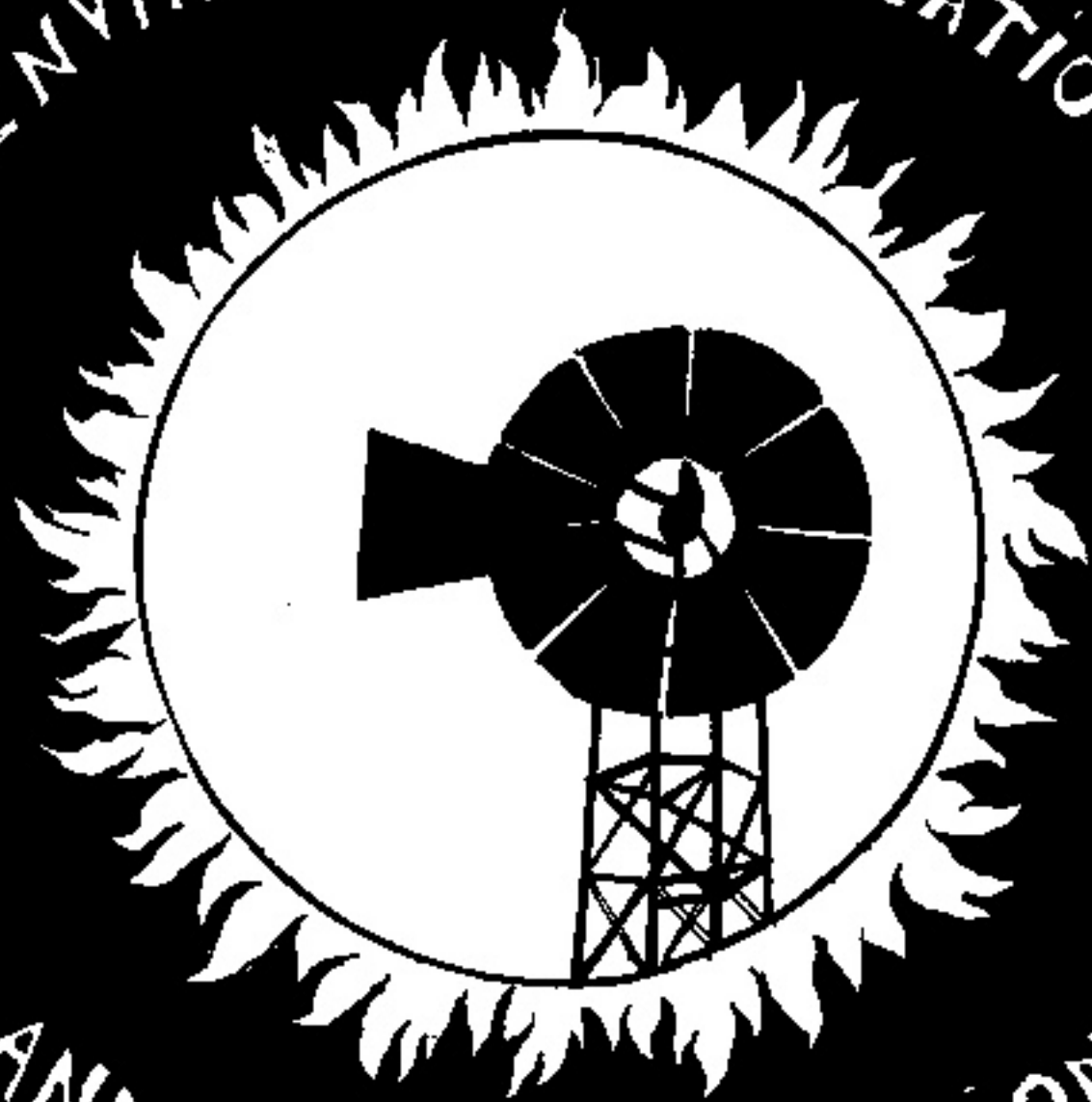


ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION



AND COMMUNITY ACTION

**Environmental Education  
and  
Community Action**

**by  
Ian Watson**

**Canberra and South East Region  
Environment Centre  
1985**

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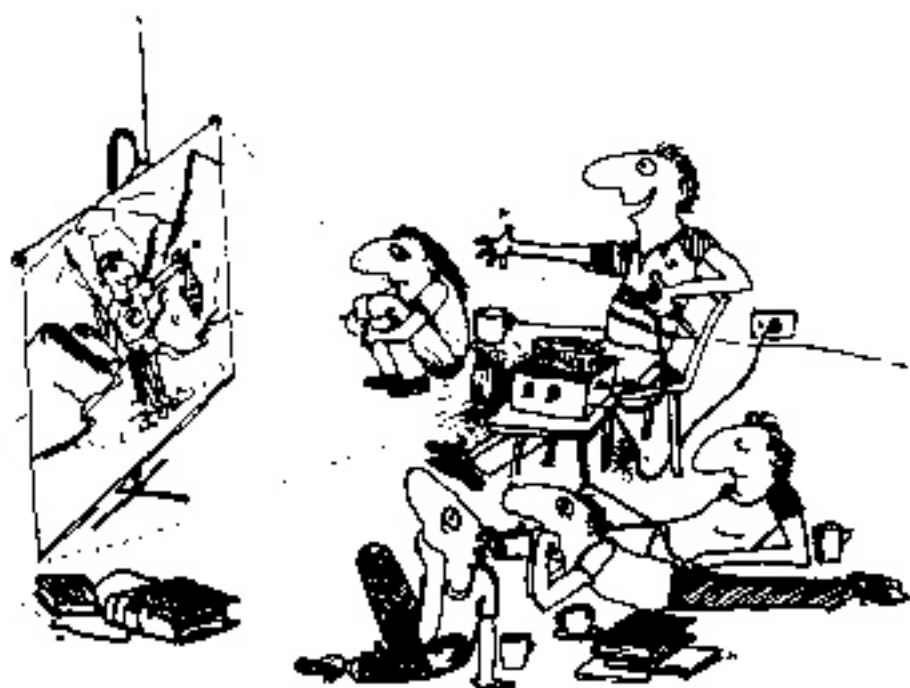
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## PART A

### Educational Philosophy



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Finally, I would like to thank Cate Kennedy for the marvellous illustrations.

kd

2017

## PREFACE

This handbook began life as an Education Policy for the Canberra and South East Region Environment Centre. It developed at the same time that an education collective was re-established at the Centre and considerable input into the policy was provided by the meetings of that collective. The policy also incorporated a research component which drew upon some of the literature dealing with community education and continuing education.

In its final form this policy is much more than just a set of recommendations. It is intended to serve as a resource handbook and I hope that it will be used as a tool by environmental educators (and other community educators) which allows them discretion to pursue their own interests but which offers constructive guidelines, specific suggestions, concrete models, and actual techniques. These are not offered in any random fashion but are systematically integrated into a coherent educational approach which stresses that education is concerned with action for progressive social change.

