

# 'Naming the Moment'

## A participatory process of political analysis for action

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### Introduction

Practitioners of participatory and emancipatory methods of education in Canada owe a debt to the struggles of people in 'Southern' nations who have resisted and who continue to resist the many forms of oppression that sustain the global inequalities of wealth and power. A principle source of inspiration for these practitioners has been the abundance of popular education methods (e.g. Freirian literacy techniques, community animation and training methods, popular theatre skills and much more) and theories that find their genesis in third world liberation struggles.

As with much else in popular education, Paulo Freire's philosophical and pedagogical ideas can be found warming the heart of many different applications of popular education. These ideas include what is no doubt familiar to many readers of this journal: the non-neutrality of education, the dialectic of action-reflection-action, problem-posing methods, liberating pedagogy, literacy that enables people to read the word *and* the world and much more. One application of these ideas that has met with success in Toronto, Canada, is Naming the Moment – a participatory method of identifying and analysing issues in order to decide how to act on them.

It is a tricky matter to write about Naming the Moment without doing injustice to some aspect of it. Like examining a crystal, each facet that you look at reveals a new aspect, and Naming the Moment is constantly developing and changing according to the unique circumstances of its use.

Essential to Naming the Moment is a democratic self-reflective and critically creative process that results in constant adaptation and change and, while it may seem to have a chameleon nature, there *are* some important constants, although these have less to do with actual techniques than with ideals of social justice, solidarity and emancipatory processes of learning.

Naming the Moment, at its best, combines a critical (and dialogic) understanding of both the structures of our world (political, economic, environmental, cultural, etc.) and the fluid movement of forces that act to sustain those structures in hegemonic equilibrium. Naming the Moment resists rigid certainties and creates space for creative understanding of the constantly changing world. Understanding that, when shared through dialogue,

including drawing, and popular theatre and storytelling, allows for relationships that resist the tricky ways in which people and groups have been trained to often collude in their own oppression.

Naming the Moment advocates and necessitates alliances across many sectors (from labour to community to academia) and between different social movements. It is a multi-cropping practice of story-sharing, skills building and democratic dialogue that is simultaneously theory and practice.

The now out-of-print book *Naming the Moment: Political Analysis for Action* (Jesuit Centre for Social Faith & Justice, Toronto, 1989) describes the process as having four phases: the naming of ourselves, the naming of the issues, analysing the issues and, finally, planning and taking action. One proviso about these phases is to beware the tendency to view them as a linear process, moving from step one to step four. They are better understood as recipe ingredients that need to be mixed in proper measure and with respect to the uniqueness of local conditions.

Most recently, the Catalyst Centre, a popular education group based in Toronto, Canada, has begun a new project called Seize the Moment that aims to contribute to the continued growth of Naming the Moment and popular education in general. A recent initiative has already begun to conceptualise a five-phase re-vision of Naming the Moment. I will talk more about this later.

### Some history

Naming the Moment followed the road back to Canada that many international development volunteers and workers took from the 1970s onward. It was in Latin American critical literacy and development work that a number of Canadian educators encountered the variety of popular education methods being used to enable communities to better resist the many oppressions that are yet with us (if not intensifying).

One popular education method encountered was conjunctural analysis. As applied by some popular education organisations, this was a collective means of conducting political analysis for action. Two dynamics proved important here: the movements of forces within

society and the learning logic of action-reflection-action. What is unique about Naming the Moment is that it acknowledges that all people have experience that gives them the potential and the right to engage in this kind of analysis, and in so doing, people can become actors in changing their world, and not merely 'acted-upons'.

There are two ways in which it is important to recognise the meaning of 'popular' in popular education. First is the choice that popular education makes to take the side of the oppressed, recognising, as Freire has argued, that no education is neutral. Second is the power of the process of action-reflection-action. When applied to the way in which people learn, this affirms that the starting point for all learning is action—people live in the world and act all the time. Nobody enters a relationship or a process as a blank slate. We all have experiences that have shaped us and upon which we rely to explain the world to ourselves. In order to change the world in which we live, especially when it comes to resisting oppression, we must reflect upon that experience, analyse it critically for strengths and weaknesses and, finally, bring our reflection to bear upon new action which in turn will need to be reflected upon.

