

## **Theory to Practice**

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# ***Popular Education, Participatory Research, and Local Foods at Highlander Research and Education Center***

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### **Abstract**

Highlander Research and Education Center is a model of popular adult education and social change. In 2009, a group of learners from Ball State University went to Tennessee to study this unique vision of education and also to learn more about local and sustainable foods. Participants were inspired to act and find creative solutions in their own lives. This collaboratively-written, reflective piece describes the journey to and experience Highlander and presents a utopian vision of adult education. Educators can transfer aspects of this experience to their own settings through facilitation, dialogue, artistic approaches, and listening to their learners.

### **Introduction**

Highlander Research and Education Center has been a model for popular adult education and participatory research since 1932. Set in eastern Tennessee, it has played a central role in supporting movements and training activists to rely on their collective knowledge and culture in

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order to solve problems in society. Myles Horton opened the Highlander Folk School in order to work with small groups with the goal of changing society (Horton, 1998). He understood that most people are not in tune with the wealth of knowledge that their experience has taught them. Horton stated in his autobiography, "The reason they don't know themselves fully is that they haven't learned to analyze their experience and learn from it. When you help them to respect and learn from their own experience, they can know more about themselves than you do" (1998, p. 71). Through respect for ideas and experience, dialogue, art, and music, Highlander has worked with thousands of people to stand up for their rights and values. Horton himself explained, "I think all of us at Highlander started out with the idea that we were going to do adult education. We've called our work adult education. We thought of ourselves as educators. We deliberately chose to do our education outside the schooling system" (Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, p 199).

Highlander's educational process is based in popular education and participatory research outside of the traditional education system. Horton tells about being offered college positions even before he graduated in the mid 1920's.

I found out that all these schools, without exception, never took the student into consideration. They always had a canned program they'd open up and dump on people. This could be religious or it could be vocational, but it was fitting the people into the colleges' conception instead of education related to the people themselves. None of them dealt with economic and social issues... That's when I said I'm not going to try to fit into this situation; I'm going to try to figure out some better way of doing it (Bell et al., 1990, pp. 232-233).

Horton developed this popular education model to teach people to trust, value, and learn from their own experiences. "The people who visited Highlander were encouraged to dig deeply into their experience and find ways to loosen memories that might be relevant for understanding a particular problem or dilemma confronting them" (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, pp. 118).

Then using a participatory action research approach,

[Horton] sought to convey that the everyday experience of adults deserved attention as a valuable resource for problem solving, but it

could not be truly productive without being subjected to systematic analysis. Analyzing experience included validating and appreciating that experience, but it could not end there. Horton insisted that it involved looking at the experience critically and comparing one's own analysis to the meanings drawn from similar experiences by one's peers. In this process errors, gaps, and omissions were identified and important insights were generated. Perhaps most important of all, analyzing experiences collaboratively helped participants identify with each other's situation, leading to a sense of solidarity and aggressive collective action to promote positive social change (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, pp. 118-119).

Participatory research begins with questions raised through reflection in practice; then new actions are pursued and tested through reflection on action (Wadsworth, 1998). Another identifying characteristic describes participatory research as more "*aware* of its inevitable intervention in the social situations within which it operates and seeks to turn these to consciously-applied effect. Most participatory action research sets out to explicitly study something in order to change and improve it" (Wadsworth, 1998, para. 22) (emphasis in original).

### **The Journey to Highlander**

In May 2009, a group of ten graduate students and faculty from Ball State University spent five days immersed in Highlander's popular education and participatory research program through the course, "Organizing Community Education." Before the trip, everyone was to read two books on local and sustainable food systems, as well as a book on Highlander. The topic at hand was local and sustainable food systems as community development, which overlapped well with the recently acquired orchard and newly built community garden at Highlander. The students learned alongside Highlander's facilitators and interns about issues—global and local—related to local and sustainable food systems. Larger issues of food sovereignty, food security, and the Slow Food Movement were addressed, as well as smaller issues related to farmers markets and community gardens. Through music, art, guest presenters, our own experiences, and written resources, we were able to develop a plan of action to share information with our local community about the importance of slow food and eating organically and locally.