For this kind of education to be effective, a particular philosophy of education and set of practices must underlie the activities undertaken. For this reason, Part A of this handbook is a careful elaboration of what is called the "dialogue" approach to education. Part B contains the main recommendations for educational activities which the Environment Centre could engage in. These are developed on the basis of the principles outlined in Part A. Both of these sections draw on concrete examples from within Australia and overseas as a way of illustrating the issues under discussion. Finally, Part C is a set of Appendices which are meant to complement the first two parts. These appendices contain greater detail about some of the issues discussed as well as some material developed by the education collective which should be preserved for future reference.

Ian Watson,

Education Policy Officer,  
April - June, 1985.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In April 1974 a military coup ended forty years of fascist rule in Portugal. During the popular revolution which followed the coup a large range of grass-roots organisations sprang up across the countryside. Industrial, agricultural and consumer co-operatives were established, as were neighbourhood committees, tenants' associations, village assemblies, and so on. A large number of these organisations took on an educational role and many of their activities were taken on the initiative of the workers themselves. For example, one group of railway workers interviewed their fellow workers with the idea of producing a history of the railways, as seen through the eyes of the workers. Elsewhere, a group of sulphur miners, employees of a multinational, began to learn foreign languages so that they could correspond with similar workers in other countries about the sale and export of sulphur. They saw this as a way of monitoring their employer's market strategies.

The Division of Continuing Education which was set up to promote adult literacy saw its task as building upon these popular, local initiatives. As Alberto Melo put it:

Our objective was to follow all these popular groups as closely as possible ... so that we could help concretely when a group discovered, and was seeking to satisfy, its own educational and cultural needs. Our role was not to tell them that they were illiterates and that it was necessary to learn to read and write. Rather, our role was to support from the outset the work of organisation and, next, to bring in technical aid when the problem of illiteracy or other problems of an educational nature were an evident obstacle to development of certain activities. [1]

The 1974 revolution not only affected the Portuguese mainland. It also had major repercussions in Africa where the liberation struggles against the Portuguese colonial empire drew to a successful close and the tasks of national reconstruction faced the new nations of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, a small nation on the coast of West Africa, confronting a 90% illiteracy rate was a major challenge. Paulo Freire and a team from the Institute for Cultural Action in Geneva visited Guinea-Bissau several times during 1975 and 1976. They continued to apply the principles of "liberation education" which they had used so successfully in Latin America. [2]

Freire's approach was to link the learning of the technical skill of literacy to a broader process of political education. His team did this by first investigating carefully the situation and attitudes of the local people. This provided the literacy team with material from which to build up a basic vocabulary of key words, called "generative themes". These were used as the basis for critical discussion of social issues and also as the phonetic basis for constructing new words. The learners would meet in "culture circles" where they engaged in a process of critical dialogue which moved from discussion of the immediate aspects of their daily lives to the wider social and political



context which was responsible for the social problems they faced, things like poverty, poor housing and health, exploitative work, and so on. For example, in Guinea-Bissau Freire's team began with the theme of rice production and by developing a series of expanding contexts, they located this aspect of daily life within the geography of the country, then within the context of world geography and then within the international rice trade and problems in the world economy. Finally, the people began to discuss the role of rice cultivation for national reconstruction and the links between rice and health and health and work. All the while this process of political consciousness raising was underway, the learners were also acquiring the skills of literacy, the ability to recombine key phonetic syllables into more and more words. (See Appendix 1 for a detailed example of how these culture circles worked.)

I have chosen these two examples of learning and liberation as a convenient way to introduce some important observations about the practice of education. Most people who have been through conventional schooling systems have memories of learning experiences which, despite some diversity, probably had certain common threads. The knowledge learnt in schools was often "academic" with no apparent connection to the problems of daily life. The process of learning often involved absorbing large slabs of material which was meant to be reproduced in essays or exams. The process of learning was then regarded as complete. Any other practical outcomes were incidental. Rather than a link between education and action, the school's agenda was invariably about the link between education and jobs or education and further education.

By contrast, these two examples point toward a different conception of education, one which should form the cornerstone of the Education Policy adopted by the Environment Centre. Not only should education be explicitly about social change, but it also needs to be committed to liberation in the way it goes about its tasks. This means at least three things:

- 1) A sound base upon which to build a liberating education is community activism. Education should be part of the political process whereby people involved in promoting democratic and progressive social change develop greater understanding of their society in order to carry out their tasks more effectively.

- 2) To extend their understanding in this way, people should experience the knowledge they encounter as relevant and personally meaningful. Furthermore, they should engage in learning situations which empower them by fostering their self-confidence and independence.

- 3) For education to translate into effective action, it must be specific to particular problems and be conceptually rigorous. A general process of "consciousness raising" by itself is inadequate.

In general terms these three ideas can be developed as the basis for many kinds of community education / activism. There is a large literature concerned with this area and I have drawn several examples from it as a way of illustrating these

principles in the remainder of this policy document. However, because this policy is specific to environmental education, it is also necessary to ask what is distinctive about that. The best place to start with that issue is to look at what the Environment Centre sees as its main political tasks.

### The Broad Political Stance of the Environment Centre

On the basis of the Search Conference [3] and detailed discussion with persons closely involved with the Environment Centre, the following set of aims can be regarded as part of the overall political aims of the Centre:

- 1) The promotion of environmental awareness as an important step towards the development of ecological sustainability at two levels:
  - a) personal life styles;
  - b) wider social developments which affect the natural, rural and urban environments.
  
- 2) A commitment toward social justice, also at two levels:
  - a) the development of personal politics which reflect democratic, participatory and co-operative decision making;
  - b) a fundamental redistribution of wealth and power within this society for the benefit of those currently suffering oppression.
  
- 3) A preparedness to intervene in many different facets of social life. This is necessary to replace or remove those structures which deny social justice and undermine ecological sustainability. Such intervention may also be necessary to support positive activities already underway and which may be under-resourced or under attack.

The last two strands of this are met within the general principles of community education outlined above. A commitment to liberating education clearly means that social justice and political intervention are at the heart of any educational activities. However, the first strand still needs to be more clearly defined.

What does it mean to say someone is environmentally educated? Sometimes the word environment is used so loosely that education about any aspect of a person's surroundings counts as environmental awareness. At other times a very narrow biological definition is employed and nature conservation becomes the central issue. In Chapter Three I address this issue at length where I discuss what should be the content of an environmental educational programme.

Before looking at content however, the basic principles of the process of liberating education must be looked at. The best way to introduce these principles is by way of illustration so in the next chapter I draw on a number of important case studies. These come from overseas and local examples of community education projects and they are particularly useful for illustrating both the possibilities and the limitations of different styles of liberating education.

