

I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

I: 978-94-6209-120-7 (paperback)
I: 978-94-6209-121-4 (hardback)
I: 978-94-6209-122-1 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
Box 21858,
AW Rotterdam,
Netherlands
<http://www.sensepublishers.com/>

Printed on acid-free paper

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3. LOCATING THE HOPE IN BONE-DEEP PARTICIPATION

Dear Sweet Honey Coated Readers,

(I once read a letter addressed in this way, and have since wanted to do the same). I am going to use the space of this letter trying to describe something in writing that I have only ever been able to capture in person, over the dinner table or while on a long walk or subway ride. For you, *Ajalkingan aqaangin*, our future, I'd like to articulate where the hope resides in participatory pedagogy and participatory research. Participatory pedagogy and research are generally regarded to have change-making capacities, but I think it is important to try to understand why and how such praxes can be transformative, to locate the hope in deep participation.

As I write this letter, schools and society can be characterized by what we might call shallow participation. Shallow participation involves raising one's hand to answer a question in class, volunteering for a few hours of community service, voting in government elections, answering questions in a focus group or survey, even shopping, or what some people call "voting with our dollars." These activities are examples of shallow participation not because they are not worthwhile, but because they invite people to take part in something in very defined and determined ways. That is, people can answer, but not contribute to the framing of the questions; students can share only portions of what they know; voters can support a candidate, but not put their own concerns up for public discussion. Shallow participation is occasional and is designed to have little structural impact. It permits participants to respond to the terms set forth by others, and bypasses opportunities to craft and reshape the stage of discussion. The possibilities for change are somewhat limited by the parameters set by others in shallow participation, and participants, knowing this, can be reluctant to pitch in. This can explain silence in the classroom when a teacher poses a question about a book that students have really read, and why some don't turn up at the voting polls, complaining that their votes don't count anyway.

Deep participation, by contrast, invites people to help define the scope of discussion, the rules of engagement, and the structure of relationships. Deep participation yields opportunities for change that can be sustained, and impact everyday life. Unfortunately, deep participation is a rare experience for youth and adults. As an educator, I have collaboratively constructed some opportunities for deep

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participation. In a community organization in the South Bronx, I worked with youth and staff to collectively design curriculum for a summer program. We developed our own processes of brainstorming, decision making, and assessment that we then implemented to develop summer workshops that were innovative, inspirational, and downright juicy with ideas.

As a researcher, I have conducted participatory action research with urban youth on the lived value of the General Educational Development (GED) credential, school pushout, mayoral control, and education policy. In my work with the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD), we designed a comprehensive study on the use and misuse of the GED to push unwanted students out of their public high schools. Several youth researchers in our collective had been pushed out of their former schools, so our research was very personal to them. At the same time, we were creating our collective as a space for collaboration and learning. We were trying to create for ourselves a kind of workspace that we had never had before, one in which we made decisions in ways aligned with what we valued, and asked questions in ways that matched our epistemologies (our theories of knowledge and knowing). In an essay that our group wrote about the experience of creating our collective, we wrote, "Everyone is responsible for making our space a participatory space. We don't erase ourselves from our work, our whole selves are involved because lots of kinds of skills and thinking are needed, not just one" (Tuck et al., 2008). We also wrote,

We have come to our project by attending to our felt senses, by listening to our hunches, by being unafraid to ask each other to say more at the point where our felt senses may be just about to break apart, to care about words and ideas, to try things on, to say what feels like small things out loud and listen to the echoes. In this way, we engage collectively in reconstructing our own realities. We engage together in/toward self-determination and re-cognition. We are constantly switching between inhabiting this current world and the world we want to inhabit, struggling to clarify our vision, like shaking a TV antenna to get a clear picture.

... We realize that reforming the school system and challenging various forms of oppression are linked struggles, so our approach to social justice focuses on challenging the status quo through PAR, and at the same time modeling the kinds of interactions we want to have.

Many times throughout this work, each of us has said that we have been waiting our whole lives be a part of a space like this. We have wondered aloud what amazing difference it would have made for our schools to be sites of collective inquiry and meaning making, as CREDD has become for us. Our schooling has marked us, but this experience as CREDD has marked us too.

In my work with youth researchers in participatory action research projects, I have been profoundly changed by the experience of struggle and possibility that

is inherent in figuring out how to create within a working space that which has been otherwise systematically denied to us. The power of successfully creating a productive collective space that meets one's own needs while engaging in meaning making has altered my experience of the world, and is now at the foundation of how I believe societal change happens. Once a person has engaged in deep participation, her bones will remember it, and will expect it, and set about creating it in other situations.

I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out how change happens, and so far, this is the truest thing I can say: An experience of deep participation, in the classroom, in an after-school setting, in a research collective, in Zuccotti Park, makes an indelible mark upon the human spirit, and can go viral.

Sarah Quinter, a youth researcher in CREDD, came to our collective having been part of numerous youth and art organizations in New York City, and continues to work to create spaces that will incubate and inspire social change. She was among the first several hundred protesters to Occupy Wall Street. Though many pundits have dismissed the Occupy movements for not having a coherent "message," what they are missing is that messages do not cultivate change. Many who have spent time in Zuccotti Park have come away with profound experiences of deep participation, in the General Assembly meetings, in conversations with strangers about the vernacular of the movement, even in Facebook comments regarding the legitimacy of the claims of the 99%; it is these bone-deep moments of participation that protesters will carry into their future collaborations that will serve to spark social change. For example, many Indigenous social critics have pushed back against the language of occupation at the heart of the protests, citing that North America is Indigenous land that is already occupied by settlers, many of whom count themselves among the 99%. This exchange has initiated many crucial conversations which, with mixed results, pressed for recognition of structures of settler colonialism that undergird economic and societal inequity.

I told Sarah that I was writing this letter, and asked her if she had any words for you. This is what she had to say:

This movement does not fit obediently into the dominant discourse of demands and concessions. We are working to create new social realities, and it is critical that the language used is in a constant state of evolution, incorporating perspectives from the margins and unheard histories. Being part of this deeply participatory process is like learning to speak a new language that is collectively invented as the need to describe fresh possibilities arises. It is a language that listens.

On October 30th, 2011 Angela Davis told the occupiers of Zuccotti Park "You are re-inventing our political universe. You have renewed our collective passion. You reminded us that it is still possible to build vibrant communities of resistance." It is by becoming radically imaginative and fearlessly open that we construct pathways to spaces which are truly liberatory.

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Dear readers, we don't need to let the enormity of change needed (and the enormity of the need for change) paralyze us. Change can be as small as shifting a baby from one hip to the other. This is not to say that change is incremental, but that steps which provide new vantage points can uncover new or forgotten paths. It is not so much the size of the steps, but the possibilities they bring into view. In Sarah's words, "Experiences of genuine participation change us for good. The steps we take together leave ever-expanding passageways into other ways of living. Push on, readers, and let us know what you can see from there."

Txin sismiti{aan, in loving support,
Eve Tuck

REFERENCE

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