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REFLECT in Oxford, England

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• Introduction

In many ways Oxford is a prosperous city. A wide variety of educational opportunities are available to its citizens, which raises the question, why use REFLECT? Yet, despite Oxford's advantages, many local people are marginalised, particularly by class and race oppression. The existing educational systems preserve the status quo, either consciously or as a consequence of long established hierarchical structures.

ODEC, the Oxford Development Education Centre, is a small NGO based at East Oxford Community Centre. Our aim is to make the world more just by achieving participatory democracy through participatory education. We adopted REFLECT as part of our efforts to close the gap between this rhetoric and the reality of our practice.

Initially, we were interested in Paulo Friere's work, but we struggled to make this process accessible to people. Our experience in England is that more people are writing about and studying Freire than actually trying to apply his ideas. We felt the need for more support from other practitioners. Both these problems spurred us to explore REFLECT. Our first focus was the tools, but as we learned more, we were also impressed by:

- the emphasis on the 'whole approach' (attitude of facilitators, tools and techniques, advocacy and action, rather than just tools alone);
- new ideas about how to build on people's experience; and,
- the emphasis on helping people to become creative facilitators, adapting and devising tools to suit particular circumstances.

Another important part of working with REFLECT, is the chance it gives us to build relationships with educators from other countries. This develops our own understanding of participatory education and development issues, and gives us a strong basis for challenging racism and other prejudices and misconceptions about people in Southern countries.

ODEC's work with REFLECT

We started work with members of Oxford's different African Caribbean communities, who face many challenges because they live in a white-dominated city. The Learning from Life project (LFL) was set up, in consultation with community activists, to help highlight and act on people's concerns.

ODEC already had a good relationship with senior citizens at the West Indian Day Centre and had helped them to produce a newsletter. Many people reacted to one article that described a growing communication gap between older and younger African Caribbean people. Thus, a key part of LFL became to provide an opportunity for younger and older people to learn from each other.

The original project team comprised a member of the Day Centre, a white ODEC worker and a young African Caribbean worker recruited specifically for the project. Together with volunteers, they used semi-structured interviews to start identifying participants' key issues, and, in February 1997, ran an introductory weekend. Invited participants were a mixed-group of about ten people who had shown interest in the project.

Timelines

After icebreakers, the group made a timeline of the history of racism in Oxford. To make the timeline, the facilitators encouraged participants to remember their arrival in England. Participants related incidents about their treatment at work, in church and in wider society. Next they drew pictures to illustrate these stories and put them in chronological order. Younger people added their pictures. Facilitators asked questions to deepen the analysis e.g. is this still happening?, why?

The process drew people in. One story sparked another; more people started drawing. We could have worked on the timeline all day. Younger people commented: *"It's different. You don't usually get the chance to hear the older ones talk like this. It makes you realise what you have in common"*. When the timeline was finished, people were less reserved and had a lot more energy. They felt they had permission to say what they needed to say, breaking the 'culture of silence'.

Pizza diagrams

To deepen the analysis, the group made a graphic that they called a 'pizza diagram' (an adapted Venn diagram). Participants thought about the groups and institutions that influenced their lives, mounting these on different sized circles of paper, using the largest circles for the most powerful groups. They arranged the circles to show relationships between the groups. This generated more energy - people were trying to clarify fundamental issues, such as 'Is it more effective to work from the grassroots up or to lobby big institutions?' People cared about getting their analysis right because they needed to make changes.

Outcomes

Using the pizza diagrams of power structures, the group developed action plans. Initially, they had been worried that it was going to be a weekend of talk and no action, but the shared analysis helped the group to decide on the many things they wanted to do. The graphics and the process were written up with the help of volunteer observers. As in the REFLECT literacy circles, this document is a summary

and an educational resource to support further analysis.

Participants held follow-up meetings and prioritised: re-starting 'Saturday school', surveying local people's skills and resources and making a video about community achievements. As time went on, meetings dropped from once a week to once a fortnight and participants felt they only had enough resources to tackle one action plan at a time. They prioritised plans for the Saturday School, called the 'Young Achievers' Academy'.

For a variety of reasons, some participants dropped out but new people arrived. This caused some problems, as new members had not been part of developing the original analysis. Sharing this analysis and giving newcomers a chance to contribute slowed down the work and frustrated some of the people who had been involved from the start. We find it is hard for facilitators and participants to understand that you can't just tell someone new what you have been doing and expect they will understand it.

We are still struggling with effective ways to deal with this practical problem. You can show new people the previous graphics that have been generated, but we find that pictures have more value as a reminder of participating in the process for those who created them. We need to develop new ways of analysing the same material, and concentrate on deepening our analysis each time.

• Young achievers' academy

After considering practical issues, (such as the age group of children to teach and how to organise teaching), and more philosophical issues, (such as the purpose and aims of the school), participants ran three information evenings for parents. Preparation included talking to two of the organisers from the previous Saturday school, to share ideas and to find out more about why the first school had closed after ten successful years. A key reason for this seemed to be over-reliance on one or two key organisers, which spurred people to try and share responsibility for the new Academy.

The deputy head of a local school was supportive and after three pilot sessions, invited participants to a Governors' meeting. Permission was granted to use the school buildings on Saturdays throughout the academic year and the Academy has been running ever since.