## CHAPTER 2: EDUCATION AS DIALOGUE

In this chapter I look at the issue of educational processes and develop an important distinction between dialogue and dissemination. Dialogue as a form of education is inherently democratic and participatory because it has the following features:

- 1) Both parties are active in the learning process.
- 2) What happens must be negotiated and mutually satisfactory to both parties.
- 3) The situation of the learner must be the starting point for education and the educator must be prepared to be an investigator. Without this, there is a constant danger of establishing monologue, not two-way dialogue.

Freire's culture circles had these characteristics which contrast strongly with the educational style found in schools and in the media. Here dissemination of information reigns. Its main characteristics are:

- 1) It is often centred on the source of knowledge and takes no account of who the learner is nor what her/his specific situation is. Examples of this are media broadcasts addressed to a general hypothetical audience "out there" and school teachers with "ready made" lessons which are offered to any class in any school.
- 2) It is often a monologue and there is little scope for any two-way traffic in communication.
- 3) The educator rarely sees her/his role as that of investigator who needs to learn nor is the existing fund of knowledge held by the learner fully appreciated. Indeed, quite often the learner is regarded as virtually an "empty vessel" to be filled.



This contrast will feature prominently in this Education Policy because I believe that only a dialogic approach to education can fully reflect the political aims of the Environment Centre. Its participatory, democratic nature is most suited to promotion of social justice, empowerment and intervention. This does not rule out activities which include provision of new information to learners by people who may be "expert" in particular areas. It is only if this falls into the dissemination mode of education that it is in danger of losing its democratic basis.

### Scandinavian Study Circles

Study circles are a traditional form of group learning where learners rely on each other's experience and expertise as the main source of their education. This may be supplemented by visiting "experts" but no formal teacher / learner separation is officially established.

As long ago as 1902, Oscar Olsson elaborated the idea of a "study circle" which had the following features:

- \* People studied in small groups, often at home.
- \* There was very little study material to be had.
- \* There were no teachers, and teachers were not in fact considered a necessary prerequisite of study. The leader of the group was an organiser and administrator more than anything else, and possessed no formal qualifications.
- \* People supplemented their group studies by attending lectures or meetings.
- \* Circle members had no previous formal qualifications, but they had a good deal of practical experience.
- \* They learnt to discuss, argue, show consideration for others, accept defeat and share responsibility.
- \* They experienced a sense of community and identity.
- \* The knowledge they acquired could be directly related to their everyday lives and practical work.
- \* Studies began at the existing level of understanding of the members and were guided by their needs. [1]

In practice, study circles often departed from this model and it is worth noting the main deviations, since participatory and democratic learning situations are not maintained automatically but have to be worked at. Anticipating what can go wrong is therefore crucial. An investigation by Jan Bystrom in Sweden in 1973-7 [2] found the following things could happen:

1. They can develop into a "school class", with recipient pupils and an instructing teacher. (This was the most common problem.)
2. They can develop into a "coffee party", with emphasis on the camaraderie of the circle and discussions which have nothing to do with the studies of the members.
3. They can develop into a "therapeutical group", in which activities concentrate upon individual mental or social problems, and are likely to stifle the studies of the members.

One response to these developments is to see them as stages which many groups are likely to pass through. They are really only a problem if a group becomes stalled at one of these places and continually fails to fulfill its educational functions or establish a participatory structure. [3]

#### Union Study Circles in Australia

Inspired by the model of Swedish study circles which involve about 10% of the population every year, the Metal Workers Union in Victoria established a series of Union Study Circles during 1983. [4] Eventually ten groups formed with over 100 people and they met regularly in people's homes. Each was convened initially by a metal worker activist but the long term aim was to establish centres of self-learning where use of tutors would be minimal and the talents of people in the group would be maximised. It was also intended to offer these groups resource people from the union centre and provide things like reading material and other useful sources of information.

The initial focus for discussion was the question of the economy and the Study Circles aimed at deepening members understanding of debates in the daily press in a more critical way. The rationale for this approach was the belief that learning is most effective when it is made relevant and of immediate benefit to learners. This did not mean that important theories or definite bodies of knowledge were inappropriate for these workers. Rather it was a question of the timing of the learning. As one of the organizers phrased it:

Moving from the known to the unknown, is perhaps the most classic commandment of education. These discussion groups, or study circles, are an attempt to practise that principle, and although the starting point mightn't be at the level of what many of us believe, or want to believe, it would appear to be somewhat more useful than expounding great theories which most people cannot relate to anyway. [5]

Study circles, learning circles, culture circles - these are all variants on a common theme. As these two examples show, the distinctive features are:

- 1) the emphasis is on self-learning;
- 2) the starting point is the concrete daily reality of the learners;
- 3) the location for learning is within the community rather than inside formal educational institutions.

However, there is no reason to assume that this format will produce liberating education. Dialogue can easily become a way for people's conservatism - their prejudices and bigotries - to be endorsed by their peers. There is no guarantee that establishing a learning circle will radicalise people to become concerned about social justice or environmental destruction.

For study circles to become vehicles for liberating education they must also assume a critical perspective. Returning to Freire's literacy model is a useful way of illustrating this issue.

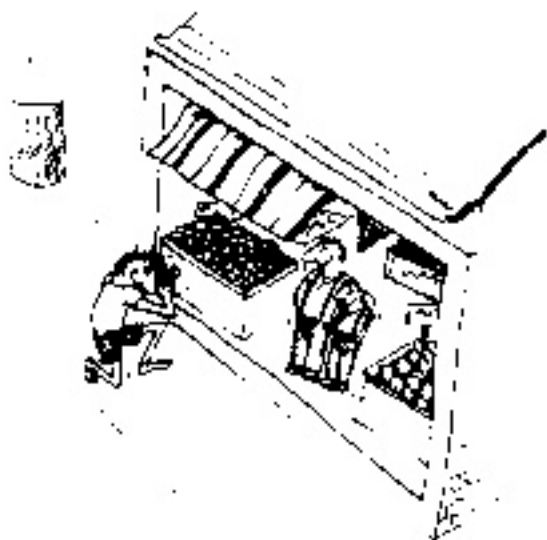
Freire's model of literacy teaching was essentially a method of promoting critical reflection and action as the means whereby oppressed people emerged from the "cultures of silence" which colonial and neo-colonial structures imposed on them. (See Appendix 1.) Because Freire's methods of literacy teaching involved dialogue rather than dissemination (what Freire calls the "banking concept") it held the potential to be a liberating process. For this potential to be realized, however, it was also necessary that the issues discussed and the kinds of questions asked promoted critical thinking and not just conservative anecdote swapping. It is at this point that facilitating becomes so important. Unlike dissemination, dialogue does not operate with a teacher "up front" all the time. But this does not mean that there is no structure, that any direction the group takes is acceptable. Rather, the structure is built into the kinds of questions which the group poses for itself and direction from a facilitator is crucial in this area. Appendix 2 suggests some guidelines for how facilitation in general can work. For a concrete example of the kind of facilitation which leads to the development of critical perspectives, we can look briefly at another project from Latin America which took Freire's model as its starting point.