The participants came from multiple backgrounds and various academic majors (adult education, landscape architecture, telecommunication, executive development for public service, and communication studies) with a group ranging in age from 25 to 70 years. Most of the students were first generation graduate students and each brought unique talents and perspectives to the conversation and course.

This article is a reflective piece written collectively after returning from the journey and draws on and summarizes the participants' experiences at Highlander. Reflective questions that were posed included: 1) Why did we go to Highlander for this course; what did its history add to the experience? 2) Why did you choose to participate in this course? 3) What happened in the workshop: what did you learn? 4) What did you take away from this experience personally? 5) What can we give back through this experience? 6) How would you take this experience and use adult education to change the world into a better place (utopia)? These questions guide the organization of thoughts for this article.

### **Why Highlander?**

The instructor selected Highlander as the location of this course due to its history and its vision of education for social change. With facilitation provided by the Center, the group was able to observe and partake in the popular education and participatory research process. Being physically present and away from home was very important. "It made it so much easier to open up and come up with solutions." One participant wrote that,

When I signed up I asked, why are we going to Highlander to learn about food sustainability? We can do that from Muncie, I thought. Then after I learned a little about the place and after I got there and experienced Highlander it just made the learning of food sustainability amazing.

The history and reputation of Highlander influenced others on their decisions to participate. Another participant explained,

It did not seem as real to me until I was sitting in a circle of rocking chairs. All the time I was thinking about all the famous people who had sat in this space and come together in community to solve an

issue important to them. I certainly think that it is transformative for all parts of a person...body, mind and soul.

The mystique of Highlander also attracted students to this journey. Until one can experience the place and recognize that teaching and learning in this manner is not a magic formula, it can be rather intimidating.

In one of my early first adult education courses, a fellow student would become glassy eyed and mystical when uttering the name "Highlander." How this seemingly rational graduate student could be so in awe of a place was definitely intriguing...Horton was still as mysterious as the mountain fog, so when this course description was read in class, I had to go!

### **Why Participate in This Course?**

As with any graduate-level course, each participant voluntarily decided to attend this five-day immersive experience. Each came with different perspectives and expectations for the course. Reasons to participate included: interest in Highlander, the search for personal growth and emancipation, an interest in the topic of local food systems, and general curiosity. One participant captured the intent of the course by reflecting:

The purpose of the course seemed to be experiencing a popular education retreat while also reflecting on this process through the critical lens as a student of education. While the topic of sustainable foods systems was the topic for the weekend, one could easily see how numerous issues or topics could be substituted. The end effect would be the same; it's a process of people coming together to learn about and clarify values, organize a plan of action that reflects commitment to those values, implement the action, and determine the success/failures of the action and use that knowledge to influence future actions.

Once the students arrived they began to feel a part of the place. Nestled in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, the grounds "reeked of history." It was a neat and calming place, almost magical; by going to visit, we were part of the magic. The intriguing part was a room full of rocking chairs where community groups brought their problems to find

solutions. Here, as the participants relaxed their bodies with the movement of the chairs, they became empowered with thoughts of liberation and emancipation toward fundamental changes and democratic views. “We were able to demystify the place and concepts enough to learn them and bring them home with us.”

### **What Happened There?**

All of the participants described the experience from their own perspective, but one captured much of the detail from the journey with her vivid description. Her voice is represented here.

The trip to New Market, Tennessee was interesting and rewarding. The time there was intense. We were in the actual place where many other people over the past 75 years had gathered to learn about themselves as well as work on a plan of action that would help them to solve problems in their own communities. Our visit was no different.

We traveled in small groups and had 7 hours of intense small group discussions about who we were and why we had made this commitment to the experience. When we arrived we were put into even smaller groups when we were assigned our sleeping rooms. In those pairings, we had even more time to reflect and relax and share our stories and experiences that had brought us as adult learners to this moment.

