

Letting Go of the Old Paradigm of Education

This is an excerpt from the introduction of George Lakey's book, Facilitating Group Learning: Strategies for Success with Diverse Adult Learners. Jossey-Bass Press, 2010. Reprinted with permission of the author and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Thomas S. Kuhn (1962) argued that when a paradigm is wearing out, people increasingly notice exceptions to the rule. “Yes, the earth is flat, but it’s also true that Columbus made it back to Spain.” “Yes, only violence is capable of overthrowing a dictatorship, but in 1989 some East European dictatorships were overthrown nonviolently.”

The old paradigm of education is also wearing out, and parts of the new paradigm have been emerging in my lifetime. John Dewey (1966) famously insisted that “we learn by doing.” During World War II the U.S. government’s effort to educate families to eat foods formerly wasted discovered that homemakers were far more likely to change through discussion groups than through lectures. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972, 1994) found that peasants learned to read more effectively when he used participatory methods that supported their power; his work flowered into popular education. The activist intellectual Ella Baker gained influence in the U.S. civil rights movement through her brilliant organizing skills and coached the young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to use her version of popular education to empower Southern African Americans to stand up to the Ku Klux Klan (Ransby, 2005).

Some founders of the Movement for a New Society (MNS) were active in the civil rights movement and then in the early 1970s began a training program that became international in scope. Drawing on activist experience, on Freire, and on early insights from mediation training and encounter groups, MNS trained trainers for a variety of groups and published the widely read adult educators’ guide Resource Manual for a Living Revolution (Coover, Deacon, Esser, and Moore, 1977).

Experiential trainers like those who started Outward Bound got life-changing results through group challenges and adventure-based learning. Religious educators made their work come alive through hands-on and participatory methods, which now permeate adult education.

I was lucky to be taught at a young age by a couple of innovators who had begun to tune into the new paradigm of education. They planted seeds that later sprouted; they gave me early personal experience with a model more complicated than that of traditional educators.

Ruth Frederick had a sharp eye and a commanding presence. We fifth graders thought it really was possible that she could see every one of us and at the same time write on the blackboard with her back turned. Unlike some of the dowdy-looking teachers in our school, she wore colorful dresses that fit her snugly, and her brown hair shone as it fell in a wave to her shoulders. Maybe being daughter of the mayor of my town, Bangor, Pennsylvania, added to her air of authority.

Ms. Frederick was full of surprises. She gave each of us a German pen pal—this not long after World War II—and we were soon puzzling about what we could possibly write back to these youngsters with their fractured English and postcards showing strange-looking towns. Another day she took me aside and told me that, instead of reading each of the stories in the fifth-grade reader and completing workbook exercises, I was to choose a few of them and turn them into plays. English class shifted immediately from a chore to a thrill. Finally, she astounded us all one morning when we arrived to find all our desks had been re-organized into a giant circle. “It’s time you look at each other when you speak,” she said. “We need to have real discussions. You’re growing up, you know.”

In eleventh grade I again had one of those rare teachers who had a more complex view of education than the mainstream paradigm. Carmela Finelli, I now realize, looked at us and saw thirty adolescents with scant attention for the names and dates of great American authors. We hungered for knowledge, but not names and dates. We most of all wanted to learn to know ourselves, obscured as we were by awkwardness, anxiety, and competition.

“Finelli,” as we referred to her, had grown up in the Italian town next door to mine. Roseto, Pennsylvania, later became famous among epidemiologists because of its low incidence of stroke and heart disease despite a diet of rich food. A study of Roseto concluded that the closely-knit Italian community itself was one protection against the stress that promotes heart trouble (Bruhn and Wolf, 1979).

Finelli acted as if she knew how to heal our teenage heart trouble, because from the first day she built community in her English classes. Her method sent the message of affirmation. She used small groups for sharing our essays about the authors. She patiently taught the talkative students that our quiet class members had important things to say. She used debate and dialogue to engage us in the great themes in literature: integrity, relationship, individuality, and courage. The class became a learning community of trust and growing self-respect. Of course, Thoreau mattered, and Emerson, and Hawthorne, and Whitman! How had we coped up till now without them?

Lucky me. I did have some teachers who even in the conformist 1940s and ’50s glimpsed the complexity, the multidimensionality of the learning process. Now even Ruth Frederick and Carmela Finelli might be boggled by what pioneers have learned about learning, but I like to think that they would be pioneers today, too, handling in their graceful way the risks and challenges of a learning group.

What Is Direct About Direct Education?

Direct education cuts through the fluff and pretense that distances learners from the subject. It drops unreal expectations—for example, that kinesthetic learners will somehow learn from Power-Point presentations—and unreal assumptions—for example, that a group is simply the sum of the individuals. I call this kind of education direct because it brings focus to the encounter of teacher and group; it replaces scatter—of teacher preoccupied with curriculum and participants preoccupied with distractions—with gathered attention. Direct education takes the most direct path to the learner in the here and now.

Because this approach builds so strongly on the achievements of popular education, the reader might wonder if there really is a difference. In 2005 I became the chief consultant to a million-dollar leadership education course of the Canadian Postal Workers Union. The course was based on popular education, and it had produced good results in its first dozen years. The union aimed to make it even better. I spent many hours in the back of the room, observing popular education applied to their content, and that woke me up to the distance that direct education has evolved from popular education.

Direct education is highly experiential, using a variety of methods to move participants out of their comfort zones into encounters with new possibilities. Although exercises are structured, they stimulate spontaneous responses rather than demonstrations or rehearsal of previous thinking: facilitators choose interventions that go for the “here and now.”

Direct education is multicultural and integrates perspectives developed by movements against sexism, racism, and the other forms of oppression. As you’ll see in this book, direct education doesn’t compartmentalize “diversity work” but instead merges anti-oppression work into its method, into the very framing of the learning group itself.

Direct education works the four major learning channels as naturally as a circus works its three rings. Unlike both traditional education and popular education, direct education highly values the kinesthetic and emotional learning channels. Content is not organized according to linear logic but instead according to how people actually learn. Direct education understands how natural it is for people to resist learning, even in settings favored by popular educators, and it provides strategies for working with resistance.

The natural rhythms and cycles of groups are used to accelerate learning rather than being ignored or subjected to efforts of control. Conflict is frequently encouraged as a promoter of learning. Direct education integrates lessons from humanistic psychology and group dynamics. Design for courses includes the use of the group as a laboratory in which to try new behaviors and apply new insights.

Working with so many variables swirling around in the learning group opens some participants to a deeper adventure than adding skills and knowledge. Some of them (and sometimes even whole groups) want to unlearn the attitudes that slow them down. Sometimes they want to let go of their emotionally held limiting beliefs! When that door opens, the advanced practitioner of direct education gets to do transformational work. The arena of limiting beliefs is one place where most people hold back their own power. The tools we use for transformational work go to a new level of empowerment.

Direct education was evolved by the trainers associated with Training for Change, a nonprofit organization that works with grassroots and nonprofit groups in the United States, Canada, and over a dozen other countries. Training for Change (www.trainingforchange.org) teaches educators how to invent their own tools and adapt them to their own cultures.

*To read more, order **Facilitating Group Learning** today, available at www.trainingforchange.org*