#### Fotomontaje in Peru

The Grupo de Educacion Popular [6] worked with neighbourhood committees in the slums of Peru with the aim of promoting critical reflection and thereby community activism. Their educational process used audio-visual depictions of the daily lives of the local people and initially followed the pattern established in Freire's culture circles. However, they became critical of a number of features of Freire's method and modified their own work accordingly. (These criticisms are summarised in Appendix 3.)

Eventually the Grupo de Educacion Popular developed a distinctive audio-visual technique of their own which they called fotomontaje. Where Freire's method used the depictions made by the educators, the Grupo de Educacion Popular insisted that the participants themselves develop the material which was to be used to stimulate critical reflection. For example, the learners made use of a whole range of resources, including photo slides, sketched slides, film strips, posters, photographs, banners, words and phrases printed on slides or placards, slogans, printed texts, tape recorded segments of speeches, discussions, commentaries, folk or popular songs.

This did not mean that the educators abdicated responsibility for direction. Rather the guarantee that a critical direction was adopted came from careful co-ordination and facilitation by the educators. In the case of fotomontaje, the educators initially collected the material and used it as a starter, thereby setting a certain agenda of questions. For example, the audio-visual depictions focussed on deficiencies in sanitation, employment, housing, nutrition, transportation, and labour, as well as some aspects of the city or nation associated with these conditions, such as government buildings, factories, farms,



As with the other learning circles, these groups met regularly in their own homes or in local centres, usually at night. Walls of the buildings were used as screens for the projections and became the community 'newspapers'.

Not only did the co-ordinator establish the initial direction but she/he also played a continuing role in the discussions which grew out of these audio-visual presentations. For example, though the material followed the group's interests and took account of their reactions, it was still structured within a broad five stage plan:

- 1) explanation of the objectives of the gathering;
- 2) composition and problems of the area;
- 3) interrelationship of production, labour and living conditions;
- 4) role and function of the neighbourhood groups to take action or continue critical reflections;
- 5) evaluation.

The stress on linking education with action was built into this sequence and facilitating this linkage was another key function of the co-ordinators. The following summary of their method draws this together very neatly:

As a method, fotomontaje aims to involve the participants in providing input for their own reflective discovery of reality and critical appraisal of the interdependence of the socio-political causes of their deprived conditions. The critical discovery must be linked to organized action, which then becomes the vehicle for implementing the decisions that come out of the reflections. [7]

One of the issues which the Grupo de Educacion Popular raised was whether anyone had the right to "raise the consciousness" of oppressed groups, to intervene in other people's lives in this way. Their response is a very good answer, not only to this issue but also to the larger question of

the relevance of Third World literacy programmes in the supposedly well-educated "developed" countries. They argue:

Perhaps it is time to think of turning our [consciousness raising] efforts away from 'others' and directing them towards ourselves. If we educators concentrated on developing critical reflection among the privileged elites of our societies (and we must admit that we are among them), who influence the socio-cultural, economic, and political destiny of so many, we would not be faced with dilemmas of the right to raise the consciousness of the so-called 'masses'. We would be forced to face the task of being our own '[consciousness raising] agents'. And this would mean doing something about changing those social structures that are the root causes of the very situations which cry out for [consciousness raising]. [8]

This call is consistent with the strategies of some Third World development and food justice groups who see the major impediment to Third World development lying in political and economic structures based in wealthy "developed" countries. The task for activists is therefore to intervene at the source of these problems - in the "heartlands of imperialism". Here it is necessary both to educate privileged elites in ways of relinquishing power and resources and also to challenge ordinary people to help create new and equitable social and political structures.

#### Theatre of the Oppressed

The Third World is also the source for another innovative model of liberating education: the use of theatre as a means of critical reflection and as the impetus to action. Augusto Boal [9] offers a number of exciting forms of theatre which aim at converting spectators into actors. (See Appendix 4 for details). These grew out of work Boal did with the People's Theatre in Peru and with the Arena Theatre of Sao Paulo. The philosophy behind Boal's approach is based on a disdain for conventional theatre which rivets people passively to their seats. By contrast, "liberation theatre" provokes spectators to directly intervene in the dramatic action and thereby prepare themselves for action in real life.

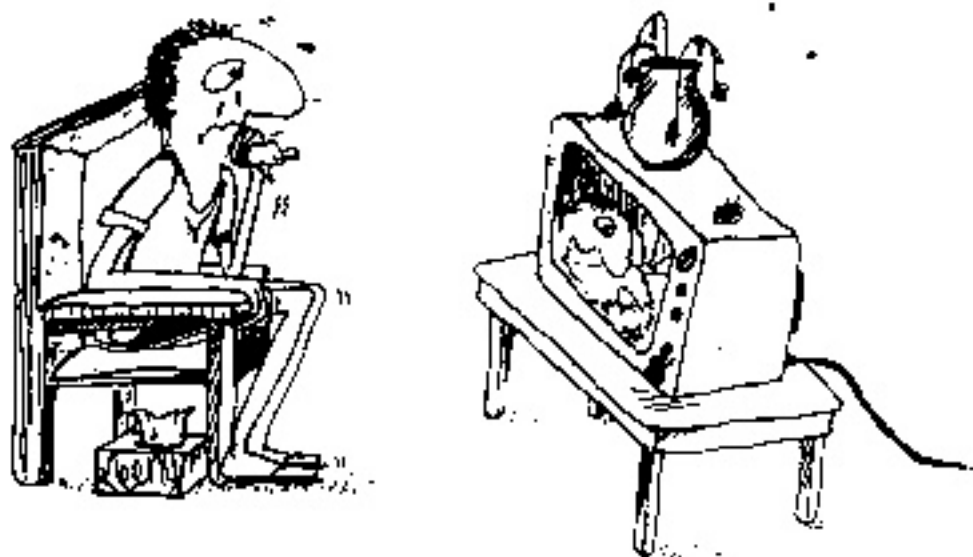
Boal contrasts these two kinds of theatre in the following vivid phrases:

[In conventional theatre] the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected, and all its values are imposed on the spectators, who passively delegate power to the characters to act and think in their place. In so doing the spectators purge themselves of their tragic flaw - that is, of something capable of changing society. A catharsis of the revolutionary impetus is produced! Dramatic action substitutes for real action.

[In liberation theatre] the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action! [10]



This contrast is obviously not restricted to "theatre" in the strict sense of the word since most television and cinema are very adept at placing people in the roles of passive spectators whose emotions are manipulated for conservative ends.