Our first day began with community breakfast and then right into the Highlander history and techniques of participatory learning. Three staff members led us through community building exercises (Highlander style) with singing and art, and laid the groundwork for work to be done in the next three days. Our staff persons, Monica, Catalina and Joshua, helped us learn about historical points regarding Highlander and took us on a tour of the grounds.

The neighboring farmers came to speak about their partnership in GOOD Earth Farms. Their candid conversation about who they were, their backgrounds in farming and their new partnership was interesting and inspiring to our group. We ended the session with new found insight about not only the process but the relationships they were working on establishing in the area.

Again we gathered as a group for dinner and conversation to digest not only the food for our bodies but also the food for our

souls. After dinner, we were entertained by two musicians who had come to Highlander and the civil rights cause in the 1960's and early 1970's. Guy and Candie Carawan graciously shared their music that at first seemed just entertaining, but on deeper examination contained the spirit of action that Highlander was all about. They continued to return each meal time to share food and community with our group.

The following day we again met in the central room filled with 32 rocking chairs placed in a circle to continue the discussion of Highlander and begin our discussion on the topic of slow food we came to discuss. The examination of our group's topic was approached with several more participatory techniques including brainstorming, small group breakouts, diagramming, and visual mapping. The group members were incredibly motivated and enthusiasm and participation was high. It was a long and intense day of interaction. The whole process was being filmed from beginning to end.

Our third day was our day to move our project into action by defining the plan of action we would follow as we returned to Muncie. The morning was spent brainstorming projects and possible events to move our plan to action and out to our community. The process was intense with everyone listening and contributing and redefining as we moved and narrowed the focus to a doable timeline. The process was finished and ready for action with everyone assigned a piece of the project.

Monday was travel day. Again we packed up the equipment from the hours of taping, and possessions of books, CDs, and tapes we had purchased to remind us of all we had learned in the last four days and we headed home. Again the individual groups, defined by our vehicle size, discussed and replayed the previous four days of input. At times we were quiet, some were sleeping, as we concentrated on the next steps of our plan and in reflection of all the events at Highlander. It was an experience we would never forget. The next day I went back into work as usual, which made the experience of the intense weekend at Highlander seem even more surreal, and yet we have the pictures and the materials we produced during the workshop sessions to show for our efforts. Now a few days later, we have moved into the action plan we stated we would do at the workshop as we line up events for disseminating materials for our project.

In reflection, my feelings of the weekend at Highlander and our slow food project are similar to those I have experienced in community theatre. After a show closes, when you have worked so intensely with a group of people to produce the show, there is a let-down because you are not living and breathing the project as you had previously. It is an odd experience like a sense of loss. I think that we will all welcome the reunion on June the 4th that will rekindle the memories and action plan for our project. I think this was a wonderfully productive experience. Everyone that came was ready to make it happen. It was a wonderful immersive experience of learning and application.

### Reflections on What Happened

“It was an entire semester’s worth of learning in five days.” The learning was not confined to a room or to a single lecturer but started immediately on the seven-hour drive to and from the site. The learning continued through the interaction at meals, during breaks, and throughout extracurricular activities. One student wrote, “Opening the first day with song was the best idea I have ever been part of in a group discussion atmosphere. I loved the workshop on getting to know each other through the letters in our name—it’s amazing how much one can learn just by a few words!”

It was significant to see how the group dynamics worked and how each person’s strengths surfaced during different exercises and experiences. With the immersive format, there was more time available for the “classroom” portion of the course. The time did not seem rushed. People spoke slower. More time was available for thought, reflection, and role-play. We incorporated art and music with the visuals. The small size of the group was extremely conducive to open sharing and trust. We all seemed to bond quickly and the diversity among our group was a welcome treat. It provided an avenue for sharing from totally different experiences, locations, times, and perspectives. The retreat-like atmosphere was deceiving in that the body relaxed, but the mind was running at full speed with the amount of history, culture, new concepts, and people to whom we were introduced.