As conjunctural analysis made its way into Canada, the importance of social location asserted itself. Who was doing the analysis for whom? The educators who returned with the news and learnings about popular education were, predictably, relatively privileged individuals and, while no-one escapes participation in relations of oppression, it was important to be self-conscious about the stakes involved for returned Canadian volunteers and popular educators to be advocates of and participants in social justice movements. It was quickly obvious that before any popular education process could begin in Canada, there were questions that needed to be posed about who was involved in the work. Naming the Moment incorporated this as the first phase: Naming Ourselves.

## The four phases (with another on the way)

### In a nutshell

As mentioned earlier, the four phases are not necessarily meant to be followed in a linear fashion. There is often much back and forth movement necessary in order to ensure a democratic and participatory process. Naming the Moment allows for, and encourages, much negotiation of meaning. Ideally, there is at least some work done in the beginning about 'naming ourselves'. Practically speaking, this can mean something as simple as introductions, but this can go much further into some sharing of personal and/or community histories, a critical look at both who is present and not present (especially regarding race, class, gender, ability etc). Having conducted some 'naming' of ourselves, it is then important to share some information (often stories of one kind or another) in order to identify key concerns or issues. This creates the need to decide which issues are

important enough to warrant collective critical analysis. Should it prove that one of the issues has to do with who is missing then a re-visiting of Phase One might prove necessary. Once a democratic (and critical) process has identified key issues, deeper analysis can be applied and finally the question of 'what to do about it' must be posed and action steps discussed (if not agreed upon).

## A well-used handout

### Naming the moment: phases and questions

The process of political analysis for action, or Naming the Moment, moves through four phases<sup>1</sup>:

Phase 1 – identifying ourselves and our interests

- Who are 'we' and how do we see the world?
- How has our view been shaped by our race, gender, class, age, sector, religion, etc.?
- How do we define our constituency? Are we of, with or for the people most affected by the issue(s) we work on?
- What do we believe about the current structure of Canada? About what it could be? About how we get there?

Phase 2 – naming the issues/struggles

- What current issue/struggle is most critical to the interests of our group?
- What are the opposing interests (contradictions) around the issue?
- What are we fighting for in working on this issue – in the short-term and in the long-term?
- What is the history of struggle on this issue? What have been the critical moments of the past?

Phase 3 – Assessing the forces

- Who's with us and against us on this issue (in economic, political, and ideological terms)?
- What are their short-term and long-term interests?
- What are their expressed and their real interests?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of both sides?
- What about the uncommitted?
- What actors do we need more information about?
- What's the overall balance of forces?
- Who's winning and who's losing and why?

Phase 4 – Planning for action

- How have the forces shifted from the past to the present?
- What future shifts can we anticipate?
- What 'free space' do we have to move in?
- How do we build on our strengths and address our weaknesses?
- Whom should we be forming alliances with? In the short-term and long-term?
- What actions could we take?
- What are the constraints and possibilities of each?
- Who will do what and when?

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<sup>1</sup> From *Naming the Moment: Political Analysis for Action* (Jesuit Centre for Social Faith & Justice, Toronto, 1989)

## Some examples

So what does it all look like when it actually gets applied?

Naming the Moment requires some form of gathering. It is about collective learning and therefore necessitates bringing together a variety of stakeholders. These gatherings take time: a series of eight three-hour workshops is typical; but a day or two-day long meeting can accomplish a great deal. As mentioned above, each application is unique according to the combination of participants and the circumstances that define the need to conduct such a process. As the design is negotiated, it usually includes a range of techniques, from fairly conventional large and small group discussions to the use of many popular education techniques such as popular theatre sculpturing (creating silent tableaux with workshop participants' bodies), collective mural making, drawing, simulation games, political weather reports (a drawing technique to analyse important trends) and a variety of types of timelines, to mention but a few.

