

These are the notes from a presentation given to the IWCE network by Dr Amy Tait Westwell on the 8th September 2022.

Why pedagogy?

Teaching has always been a central revolutionary practice. After the Cuban revolution, literate children from the cities went to rural places to teach adults how to read and write. They were realising Che Guevara's dream that 'society as a whole must be converted into a gigantic school', to develop the kind of powerful moral popular response that arose in times of revolution into a post-revolutionary constant that would build a new set of values.



The children from the cities worked on the farms by day and taught people how to read and write in the evenings, doing a double-shift just as their students were. They learned about material conditions in the countryside as the farmers learned about the revolution through literacy.

Once you start looking out for it, you see teaching everywhere in radical movements. Of course, this essential radical practice is obscured in liberal histories. When I learned about Rosa Parks in school, I was taught that she was an 'average' liberal citizen who had taken an individual moral stand. It was only later than I learned what should have been obvious – that bus boycotts had been a tactic under development by the local chapter of the NAACP for a long time, and that Rosa Parks had been a student at the Highlander Centre, the same centre where Septima Clark had been leading a literacy movement for Black people in the South. Septima Clark's literacy campaign operated on the principle of 'each one teach one'. Students became teachers, and this way pedagogy spread exponentially.

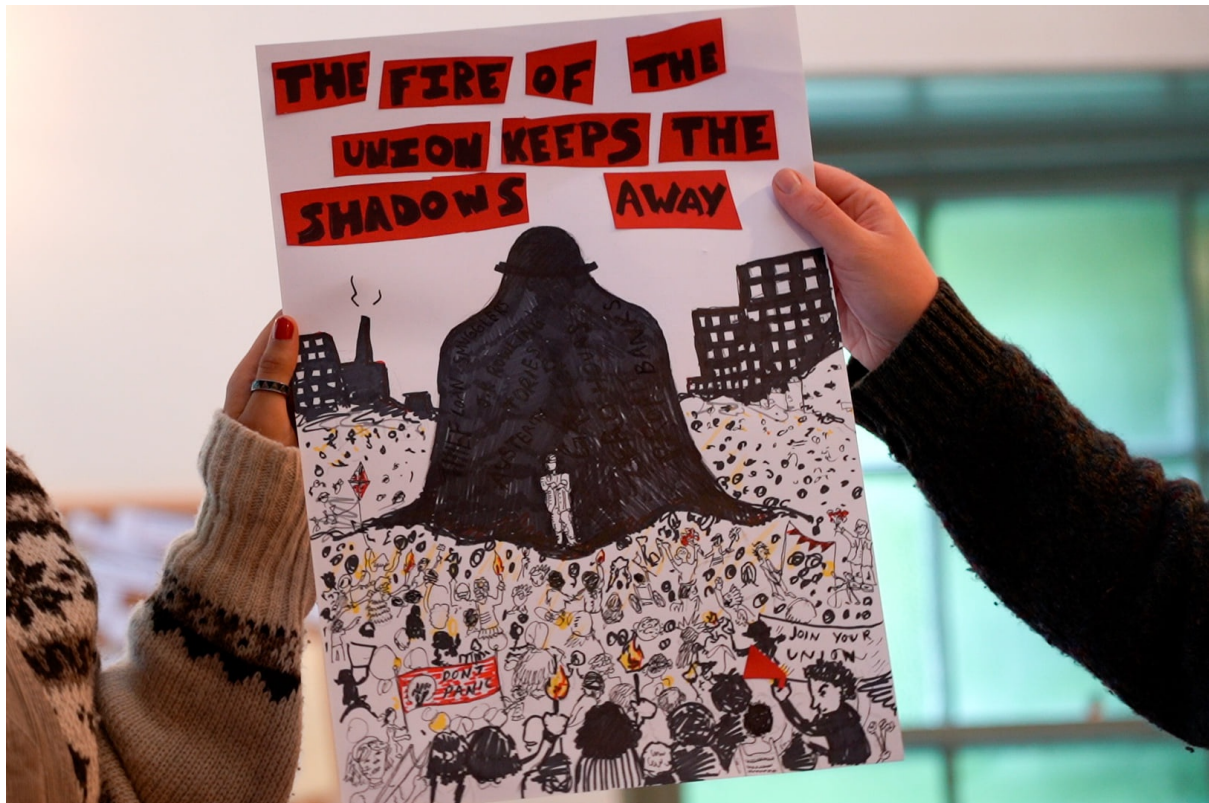


Pedagogy and Culture

One of the ideas I want to outline today is that pedagogy gives us the opportunity to find new (unalienated) ways to make things and to act in the world. Michael Rosen's book on how to teach writing, 'Writing for Pleasure', is a great primer on this. It looks at how to set up collective production, production for different kinds of 'use value' or no use value, and how to make things with more and more freedom. When we make things, we make culture. One of the stranger anarchists from Russia's late 19th century, Leo Tolstoy, wrote that

"Education is the tendency of one man to make another just like himself. Education is culture under restraint, culture is free. Education is when the teaching is forced upon the pupil, and when then instruction is exclusive, that is when only those subjects are taught which the educator regards as necessary"

Whatever terms we want to use for the practice of radical teaching, Tolstoy's comparison of state education and culture brings out a way of thinking about culture that's incredibly useful for radical educators. Radical pedagogy must make no distinction between teaching and making, or between learning and culture. Theory has no root unless people are all the time making their worlds anew using all the resources at their disposal. Pedagogy isn't a place to experiment before action, it's just a different name for the sphere of action itself.



Challenges in pedagogy today

This brings me to some central challenges pedagogy faces at this moment. One is precisely what I have just described – that pedagogical spaces are held at arms length from spaces of political action. As a teacher, you see this most clearly when students in radical pedagogical spaces investigate new languages and imagery, but when they return to their 'real lives' they drop these in favour of familiar slogans. The teaching space becomes a space for individual growth, but not for doing the work of turning the world upside down. Changing this is everyone's responsibility.

This is connected to a second challenge, which is that much education within radical movements has become tied to a cut-and-dried set of community organising 'practices'. Students are encouraged to apply organising theory to their particular situations, but not to develop the theory themselves.

Some of the pedagogical work going on in the world is incredible. But it's hard not to feel that, in many struggles, the link between pedagogy and action needs to be reformed. There is so much from the past that we can learn from – since every great movement had a pedagogy, from the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau, to the Black power movement in the US, to the Russians at the end of the 19th century who were standing at the gateway to revolution. Let's find the pedagogy of our own struggles together.



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