A good example of liberation theatre is Forum Theatre where the spectators are invited to directly intervene in the staging of the drama. The participants choose a story with a social or political problem and initiate a ten-minute skit based on finding solutions to these problems. This presentation continues to change as people from the audience displace the "actors" and thereby offer their own experiences and their own vision.

Boal is most eloquent about the political potential of this kind of theatre:

Maybe the theater in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without doubt a rehearsal of revolution. The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner... Here the cathartic effect is entirely avoided. We are used to plays in which the characters make the revolution on stage and the spectators in their seats feel themselves to be triumphant revolutionaries. Why make a revolution in reality if we have already made it in the theater? But that does not happen here: the rehearsal stimulates the practice of the act in reality. Forum theater, as well as these other forms of a people's theater, instead of taking something away from the spectator, evokes in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theater. The practice of these theatrical forms creates an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action. [11]

By now the significance of Boal's innovative work should be apparent. In the same way that learning circles point toward a conception of education based on full participation of the learners in the control of their learning, so too does liberation theatre insist on the elimination of the spectator / actor division. Both are forms of dialogue education, ways of learning about the world which involve democratic partnerships, not authoritarian direction from above.

#### Possibilities and Limitations

Despite the praise in the last paragraph it is necessary to offer words of warning. Learning circles can never be entirely symmetrical in the sense that everyone is equal. Clearly different levels of expertise and experience make some people more suited to offer direction during learning. What is distinctive about dialogue education, when compared with dissemination, is that these inequalities are provisional and relevant only to the particular task at hand. They should not lead to formalized roles of "teacher" and "students" but rather they should be taken up and relinquished as the needs change and as more and more people gain greater expertise in different areas. Learning circles which refuse to acknowledge this run the danger of a complete internal absorption into the world of the learners. For their understanding to be extended beyond where they are at, this lack of symmetry must be recognized and not dreaded as some form of authoritarianism. After all, Boal's spectator / participants still needed the stimulus and the setting provided by the actors. So too did the peasants and the slum dwellers require Freire's educators and the Fotomontaje people to play crucial co-ordinating roles.

The possibilities for learning circles and for the dialogue process of education are that they provide one of the best ways of making what is learnt relevant and personally meaningful for learners. It is their world which learners are exploring, their problems for which they are seeking solutions, and it is a process which offers them democratic control over many aspects of the learning situation.

The limitations have already been alluded to. There is no guarantee that dialogue education will necessarily become critical nor that it will necessarily lead to specific and effective actions geared toward social change. For these things to happen, particular educational content which plays that role of extending understanding in critical ways is necessary. Similarly, a particular educational context is necessary to increase the chances of education promoting action. These issues are explored in the next two chapters.

In this chapter I will draw upon two case studies as a way of showing how dialogue education can become a force for developing critical consciousness and how that consciousness can also be channelled in specifically environmental directions.

#### The Open Admissions Programme at the City University of New York

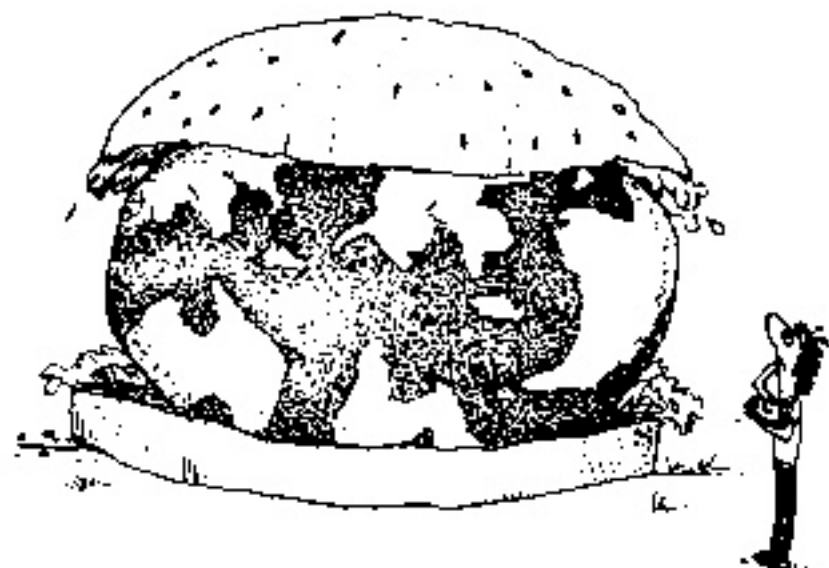
In the early 1970s the City University of New York (CUNY) began an Open Admissions programme. This was a direct response to vigorous student campaigns to make higher education more accessible to the working class. By the mid-70s the conservative backlash had set in and budgetary cuts and other repressive devices were used to demolish what had been a unique experiment in working class education. Ira Shor taught at CUNY during this period and, inspired by people like Freire, he developed a remarkable method of promoting critical consciousness. [1]

Shor begins his discussion by showing forcefully how critical consciousness is constantly impeded from development by a series of "interferences". In particular, he regards mass culture as responsible for subverting people's attempts to become critical about their everyday lives. It prevents them thinking structurally about the significance of their lives. For example, mass culture promotes conservative notions of human nature and scapegoat ideas like "blaming the victim". It also encourages activities like "beating the system" and it constantly demeans the value of talking. In general its high-speed pace and its superficial vision allow no space for deep reflection. These characteristics of mass culture are expressions of powerlessness, forms of thinking and behaving which are "rooted in powerlessness". They must be overcome if democratic practices are to be extended to all areas of social life. It is in this context that Shor offers his own answer to the thorny problem of whether Third World literacy models of education are relevant in "developed" countries:

Domination by mass culture ... has left the population either functionally illiterate or uncritically literate, and politically underdeveloped. The need for [consciousness raising] exists, to counter the interferences to critical thought in daily life. [2]

The basis of Shor's approach was to start where people were at and to encourage them to reflect on a familiar situation with the aim of "extraordinarily re-experiencing the ordinary". To do this, three steps were necessary: separation, transformation and re-integration. In one lesson, Shor brought a hamburger to class and the students proceeded to closely and systematically describe it (separation). In the course of this, many of their descriptions evidenced revulsion for its greasy, rubbery, and low-nutritional character. Then followed a diagnostic process whereby the students posed questions about the hamburger: "If the burger is so unattractive, why do we eat so many of them? Why are there so many fast food restaurants? Why are so many things put on top of hamburgers? Are they nutritious? What did we do for restaurants before the fast food empires began pushing the

burger?" In the course of this process, a transformation in consciousness got underway: an ordinary, taken for granted aspect of everyday life was made problematic. Its immediate appearance was used as an entry point into examining its wider social significance, its structural location in a network of economic and social relations based on consumerism, labour exploitation and environmental destruction.