An example that illustrates some of this well is the Naming the Moment workshop series that ran from May 1991 through October 1992 and which we called 'Recovering Stories of Resistance'. Each year, Naming the Moment focused on a different aspect of social justice struggle. In the spring of 1991, when a community was invited to discuss what the important upcoming themes concerning social justice were, someone mentioned that plans were well underway to 'celebrate' the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. This was critically discussed and it was agreed that this was not a moment of celebration for the millions of indigenous peoples of the Americas for whom Columbus' arrival marked the beginning of centuries of genocide and oppression. We decided to 're-frame' this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary to examine the struggles of indigenous peoples to preserve their cultures and their lives. This required building new relationships with Native peoples and engaging in much mutual learning.

The 1991-1992 workshop series included eight monthly workshops plus a variety of additional activities planned during the workshops including a puppet production of the 'Ojibway Prophecy of the Seven Fires', participation in the October 12, 1992 demonstration in Toronto, Ontario, celebrating 500 years of resistance and survival of indigenous peoples worldwide. This series found its origin in a special meeting in early 1991 to name the issues that some activists felt would be important in the coming year. Someone noted that the preparations for the celebration of the quincentenary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas was well underway. It was decided that this would be a good opportunity to use Naming the Moment to reframe this 'celebration' of the beginning of European conquest of the Americas as a moment to reflect on the lives and cultures of Native peoples. The negotiations of the workshop series began in earnest. As Deborah Barndt, founder of the Moment Project, writes in *Revisiting the Boats and Canoes: Popular Education around the 500 Years:*

'Initially, some of us had imagined working our way through the 500 years, starting with 1492, and marking key events along a linear path, left to right. Our Native colleagues suggested however, that we start the process in the present, in the personal lives of all of us, then move back to the roots to understand both how we got here and where we might go from here.' (Convergence, Vol. XXX, #1, Toronto, Ontario, 1992).

It required months of building better relationships with representatives of various Native peoples' organisations, at the end of which there existed a highly imaginative design incorporating both Native (e.g. talking circles, storytelling teachings) and non-Native (e.g. collective murals, popular theatre) methods of dialogue, information sharing, critical analysis and collaborative action. This included using, as a conceptual frame, the two-row wampum treaty belt, *Kuswentha* (a beadwork belt that was made with a unique pattern to represent various types of agreements)—a co-existence agreement between 18th Century Dutch settlers and the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse or Iroquois—a confederacy of five Indigenous nations). This led to the creation of a mural exercise which invited participants to take photographs of themselves and place them on one of two parallel lines; one of canoes and one of tall ships. This brought on an immediate contradiction typical of the complexity of identities in the 20th Century. Some African-Canadian participants expressed discomfort about putting their pictures on what were images of slave ships, whilst some Native participants felt that their mixed heritage made it nonsensical to simply place their images on the line of canoes. This led to a highly critical and mutually informative dialogue about our many identities and the different stakes involved in self-identifying for each of us.

## 'Naming the Moment' today

This is merely the briefest taste of a long and creative process. While the Moment Project no longer exists, the 'Naming the Moment' process has continued to be applied across Canada and elsewhere in the world. Founded in 1986, it has spread and, no doubt, been adapted to local circumstances wherever used. It has been used for community analysis, coalition building, anti-racist change, organisational development and strategic planning.

Currently, the Catalyst Centre in Toronto, Canada, has revived some of the elements of the Moment Project. It is calling its project 'Seize the Moment' with the intention of drawing on many practices around the world that are participatory and critically minded in order to continue to build the democratic processes of dialogue that 'Naming the Moment' is one example of. Catalyst is currently concentrating on looking at the question of the participation of peoples with disabilities in social movement work. This has provoked the need to re-examine the 'four phases' and Catalyst has begun to conceptualise a 'five phase' process that would include a new 'Phase 1'. This

crucial phase, which has existed implicitly until now, would name more explicitly the need to establish pre-conditions for democratic participation of all peoples (especially people with disabilities). This has important implications for the types of interpretation support that is made available, the location of gatherings, and the solidarity of all people with the struggles of people with disabilities.

In keeping with the constantly self-critical nature of 'Naming the Moment', 'Seize the Moment' promises to develop some powerful tools to strengthen this popular education practice for the benefit of all practitioners who are committed to social justice.

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