Just sitting in the circular room with rocking chairs surrounding the perimeter of the braided circular rug had a unique way of getting us to produce some interesting ideas. One student summed up the overall feel-

ings of the group, *“I came back to Muncie totally spent from the experience and definitely changed by it.”*

### **What Did You Learn Personally?**

The reflections about personal growth from the course were rich with anecdotes, illustrations, and stories of growth showing the leaps and bounds that we made in the short time at Highlander. There was wide consensus that this immense amount of learning could have happened only in an immersive setting and that being geographically removed from our immediate community was key. It is not unusual for a group of diverse individuals to have intense personal growth; the participants in the Highlander experience all revealed different levels, in some cases, life changing growth or revelations. One participant exclaimed, “I cannot begin to implement or even absorb all I experienced during this class, but my goal is to start...starting is the biggest hurdle.”

Themes reflect the new learning community that was established. One participant compared this experience with community-theater. “These are intense, emotional, creative, and interactive spontaneous ways to create... Some of these techniques were very similar to creating community [in the theater].” Cultural awareness and assumptions were revealed. New values about food and community emerged. “I regained a new appreciation for the food I eat, and it grounded my idea of food as my relationship with the earth and others.”

Personal relationships were strengthened. “The power of the experience is the strength that grows within the souls of people, working together, as they analyze and confirm their own experience and draw upon their understanding to contribute to fundamental change.” Members of the group all expressed the determination to take what was learned in eastern Tennessee and share it with the people of central Indiana and ultimately the larger community.

Finally, as future adult educators, the Highlander experience was rich with examples of popular education that have worked, still work, and will work in the future. Many members commented about their goal to replicate as much of Highlander in the traditional classroom as possible. “I strongly believe that learning is more than regurgitation of facts during an examination, and I have found that the Highlander founders shared this belief.” Different ways of teaching were validated.

These methods really do work to establish trust, look at the details and the big picture, and encourage group processes for action. The dia-

logue that is required can be difficult at times, especially when examining challenging subjects or those where people hold strongly to their assumptions, but the broadened knowledge and further understanding of one another is worth it.

### **What We Can Give Back?**

One aspect of popular education and participatory research is that the process, once begun, does not end. Those who are exposed are torchbearers passing the knowledge and modeling the process for others. As the participants reflected on this experience at Highlander, they were ready “to light a fire of passion to inspire others to join us in a movement of change.” As an outcome, the group has continued to work together, developing a presentation and CD about slow food and healthy choices, writing this article, preparing a national presentation, editing a documentary film, and participating in public events to share their knowledge with others. They also are working to incorporate this knowledge into their daily lives. More than one participant has developed cooperative or community gardens. Others are “creating opportunities for popular education and developing skills to facilitate such meetings.”

One student reflected, “Although the weekend was explicitly about food systems, the real take away is the discovery or rediscovery of the power of the people united under a common cause, in the service of shared values.” As another participant reminded us, “the hope for the next generation lies with their ability to see what is wrong and correct it.” Now it is our job to go out and encourage others to become involved.

### **Is This a Utopian Vision of Adult Education?**

From our Highlander immersion, the question of a utopian adult education elicited diverse responses; however, these responses reflected the need for adult interaction and the importance of education to a robust democracy. One vision of utopia in adult education could be to “bring people together to learn from each other.” By “removing the huge barrier between student and instructor, we realized that everyone has something to learn and everyone has knowledge to share.” Popular education and places like Highlander fill tremendous needs such as: providing educational opportunities outside of the academy; organizing people around common values; and teaching people to take ownership of their world.

By sharing experiences, adults realize that they are not alone in their struggles.

Popular education and action research can build knowledge and leadership skills. Every journey begins with one step, and we can change the world through conversations with our friends, neighbors, students, and others that we meet. The world would be a better place if space and room for dialogue and engagement with diverse ideas could be the norm for learning.

By affirming our cultural and racial diversity, we can overcome differences that divide us. Together we develop the resources for collective action. By connecting communities and groups regionally, we would be working to change unjust structures and to build a genuine political and economic democracy.