The final phase of reintegration involved a reconstruction of the object, that is, a programme for redesigning the object which resolves the problems uncovered. In the case of Shor's class, the students developed the distinction between "junk food" and "health food" and then went on to propose that the college canteen become a food cooperative and offer nutritious fixed price meals.

This is just one example from the many stimulating exercises which Shor outlines in his book. These include asking his class to design marriage contracts as a way of questioning sexism and setting up a writing course based on designing utopias as a way of expanding our vision of the range of alternatives to our present society.

Despite taking place in classrooms, Shor's methods were still based on dialogue, not dissemination. One of his long term aims was to make himself obsolete. As he phrases it, liberating education should entail "the withering away of the teacher". As the comments at the end of the last chapter make clear, I think this disdain for teacher roles is misguided since it is possible to have democratic and participatory learning processes while still receiving direction from an "expert".

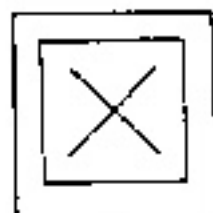
In practice, Shor's own teaching was not one in which "anything goes", in which no definite direction was given. After all, his exercises posed a specific agenda of questions for his classes to pursue. There was also another very important way in

which Shor's students were offered specific conceptual directions: his emphasis on structural thinking.

One of the most pervasive of conservative ideologies is individualism: the focus on people isolated from their social and historical context. This perspective sees people as totally self-contained and entirely responsible for everything that happens in society and it surfaces in attitudes like blaming the victim (the "dole bludger myth" for example). It also impedes progressive social change because it promotes the tendency to focus on changing the people in power rather than recognising the need for changing the structures of power. Developing a structural perspective is one of the best ways to combat this conservative ideology. It allows people to see that particular environmental problems or issues of social justice are not the fault of individual people but are rooted in larger economic, political and social structures and that strategies to deal with these problems must focus on changing such structures. Structural thinking means constantly locating individual things or events within their wider social context. Shor offers a very useful set of diagrams [3] to illustrate how such structural thinking might be encouraged:

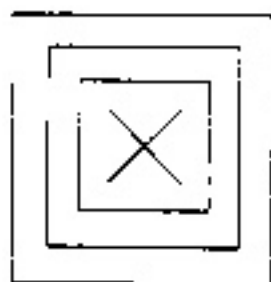


1. X in the square is the theme or object under problematic study. In this first step it is described in great detail.

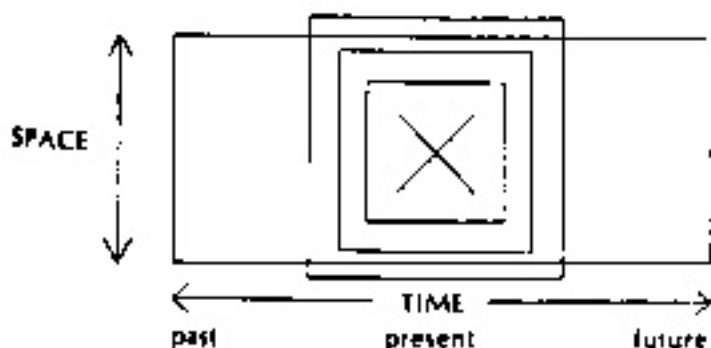


2. The larger square represents X in its immediate social setting. How does X relate to other aspects of social life? What are the human consequences of the codified theme. Example: the car. How do cars get made, sold, and delivered? Why do

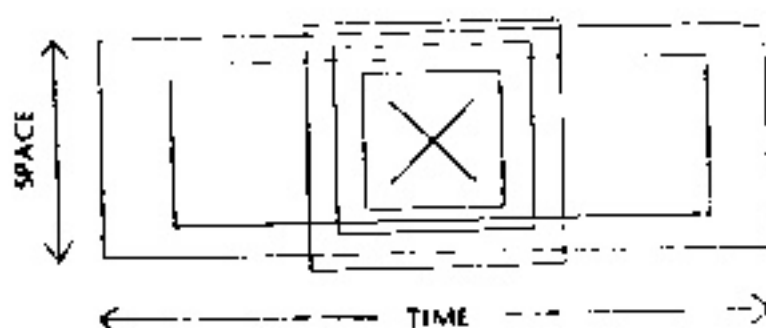
people buy the cars they do? Why do the cars look like they do? What other means of transport are available in society, and how do they compare to the car? What are all the things people use cars for?



3. The next large square represents the global relations of X. Does it exist in France, China or Afghanistan? Does our use of cars affect life elsewhere on the planet? Are building materials from other countries used? Are they built elsewhere? What do other countries do with or without cars? Why do they build them there and sell them here? Why would other countries send out raw materials to build cars someplace else? Who organizes this kind of system?



4. The previous two steps have elaborated X in its immediate and global space. They unveil the social relations of X in the present time. The new rectangle moves backwards and forwards in time. This new dimension seeks to know how each student's life has been involved recently with X. Further, it probes the immediate future via X. Example, the car. When was the specific vehicle you use built? How does it change over time, as you use it? What determines how long you can use it? In terms of cars, what social changes will be effecting their use in the next few years?



5. The larger rectangle is the long-range time-span of I. When did it first enter human history? What did it replace? Why did it appear when it did? Has it changed since then? Who brought it into being and why? What will it look like ten or twenty years from now? How could I look if it was reconstructed along different ideas? What changes are needed in it?

Where Shor indicates a spatial dimension (the vertical arrow) he seems only to mean geographical relationships. It is at this point that Shor's diagrams should be modified and this spatial dimension could be re-labelled "ecological". In this way we can place social structures within their ecological context. This means the geographical features of human societies are expanded to include human's relations with other species and the overall network of inter-relationships within the ecosystem.

Any attempt to envisage a more humane and ecologically sustainable future must develop viable alternatives to current social structures. But this requires not just a sense of historical variation but also a sense of ecological variation. Not only must activists recover their historical traditions (earlier struggles and achievements) so that they do not start from scratch with each new project, but they must also understand their ecological setting, the possibility of new relationships with other species which are founded on ideas of harmony rather than exploitation. Clearly, underlying any proposals for alternative social structures must be an understanding of ecological sustainability.

#### The Social Literacy Project

Shor's modified diagrams show how the social justice component of environmental education can be neatly combined with an emphasis on ecological awareness but it does not really have anything specific to say about what concepts are appropriate in developing such awareness. Clearly, to be ecologically aware requires as a minimum that concepts like ecosystems, energy flows and food chains be well understood. But even this is not enough. It is possible to be a very good biologist but to be apolitical: to define your horizons solely in terms of nature conservation. To be environmentally aware in a world which is, after all,

populated by a species like humans which constantly modifies the environment, means that a purely biological orientation is insufficient (and can even lead to very conservative politics).