Participants were pleased by the enthusiastic response of the children, but worried by the lack of pre-planning and creeping over-reliance on two or three volunteers. We invited one of the organisers of the previous Saturday school to help facilitate a one day event to analyse progress so far. This was partly to help participants but also to introduce the REFLECT approach to a potential new facilitator. The event was structured around the adult learning cycle (what have we done? what have we observed? what have we learnt? what will we do next?) and came up with three key action points. First, the workers needed to get to know each other better and share a vision. Second, it was important to sort out their roles, responsibilities, commitment, and identify a regular space for dealing with problems. Third, the teaching content needed to be addressed.

Rivers

We started work on the action plans by asking everyone to draw a river of their lives so far, using rapids to show hard times, calm wide flows for strong, peaceful times etc.. People focused on the experiences that led them to get involved with the Academy. Facilitators joined in. This was a turning point. It released lots of energy and boosted trust in the group. Key issues, like attitudes to religion and the effects of internalised racism, started to surface. People still talk about their rivers. Revisiting the rivers and asking new people to draw their rivers has become an accepted way of introducing people to the group.

After the rivers exercise, the group wanted to revisit and clarify the objectives. From three sessions of card sorting and discussion, the following objectives emerged:

- to help children progress in main school and Saturday School;
- to teach community by example, incorporating spirituality;

- to teach children about their roots and help them have a positive identity;
- to teach critical thinking;
- to create parental involvement and to liaise with the community; and,
- for the children to have fun.

REFLECT for ODEC and for advocacy

Using REFLECT on ourselves has been a key way of learning about the process. ActionAid trainers ran a training of facilitators session for ODEC workers. Actions arising from this include: termly, participatory review meetings for all ODEC workers, increased sharing of written reflections on the work, and visits from local and national politicians. The latter is part of our perceived need to know more about political decision making processes and how best to influence these.

• Key lessons

The process of participatory education, with a global perspective, changes everyone involved, facilitators and participants alike. We have seen participants grow in confidence. As one Academy volunteer said: *"Before, I was afraid to say anything in meetings, now I just join in. I like the way you do it. You probably know the answers, but you get us to think of them ourselves."* But of course, we don't know the answers, we find them together.

Another participant commented: *"I've never been in a group in Oxford before where you can really put your baggage on the table and deal with it. We need this to start the healing process."* This highlights another lesson. The foundation of this work is building relationships between the people involved. This means making time to talk with people about parts of their lives that, at first, seem unconnected with concrete plans, such as running the Academy. As facilitators, it means being open about your own hopes, fears and problems. It means visiting people in their homes. It means idle chat, relaxing together. We are finding the stronger the relationships we build, the quicker the work moves on and the better our support is targeted.

As facilitators, we have also become more prepared to make plans as we go along, to think carefully beforehand but to be much more responsive. This was intimidating at first but gets easier (and becomes more fun) with practice.

As an organisation, ODEC's horizons have broadened. We are starting to see ourselves much more as a part of education in Britain rather than education in Oxford. Pressure is building on the education system to solve economic and social problems by providing a flexible workforce, and to do this cost effectively. Given this context, it is vital that we continue to embrace educational approaches based on social justice.

In many important ways we are part of one society and one world. The partnerships with other radical educators that we are developing and cementing by using REFLECT, are proving a key way for us to understand the connections between our local situation and other people's struggles. REFLECT, and other participatory approaches, help us to re-claim education as communal generation of the knowledge we need to shape our futures.

• The future

We have recognised the need to train ourselves, and other facilitators, by arranging on-going support as we do the work, both in terms of new information and time to reflect on our own experience. Our goals in the near future are:

1. To involve people from different African Caribbean communities in LFL, to deepen the initial analysis and plan and carry out more action. We plan to work with parents who bring their children to the Young Achiever's Academy, to get them to reflect on their own education and plan how they can collectively support their children in mainstream school. We plan to build better relationships with other African Caribbean community groups.
2. To build on our partnerships with radical educators from other countries, to use this as a way of promoting solidarity as well as a valuable way to learn.
3. To support more community facilitators by developing an accredited course in this

participatory, radical approach to Development Education work.

4. To extend our work to other marginalised groups in Oxford.

We are combining these goals in two new projects. The first project, Skills for Change, is already funded. The plan is for ODEC workers to spend six months consulting other community educators locally, and development educators nationally, about developing our own accredited facilitator's training programme. We will involve local community activists, who are interested in doing the training, in designing it.

The second project, for which we are seeking funding, is the Southern Trainers' Feasibility Study. This would be a partnership between ODEC, ActionAid's international education unit, the Development Education Association and the Federation of Community Work Training Groups. We want to investigate interest in setting up partnerships between radical adult educators from Southern countries and community activists in Britain.

We hope the outcome of this project will be a consortium of like-minded partners bidding for funding to run a joint project nationally. This could help us advance the following strategic aims:

- to strengthen on-going communication between participatory appraisal and Freirean trainers and practitioners in the UK, to increase our understanding of the participatory process and sharpen our political vision; and,
- to link UK work more systematically with participatory appraisal and Freirean work in other countries.

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