While wanting to give back is a good thing, it is important to know where to give back and if it is right for you. Remember, “the best opportunities find you, and come along when you least expect them.” When that opportunity arrives, “if the learner has learned, then the immediate surrounding world will have to change as well, and there starts the ripple effect of changing the world.”

While visions of utopia are valuable, they are also elusive. One participant shared a saying, “if you ever find utopia, go there, but once you do, it will no longer be utopia...Our personal imperfections corrupt all good things... After all, if we were perfect, what would be the need for education?”

### Conclusions

Underlying the responses from the Highlander experience is an acknowledgement that it touched our lives in a memorable way, strengthening our convictions and beliefs in adult education. Learning can take place in many different forms and as one can see this learning style was a really good one to have for this type of class.

Horton felt strongly that the residential experience of Highlander gave people a taste of what it was like to participate in creating a truly humane community. A critical part of Highlander’s approach revolved around creating a model community where free and open

discussions were encouraged, participants could share and analyze their relevant experiences, and everyone could learn to make collective decisions through consensus...Horton himself argued that students must learn to analyze the world as it is and as it is experienced, with all its injustices, while simultaneously reimagining how the world could be if people were truly empowered. (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 120).

Getting to visit such a “mystical” and historical place was a wonderful experience and could have been a blessing alone, but adding a learning component allowed for so much more to take place. All this learning and knowledge that was shared and spread among the faculty and students will hopefully help bring out ways to not just help these few people, but to help many more in communities that these people touch. The quote from Lao Tzu captures some of the feelings, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This quote shows what a learning experience can do for someone and this class really did that for everyone that participated in it. As each of the participants reflected on their experience, it became clear that this workshop has impacted their understanding of Highlander, issues related to local and sustainable foods, and visions of adult education.

Adult educators have choices of how and what they wish to teach as they work with audiences in multiple contexts. The approach of meeting people where they are, encouraging them help to define the problem and create a solution from their own experiences, knowledge, and creativity is a risky, but a satisfying approach to education. The educator needs to perceive his or her stance as a facilitator of learning by gathering resources, listening, and sharing, but not by making all of the decisions. When facing real world problems, those who are intricately involved hold the solutions, the educators can support them through facilitating a Highlander-type process of reflection, new learning, and building a plan of action.

This story from *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990) beautifully explains how Highlander’s model works and reinforces our topic of sustainability and slow food.

Someone criticized Highlander workshops, saying, ‘All you do is sit there and tell stories.’ Well, if he’d seen me in the spring planting my garden, he would’ve said: ‘That guy doesn’t know how to

garden, how to grow vegetables. I didn't see any vegetables. All I saw was him putting a little seed in the ground. He's a faker as a gardener because he doesn't grow anything. I saw him and there's nothing there.' Well he was doing the same thing about observing the workshop. It was the seeds getting ready to start, and he thought that was the whole process. To me, it's essential that you start where people are. But if you're going to start where they are and they don't change, then there's no point in starting because you're not going anywhere. So while I insist on starting where people are, that's the only place they could start. *I* can start somewhere else. *I* can start where I am, but they've got to start where *they* are. But then if you don't have some vision of what ought to be or what they can become, then you have no way of contributing anything to the process. Your theory determines what you want to do in terms of helping people grow. So it's extremely important that you have a theory about it that helps you decide (Bell, Gaventa and Peters, 1990, pp. 99-100).

Our Highlander immersion formed our theory that guides us as we meet central Indiana people in the only place possible, where they are.

We left Highlander humming this song that was written by our colleague, Julia Dotson (May 16, 2009):

### ***Making a Plan of Action***

Sittin' in a rocking chair in Tennessee  
Thinking of farmers and plants and seeds  
What will it take for us to see the need?  
We need a plan of action.

Workshops, deep thoughts,  
Inspiration from Rocky Tops  
What we decide will effect the cost  
As we make a plan of action.

Take it home, let it be known  
Make a system that promotes homegrown  
Food for you, food for me

That's what we call sustainability

Pass it along, sing out strong  
This time we can't afford to get it wrong  
Heed the word, we must be heard  
This is our plan of action.

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