What is needed in terms of conceptual development is an understanding of the inter-relatedness of the social and the natural environments. People need to acquire not only key ecological concepts but also social concepts which deal with areas like economics, politics, gender and power. Only by integrating these conceptual areas and drawing the links can the full development of structural thinking take place. This is one of the reasons why holistic and transdisciplinary learning practices are so important in developing environmental awareness. (The Human Sciences Programme at the Australian National University is an excellent example of this kind of holistic approach at a tertiary level.)

A useful case study which shows how this dual approach to conceptual development can occur is the Social Literacy project in Sydney. [4] This is a social education project aimed at school students in upper primary and lower secondary schools. It is based on retaining the best insights from the 1960s "progressive education" movement but locating them within a conceptually rigorous system. Progressive educators in the sixties vigorously criticised traditional educational curricula because they were often irrelevant straight-jackets for both teachers and students. In its place they wanted their students to study material relevant to their interests and needs and curricula were to be open to negotiation between teachers and students. The danger was always there that an "anything goes" approach might arise and no underlying notion of "conceptual development" would be available to offer some form of structure to the learning. The Social Literacy project focusses on this shortcoming and suggests that to be socially literate is really no different than being verbally or mathematically literate: a definite set of social concepts and their inter-relationships must be understood so that learners do actually move toward a definite stage of competence in analysing society. This is what Shor's structural perception also means - being able to apply a set of conceptual skills in many different situations and gaining greater competence with each successive episode. By contrast, an "anything goes" approach is in danger of haphazard acquisition of conceptual skills because the learning process is so random.

The Social Literacy project therefore seeks to develop a set of social analytical skills based on particular concepts which can be re-applied in any new set of materials. For example, their Book D series (for Years 5 to 8) moves systematically through the following set of concepts:

#### Unit 1: Patterns of Social Organisation

- Needs (Basic needs/cultural needs)
- Wants
- Nature
- Labour
- Tools
- Division of Labour
- Problems and solutions (Both technical and social)
- Co-operation
- Patterns of social organisation



## Unit 2: Ecosystems

Ecosystem (network of interrelations)  
 Gatherer-hunter and settler societies  
 Settlement patterns  
 Social Systems  
 Social control  
 Prejudice, racism, social science  
 Traditional change  
 Culture contact  
 Resources  
 Conservation and resource depletion

## Unit 3: Production for Needs

Settlement  
 Specialisation and Land Use  
 Production and Industrial Society  
 Mechanisation  
 Markets  
 Distribution  
 Energy  
 Skills and Factories  
 Assembly Line and Mass Production

Set out in this schematic form, this probably looks like a laundry list. However, it is in fact a carefully thought out and very systematic sequential development of concepts. The details in Appendix 5 will show more clearly how these concepts are used for particular examples. What is important to note here is two things:

1) A large number of topics can be used within this particular conceptual framework. For example, where they have used the Cherokee Indians in their ecosystems example, it would be equally feasible to use Australia's Aborigines to develop the same concepts.

2) The inter-relatedness of both social and natural aspects of life is apparent in each part of the conceptual scheme. For example, ecosystems are introduced and defined in terms of natural relations yet the social relations which are also involved emerge when studying settlement patterns. These topics thus constantly highlight how every social activity involves changes to the ecosystem and at the same time every "technical" intervention into nature is also at the same time part of a social relation.

## CHAPTER 4: EDUCATION FOR ACTION

It is implicit in the dialogue approach to education that critical reflection should lead to action. Certainly examples like that of Fotomontaje illustrate the importance of taking action to change the oppressive conditions which that reflection reveals or highlights. However, there is a certain naivety in believing that increased awareness is sufficient to promote action. As well as conceptual awareness of social injustice or of environmental destruction, a number of other conditions must also be met if action is likely to follow. These include:

### 1) Willingness to Engage in Action

Despite awareness of problems it is easy enough to adopt a "live and let live" approach to oppression, injustices and environmental destruction. There are certainly lots of rationalisations around to cement complacency into our lives. ("Don't rock the boat", "If we don't mine uranium, someone else will", "It won't happen in my lifetime", and so on.) To some extent, structural thinking helps tear down the defences of complacency but it does not always offer emotional impetus to engage in political activity to bring about progressive changes.

Indeed, too great a pre-occupation with social and environmental problems can breed pessimism and fatalism. Often the most socially aware people can also become the most psychologically depressed. For this reason it is crucial that a major part of environmental education focus on positive options, on the positive alternatives which have been developed locally and overseas. Knowledge of such alternatives not only saves people from re-inventing the wheel by showing them the lessons learnt by others' experiences, but it also fires the enthusiasm and prevents fatalism undermining our willingness to engage in action. Ira Shor's writing course on designing utopias helps people to imagine that the present can be different and Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre (see Appendix 4) provokes people to think through the steps (and to enact them!) in moving from the present to the alternative futures that are possible.

Amongst the emotional resources people need as they they embark into the unsettled waters of radical social change is humour. Ira Shor offers some interesting ideas for using comedy. He begins by noting how "fun" has been compartmentalised in contemporary society and the challenge this poses for educators:

Critical education needs to challenge the ordinary monopoly of fun held by the free-time industry. If [liberating] learning does not draw on the refreshments of playing, it will be experienced as another grim exercise, just like the school and work everybody has already had enough of. If study can assimilate the energy of play, it will attack a basic [oppressive division in] daily life - the bargain struck between working now so you can have fun later. This deal keeps people frozen in a pattern of powerlessness because leisure is as dominated as school and work. [1]

Shor then suggests how comedy functions as an educational resource:

- 1) it can relax the fears which cloud attempts to make radical personal shifts in thinking;
- 2) it can help demystify the "professional aura" of the educator;
- 3) it brings together both intellectual and emotional experience;
- 4) it can serve as a potential bonding experience for people;
- 5) comic use of language (e.g. satire) has always been the weapon of the underdog and is eminently suitable for challenging various kinds of authority.



## 2) Capacity to Engage in Action

It is insufficient to provide the psychological resources to motivate people for action without also providing the material resources needed to make that action effective. It is naive to expect that a person, or even a small group of people, will always have the capacity to initiate a campaign for any particular set of social changes. It is by networking with existing organisations that people are most likely to see their willingness to engage in action bear fruit. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer two case studies which highlight the need to direct the actions which arise from community education into existing channels of activism.

### The Community Action Research Education Project

Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the birth of a large-scale, popular civil rights movement. During this period a whole range of grass-roots community groups arose to address the issues of family breakdown, inadequate housing, poverty, unemployment and sectarian violence.

By the late 1970s this movement was faltering. At this point a decisive educational initiative was launched in Londonderry. The Magee University College set up a unique educational project called the Community Action Research Education (CARE) [2]. It consisted of two main strands: support and educational work with existing community activists and educational work in the wider community which focussed on social problems. The first strand is discussed in the "Training Activists" section of the next chapter. The second strand will be outlined here.

#### "What is Happening to Us?" - Community Radio and Education in Northern Ireland

This project attempted to use a combination of media education (radio) and learning circles (listening groups) as a way of offering people insights into:

- (i) the practical everyday issues and problems as perceived by people in the community;
- (ii) the causes which give rise to these issues and the extent to which they are due to:
  - (a) the organization and structure of local, central or regional government;
  - (b) industrial and economic conditions;
  - (c) social, political and economic structures;
  - (d) the structure and function of the community itself;
  - (e) inter-personal, inter-group, inter-professional relations;
- (iii) how these problems and issues have been tackled in other parts of the world. [3]

Putting this project into practice involved gathering educational material from the local environment to illustrate the following themes:

- \* community problems (facilities, housing, unemployment, vandalism, poverty);
- \* sectarian hostility (how Protestants and Catholics saw each other);
- \* family and community in Northern Ireland (the neighbourhood, marriage, family, religion, social life, education, work, community action);
- \* women's issues (prepared by a number of women's groups).

People in the community were interviewed and their thoughts on these issues were edited into a series of fifteen minute radio broadcasts. Though the CARE staff and the BBC coordinated the collection of material, many of the local people in the community also took initiatives in this area. The recording sessions were in family homes, in clubs and pubs and in community centres and often animated discussions continued long after the recording sessions ended.

In the words of one of the CARE staff, the project attempted to:

create a democratic partnership with the media which offered working class people in Northern Ireland an opportunity to learn how to use it to speak to each other, to paint an oral picture, a montage, of their lives and to use this material for their own education in an informal, but structured, educational process. [4]

The second part of the project involved setting up listening groups throughout the community. Eventually a dozen discussion groups were formed and over one hundred people were involved. These groups tuned in each week to the radio broadcasts and then proceeded to discuss the themes. The CARE team had provided basic support material in the form of a short booklet which outlined the main theme for the series, offered information about each programme and also suggested questions around which discussion might proceed. (For details on this, see Appendix 6.)

This project ran for three years and, as well as fulfilling its educational task of promoting greater understanding of the issues, the programmes also led to a number of practical outcomes. These included:

- \* "The Other Sort" (a series on sectarian division) stimulated a number of young people from both sides of the religious divide to co-operate in producing a TV documentary about working together.
- \* The series on young people led to one group carrying out a survey of social and recreational facilities in the area.
- \* The series on women's issues led to one group women conducting a survey of child care facilities in their district.

Despite these positive outcomes, a number of weaknesses in the second component of the project emerged. In particular, many of the community organisations involved in the project failed to establish an effective listening and discussion network. They basically lacked the educational expertise, the structured organisation, and the experienced field workers which organisations like trade unions or farmers groups have traditionally been able to develop.

Another major problem was that the fixed time of the broadcasts made the reception part of the project too inflexible. Tom Lovett, one of the people involved in the project, points out that making cassette recordings of the programmes would have meant that a permanent community education "package" was available for groups at their convenience. Lovett's overall assessment focuses on this problem of weak community involvement:

The problem with the series was that it attempted to reach the general non-active public with programmes concerned, not with training for specific tasks, but with empathy and understanding. Thus, it depended heavily on people organising themselves or on local informal organisations setting up groups. The former is extremely difficult, so we had to depend on the latter. However, many community associations were not particularly helpful because they were concerned primarily with tackling concrete problems such as

poverty, housing and social facilities. They did not understand, or were not convinced of, the usefulness of this educational approach to the problems in their area and did not see how it could lead to more purposeful activity in their community. They would have been more committed if they had been involved in the series from the beginning. [All the work with the BBC] left little time for extensive personal contact with the existing loose network of community organisations. [5]

#### The Australian Railways Union's Strategy [6]

These days it is almost axiomatic for environmentalists to include "working with the unions" high on their agenda of campaign strategies. The decisive role played by unions in the anti-uranium campaign of the 1970s showed the potential for effective political alliances.

However, not all unions are sympathetic to environmental issues nor are all unions sufficiently radical to become the vehicle for activities based on liberating education. The Australian Railways Union in Victoria does show what can happen when a progressive union incorporates an educational component into its industrial strategy. This case study also highlights what the CARE project revealed: the importance of an existing network of organized activists for promoting educational activities.

During the 1970s the management of Vicrail began to restructure the railway system in a way which favoured big corporations at the expense of the travelling public, the country regions and the smaller businesses. The Australian Railways Union developed an industrial campaign during the early 1980s to combat this and its central core was based on worker education and community participation. The four main elements to this strategy were:

- 1) the enlarging and developing of workers' knowledge and understanding of their own industry;
- 2) developing alternatives to management plans which took into account the interests of the community and rail users;
- 3) developing new forms of action which didn't alienate the public;
- 4) building stronger links with the rail using public and highlighting the ways in which the interests of union members coincided with those of the public.

The worker education component was one of the most exciting aspects of this campaign. The union officials were well aware that individual workers were very creative and imaginative about the kinds of improvements necessary in their own particular areas. They saw their task as providing a means whereby these individual viewpoints could be pooled to provide an overall view of the industry and thereby form the basis for an alternative management strategy for the industry as a whole. This approach was summed up well by one of the union activists:

The more important part of our process involves drawing knowledge from the place where there is the most of it, and

that is in the heads of railway workers themselves. Railway workers, from their own daily life experience on the job, know what is going on in their industry, and they have an incredible pool of collective knowledge about their industry; far greater than any management or, indeed, any union leadership could have. The task for the leadership of the union has been to bring out that knowledge and bring it together in a way that is of use, in a way that makes it into a weapon in the ongoing battle with the management. [?]

A specific example of this was the union campaign around the country freight service which was being steadily run down by Vicrail. Union delegates from Melbourne conducted a survey of 35 regional centres where they drew upon the workers' knowledge of staffing, levels of business, kind of equipment in use, and so on. All this was drawn together to form an overall picture of the State's freight service and from this basis the union developed its alternative management plan for that sector of the industry.



The community participation component relied on mobilising community support for the kinds of alternatives which the union was proposing. For example, the government had threatened to close the Warrnambool line so the workers conducted a survey amongst the passengers about what they wanted to see improved in their rail service. The union then developed these ideas into an alternative plan for the line which included coatings and the methods for implementing the changes.

\* \* \*

While this example of worker education and community participation is quite different from the other examples of learning circles and discussion groups, it nevertheless shares a common thread. The underlying philosophy is one of dialogue. The concrete daily reality of both workers and rail users is the starting point for investigation. It is this reality and the input from workers and rail users which form the building blocks for the union's alternative management plans. It is true that the exercise was not educational in the sense of specifically developing structural thinking. But in terms of action, it was educational in the way it has laid the groundwork for worker self-management by showing workers that their knowledge is valuable and that they themselves are able to shape the future of their industry.